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Cheeses Lying Fallow. The Difficult Revival of Cheese Production in a Post-industrial Ariège Valley (Pyrenees, France)

Tristan Fournier, Olivier Lepiller and Guillaume Simonet

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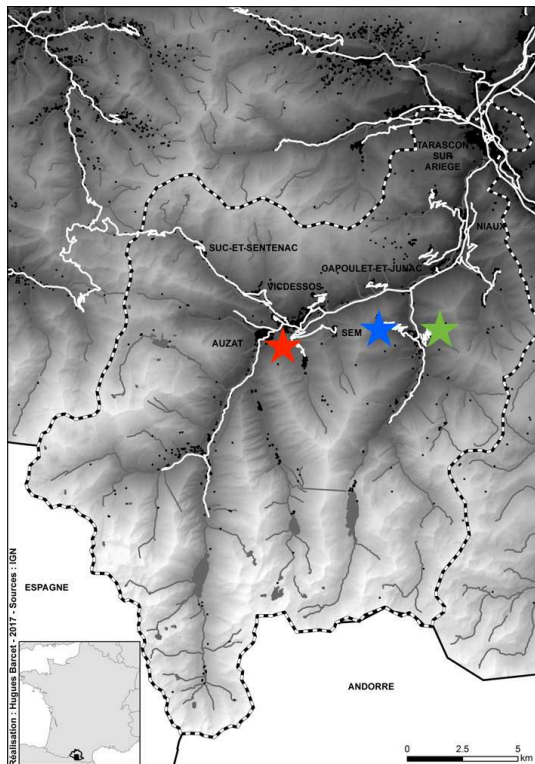
- 1 In 2021, France had 46 cheeses with a protected designation of origin (PDO) and 9 with a protected geographical indication (PGI) (CNAOL, 2021). A large proportion of these cheeses come from mountain and foothill regions. While many labelled mountain cheeses are produced in the Alps and the Massif Central, there are only two in the Pyrenees: the PDO Ossau-Iraty (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), and the PGI Tomme des Pyrénées (all Pyrenean *départements*). Ariège has about ten cow milk cheeses—including Bethmale, which is not labelled but has a regional reputation—, several goat milk cheeses, and a few ewe milk cheeses. The Ariège Pyrenees, where livestock for meat is by far the most prevalent type of farming (Lazaro, 2015), is the second-largest cheese production area in the massif, after the Atlantic Pyrenees (PNR, 2019).
- 2 Cheese is a heuristic object for monitoring and analysing the dynamics of “re-territorialization” (Rieutort, 2009), “relocalization” (Frayssignes *et al.*, 2021) and food “heritagization” in the mountains (Linck, 2005; Boëtsch and Hubert, 2007; Delfosse and Le Gall, 2018). Heritagization is understood here as “a dynamic of valorization [...] consisting of updating, adapting and reinterpreting features drawn from the history of a group; that is, combining heritage and innovation, stability and change, reproduction and creation, and thus producing new social meaning by building on the past”

(Bessière, 2012, p. 40). More broadly, cheese is a marker of contemporary socio-cultural, economic, spatial, and ecological developments in rural mountain territories (Whited, 2018).

A Survey in the Vicdessos Valley

- 3 The Vicdessos Valley, located in the upper Ariège, has several historical strata of human presence: the Niaux cave (Palaeolithic), the Montréal-de-Sos castle (Middle Ages), and the Rancié mines (in operation from antiquity to the 20th century). Then, from 1907 to 2003, the Péchiney aluminium smelter marked the industrial era in Auzat. Today, outdoor tourist activities appear to be the new development horizon for the valley. One component that is usually essential in green tourism (Poulain, 1997) is however absent from this reorientation: no food heritage peculiar to the valley is put forward, to the point that one can speak of a “sleeping food heritage” (Fournier *et al.*, 2018).
- 4 In 2014, in a survey on the impact of climate change, a respondent noted that “Auzat cheese used to be reputed in the valley” (Simonet *et al.*, 2017). Since the neighbouring Couserans is known for its cheese, how did this renowned product disappear in the Vicdessos Valley? This question was behind the *Environnements Alimentaires en Transition* (EAT) project, launched in 2015 at the *Observatoire Homme-Milieu* (OHM) of the Haut-Vicdessos. Our first surveys confirmed the observation, by tourists and inhabitants alike, of the scarcity of local food products. Significantly, the bakery located on the road leading to the valley offered cheese sandwiches with only reblochon, a famous cheese from Savoie on the opposite side of the country!
- 5 We were nevertheless aware of some embryonic cheese initiatives. How could they shed light on the conditions for a return of cheese to this territory? And how was this revival based, or not, on the extinct tradition? These questions differed from those raised either by the processes of heritagization compatible with mass distribution (Camembert, Roquefort, Comté, etc.), or by the more recent processes of heritagization of “forgotten” cheeses that are kept alive within local networks (Delfosse and Le Gall, 2018). We also needed to establish which actors—local and/or exogenous—were responsible for this revival, primarily to understand the power dynamics structuring the territorial anchorage of food (Ricard and Rieutort, 1995; Delattre *et al.*, 2005; Sonnino, 2007; Bowen and De Master, 2011; Naves, 2016; Guillot and Blatrix, 2021). The past existence of a renowned cheese led us to investigate further: what was it called, how was it produced, and marketed? What were the milestones in its history, the pillars of its reputation and the conditions of its disappearance?

Figure 1: Map of the Vicdessos Valley (Ariège, Pyrenees)



The stars indicate the location of the cheese producers studied

- 6 This article considers the dynamics of food relocalization in rural mountain areas by following a thread, that of the social biography of this cheese (Appadurai, 1986) and of its trajectory (Marache *et al.*, 2018), reconstructed from an ethnographic survey combining several data collection tools (Table 1).

Table 1. Survey methods used

| Tools | Details |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Semi-structured interviews (n=42) | Stakeholders in livestock, food production, catering, tourism and local politics, inhabitants |
| <i>In situ</i> observations | Sales, catering, breeding and documentation facilities, local events (Saint Matthew's fair, transhumance) |
| Literature review | Review of gastronomic and folklorist regional literature, Ariège departmental archives (Foix) |

Trajectory of Auzat Cheese

- 7 In 1870, D^r Speleus (1870, p. 60) advised excursionists to go to Auzat “to stock up on cheese imitating Roquefort”. A century and a half later, we could find no physical trace or memory of this famous cheese which is now not only extinct, but forgotten.

The “Best Cheese in Ariège”

- 8 Our first steps in the field were confusing as opinions on Auzat cheese differed, whether they concerned its reputation, its composition, or even its existence. The chef at a restaurant explained: “There was the Bleu d’Auzat, which was very good”. A shepherd told us that there was a local cheese in the past “but you ate a small piece and had to drink a litre of wine with it!” An amateur documentary maker told us that he had tasted it in the 1980s, “but it was neither blue nor veined, it looked like a classic cow’s milk tome”. The only certainty was that there was no longer any local production. This cheese, if it had indeed existed, seemed to have escaped not only the transmission of know-how but also the transmission of memories. Talking to a farmer in the valley encouraged us to continue the investigation, for he validated the existence of a renowned cheese and affirmed that his parents and grandparents had continued to make it for their consumption until the 1980s. He still had the wooden tools and agreed to reconstruct its production. The local archives (of the *département*) confirmed, moreover, that a cheese with a regional reputation had been sold in significant quantities. Statistical data indicated that in 1872, more than 9 tonnes of ewe milk cheese was produced annually in Auzat, generating an income of 14,100 francs and involving the work of 180 people (archive AD09, 7P56). At the end of the 19th century, Auzat thus appeared to be the main cheese-producing *commune* in the upper Ariège.

Figure 2: Excerpts from the Archives

"The regions of Ax, Les Cabannes and even Tarascon produced only bad ewe milk cheese which was not commercialized at all, whereas the cheese from Auzat ('veined' cheese or Bassiès) enjoyed a good reputation, so that it was sold for 30,000 to 40,000 francs at the Saint-Michel fair in Tarascon in 1846." (Chevalier, 1956: 297)

"No other *commune* has so many herds, nor such large and distant pastures as those of Auzat [...]. In Auzat itself, dealers concentrate the production. They sell their goods at local fairs in the *département*, and send little beyond, except to the Hérault. The cheese of Auzat has become famous locally, apparently because of its powerful smell." (Taillefer, 1939, p. 214)

"Each cheese weighed between 6 and 7 kg, one ewe gives on average 2 kg of cheese per season. We sell it for 1.50 to 2 francs per kg. It's a very good cheese, which has the advantage of keeping from one year to the next. The one that is valued most is made in the Bassiès." (Lapparent, 1890: 3)

- 9 It seemed to be a cheese made from ewe milk, produced on the mountain pastures and sold outside the valley. Local memory has confirmed this reputation; a town councillor told us that his grandfather “was a fan of Auzat cheese. It was veined, more or less blue, with a lot of taste, which depended on the quality of the milk [...] It was sold in Vicdessos, Tarascon and even in Toulouse”. A very old resident who grew up in the valley recalled that, as a child, he used to buy it in the village of Mounicou, where a cellar matured the cheese that came down from the summer mountain pastures on the back of a donkey: “It was 15–18 cm in diameter, very tasty, a little strong for me, but it wasn’t as insipid as [cheeses are] today”. When asked about its composition, he posited that it was a cheese made from a mixture of sheep and cow milk, adding that “it was not veined”.

Towards Decline... then Oblivion

- 10 The memories of this respondent raised several questions: first, on the size of the cheese (how could it have weighed 6 or 7 kg while measuring only 15 to 18 cm in diameter?), second, its composition (Ewe milk, cow milk, or a mixture?), and third, its production (veined or not?).
- 11 It turned out that two major periods in the history of Auzat cheese had actually overlapped for several decades. During the first period, from the second half of the 19th century to the 1930s and 1940s, the cheese was made on the summer mountain pastures from sheep's milk, was veined, weighed between 6 and 7 kg, and enjoyed a regional reputation. The second period started at the end of the 19th century with the relative growth of cattle breeding compared to sheep breeding. Chevalier (1949) explained sheep depopulation by human depopulation, as cattle were less labour intensive than sheep. Although this decline in sheep farming was less pronounced in the Vicdessos than in the rest of the upper Ariège, it was nonetheless significant. Cow milk cheeses were first made on the summer mountain pastures alongside sheep milk cheeses, then in the valleys with a collection system¹, and finally in an increasingly domestic setting of self-consumption until the 1980s. These cheeses were smaller and less renowned, and veining was less frequent. Thus, the name "Auzat cheese" was used to denote two different cheeses.

Figure 3: Excerpts from the Archives

"In the inter-war period, an agricultural monograph on the Ariège *département* stated that in Vicdessos, in addition to the large amount of cheese made from cow milk, a small amount of ewe milk is still used to make the cheese known as Auzat."
(Bérard *et al.* , 1996: 218).

"Cow milk was not used in the past in Auzat cheese. With very few exceptions, it is widely used today, with the result that the taste of the cheese has changed and become bland [...] The substitution of cow milk for ewe milk has depreciated it. It remains an important resource for shepherds [...] In 1938, a shepherd who owned 800 ewes sold 17,000 francs worth of cheese.
(Taillefer, 1939: 214).

- 12 The farmer with whom we reconstructed its production did not contradict this: "It's been a cow's cheese for a long time, in my family we always prepared it like that". The old wooden mould was used to make a cheese weighing about 1.5 kg. After maturing, no traces of blue mould were found. According to our informant, this was not surprising: "On the mountain pastures, there was a combination of the day's milk and the previous day's curd" which favoured the appearance of mould, as did maturing in a mazuc, a dry stone hut (next to the *orri*, the shepherd's shelter), often cooled by a spring, where the cheeses were stored on the mountain pastures. A technician from the Association des fromagers fermiers artisans des Pyrénées (Affap²) confirmed that an aerobic fungus of the *penicillium roqueforti* type could develop in a cheese even without deliberate seeding, provided that air-filled cavities existed: "If hay dust is in the air and the grains dry out a little before being agglomerated, this can create cavities". The two-stage production and maturing in a mazuc could create these conditions.
- 13 A retired shepherd from the valley told us that "sometimes there was mould, sometimes not. It depended on the conditions of production and maturation". He added that "it was sold until 1970, the production came from Marc [a village in the valley] but

it was on a very small scale and it worked with a barter system with the butchers". Another respondent, also a former shepherd, dated the end of cheese collection in Auzat back to 1976, following the death of the trader who had carried on selling it quietly. In some families, self-consumption continued for another ten years.

An Industrial Valley Turning Its Back on Pastoralism

- 14 How can this slow decline in cheese production be explained? First, there are constraints common to other rural and mountain areas, such as the massive rural exodus of the 20th century (Milian *et al.*, 2012). In the Vicdessos, the effects of emigration were compounded by the absorption of the remaining labour force by the Pêchiney aluminium factory throughout the 20th century. Moreno (2006) mentions a gradual shift, from 1945 onwards, from a population of "peasant workers" to a population of "worker-peasants" hired full time at the factory and maintaining an increasingly distant link with agricultural activity. Agropastoral decline intensified (Dérioz *et al.*, 2014) and with it the gradual loss of know-how in cheese making. After the war, in the context of the agricultural specialization of territories, livestock farming was gradually limited to a system of breeding animals for meat, to meet the rapidly growing demand in France (Campion, 1968). The decline in cheese production can thus be explained, but its disappearance is still surprising, as is the veil of oblivion regarding it.
- 15 The socio-political weight and memory of the metallurgical past—summed up in the term "pêchineysation" (Fournier *et al.*, 2018)—must be considered. The Pêchiney factory offered a collective modernist narrative, materialized by the benefits of paternalistic capitalism. A collective ambition to "make a city" (Fournier *et al.*, 2018), still visible in the buildings (engineers' villas, giant clock), accentuated the social disqualification of agro-pastoralism. With the industry running out of steam and the obsolescence of this narrative, this disqualification turned into a collective mourning mixed with anger: agro-pastoralism had had to be killed, and resurrecting it was out of the question. In fact, we encountered vehement discourse against livestock farming, including among breeders, pointing to an unsuitable territory, with little sunshine and steep slopes. Faced with non-native farmers' difficulties of integration, one of them summed up this deathly climate: "The valley is dying so everyone must die with it". In this atmosphere of painful mourning, "territorial agri-food" issues (Lamine, 2012) were not a political priority in the Pêchiney era. They were not put on the local development agenda until 2014, when a new team broke with the previous government that many inhabitants considered compromised, if not corrupt. Demographic changes (departure of the working-class population, and "leisure migration" [Rieutort *et al.*, 2018]) may have played a role in the success of this new political offer.
- 16 A second set of constraints stems from the previous one: with the disqualification of agro-pastoralism, the waves of return to the land in the 1970s and 1980s did not reach the valley. Other more attractive fronts of rural transition were preferred by neo-ruralists, such as the neighbouring Couserans. As a result, the valley has not benefited from the action or the external viewpoint of these exogenous actors who tend to be sensitive to local assets, and who play an important part in the processes of heritagization (Bessière and Mognard, 2012).

- 17 A third set of constraints remains more hypothetical. Industrial activity brought with it its share of pollution, notably by fluorinated compounds. A retired physician in the valley explained to us that he had observed fluorosis in the livestock and the inhabitants. In other areas, such as L'Argentière-La Bessée (Kovacic, 2012) or Lannemezan (Dujardin, 1978), animal fluorosis led to conflicts between farmers and Péchiney as early as the 1970s. By contrast, a “worker’s silence [...] that was less complicit than forced” (Elsig, 2019) shrouded the problem of human fluorosis in secrecy. During a presentation of our research in Auzat, a former unionist declared that pollution was killing the animals and had damaged cheese production. Later, in an aside, a local resident told us that at the time of Péchiney, no one talked about pollution, not even the unions, “because their palms were heavily greased”. The effects of pollution seem to have remained taboo for a long time, even though they were tangible for farmers, as measurements in Lannemezan showed. The study of their role in the abandonment of dairy farming in the Vicdessos warrants further study.
- 18 These three sets of constraints shed light on the disappearance of dairy farming. Several recent initiatives provide information on the new conditions that have facilitated its return.

The Cheese Revival

- 19 Since 2018, we have met the individuals behind three cheese production initiatives in the valley.

Profile 1: Jeanne³, Producer in Gestières (Fig. 1, green star)

- 20 This cheese factory project was started in 2016 by Jeanne, a young woman who was not originally from the valley but whose partner, Hervé, had been working there for twelve years as a farmer. Jeanne’s ambition was to produce a sheep milk tomme cheese inspired by Ossau-Iraty, a product that had been “speaking” to her since she took a specific training course in sheep milk cheese production. The first step was to build the cheese factory, with a dairy and an underground maturing cellar. Eventually, the target production would be one tonne per year. In the first year (2018), the production was only 400 kg because the cheese dairy was not yet ready. Jeanne was counting on direct sales at the farm and at regional markets. The farm now has a richly illustrated website detailing the products: brousse and tommes made from raw ewe milk, and meat (lamb). In total, the couple owns 300 ewes that Hervé grazes on the summer pastures near this hilltop village: 200 are of the Tarasconnaise breed and intended for meat, and 100 are of the black-headed Manech dairy breed.
- 21 There were several obstacles along the way, including resistance from neo-rural inhabitants and residents with second homes in the area, because of the noise and smell of the animals. However, the project received decisive support. First, the fact that local farmers recognized Hervé for his work as a shepherd, and that he had been there for a long time, were two factors that clearly played in their favour. The help of the Affap and its support for the construction of the cheese dairy were necessary to make the project a reality, as was the help of the municipality in grouping together the initially very fragmented plots.

Profile 2: Mei, Producer in Olbier (Fig. 1, red star)

- 22 The Olbier cheese factory, opened in 2017, is run by Mei, a native of China and the partner of Javier, a retired farmer from Catalonia. The aim of the project was to produce dairy products (cheese, yoghurt, *faisselle*) made from Pyrenean goat milk. Mei already had experience in this respect. Wishing to settle in the region, she responded to a call for applications from the regional nature reserve (*Parc Naturel Régional*—PNR), which was looking for a goat farmer with a view to opening up the countryside, that is, preventing the forest from encroaching on open pastures. The municipality, which supported this initiative, added the condition that the applicant had to live in the village all year-round. Mei's response included the cheese-making project. As soon as she and Javier arrived, a meeting was organized by the municipality to present the project to the inhabitants. The integration was easy, as the village, located at a high altitude, was inhabited mainly by young retirees who saw the project as an opportunity to revive the area. Mei milks the animals in the morning, then sells her cheese (on the farm and at regional markets), and takes the flock out to graze in the afternoon. She processes the milk herself in the dairy installed in a former gite owned and rented to her by the municipality. The couple is housed upstairs.
- 23 Among the obstacles noted, Mei described a cumbersome administrative system and extremely complicated access to land, due to fragmentation, with boundaries that were difficult for the owners themselves to identify. There was, however, a lot of support. The PNR, which issued the call for applications, also provided strong support in terms of visibility (website, communication). The municipal authorities provided significant backing, in terms of renting the building, financing the dairy and bringing it up to standard, and helping to ensure that the local population and breeders accepted the integration of the project. It was also the municipal authorities that chose the name of the cheese factory. The Affap sent a technician to set up the dairy, and Mei chose him for the quality control of her cheeses. Finally, the AFP⁴ was also of considerable help in the compromises that had to be found to secure access to land: Mei rents 34 hectares of land in Auzat and Olbier, with a 9-year annually renewed grazing agreement⁵.

Profile 3: Estelle and Eddy, Producers in Lercoul (Fig. 1, blue star)

- 24 In 2014, Estelle and Eddy learnt that the town council of Lercoul was looking for goatherds for a project to open the landscape and prevent the forest from encroaching on pastures. As they were not natives of the valley, they settled on a fallow plot of land, which they cleaned up themselves before building their house and their farm building. The project started with 30 Pyrenean goats; with the milk, they produced soap and sold the kid meat directly. From the outset, they also wanted to produce cheese in the “traditional” way. In 2018, they bought black-headed Manech ewes and Vosges cows. The cheese factory became operational in spring 2020. Since then, the cheeses offered are made from goat, sheep or cow milk. Most of the products are sold on the farm, and advertising is done on the website of an association that Estelle and Eddy created with six other producers and breeders of the valley, with whom they share the taste for “authentic techniques”.
- 25 The main obstacle they encountered was access to land: “Here on a 20 m² plot, you have six owners and often five of them have disappeared (*sic*), we don't know where they are

and when they'll be here, and they don't necessarily get along!", explained Eddy. It was the municipal authorities of Lercoul that found them several plots of land to make up the living and working area, on the one hand, and the grazing areas on the other. Part of the land they rent consists of small plots⁶ (3.6 ha of grazing areas around the village) and additionally they have multi-annual grazing agreements⁷. The PNR supported the project on the grounds of opening the landscape and fire prevention. The couple also received a grant for gradually settling in, offered by the Region. In 2020, Eddy was elected to the municipal council of Lercoul. This involvement in local political life did not simplify their situation. They were refused the creation of an AFP, as well as access for their goats to the mountain pastures. At the end of 2021, they resigned themselves to stop producing cheese and decided to leave the valley in 2022. They planned to settle elsewhere, but "not in Ariège" where "people are afraid that their land will be stolen".

The Inclusion of the Initiatives Studied in the Local Food System

- 26 These small-scale initiatives are part of the "alternative short supply chains" that have been developing in mountain cheese production for several decades (Delfosse and Le Gall, 2018). They highlight the role of external actors in the relocalization of food in rural areas. Initially less caught up in the sometimes conflictual local networks, these actors are likely to commit more firmly to the realization of their projects.
- 27 The renewal and relocalization of cheese production is part of the territory's "food landscape" (Vonthron *et al.*, 2020). The three producers sell their cheeses directly on the farm and are referenced in the click-and-collect directory of Tarascon-sur-Ariège (a town of 5,000 inhabitants, 15 kilometres from Auzat). Two of them are present on the Tarascon farmers' markets and on a seasonal tourist market. None of them is certified as organic. The promotion of their products is rather a matter of "geographical and relational proximity" that articulates a "rural area" with the commercial foodscape of a small town, making the "maintenance of functional relations with the surrounding agriculture" sensitive to the inhabitants and tourists (Rouquier and Perrin, 2022).
- 28 Their websites and local media coverage show a certain talent for telling their life stories and expressing their wish to be territorially anchored (on the PNR website, for example, Mei has a biographical page with a poetic tone where she is described as a "telluric goatherd"). This mode of valuing cheese is reminiscent of the "economy of feelings" observed in artisanal cheese production in the State of Vermont (Paxson, 2013; Gérard, 2022).
- 29 Yet these three initiatives do not explicitly cultivate the link with the valley's cheese-making past. In this sense, they are not, strictly speaking, part of a heritage process. Two of the producers have nevertheless expressed an interest in the traditional techniques of making the lost cheese of Auzat. One of them told us that she wanted to try maturing her cheese in a mazuc, while the other was willing to have a well-known figure from the valley stage her initiation into traditional cheese-making for a documentary.
- 30 The cases of Mei and of Estelle and Eddy highlight the importance of the multifunctionality of livestock farming in the Vicdessos. The contracts concluded with the local authorities and the PNR expressly commit the farmers to providing

ecosystems and social services to reopen the landscape, which the inhabitants clearly wish for. Cheese appears here as a co-product of the multifunctionality of livestock farming, and mountain farmers as “gardeners of nature” as much as “producers of food” (Eychenne, 2018).

- 31 The exogenous origin of these producers has a downside. As they do not come from the valley, they are not landowners and have to deal with the fragmentation of the land ownership, resulting from migration and inheritance. Moreover, the past marked by depopulation and exit from farming has led to a weakening of traditional management of the pastoral commons (Eychenne, 2018), which makes the herders vulnerable to variations in collective decisions. The precarious success of initiatives thus depends on local authorities’ ability to enlist owners behind the same objective of opening up the landscape, as in the case of Mei.
- 32 An article on catering in the valley, studying a slightly earlier period (Fournier *et al.*, 2018), highlighted the lack of networking among agricultural producers in the Vicdessos. Before deciding to leave, Estelle and Eddy had contributed, in 2020, to the setting up of an association of producers of the “basket of goods” type (market gardening, cheese, honey, meats). Their land issues got the better of their commitment to the structuring of a local food supply chain.

Conclusion: What Role Do Public Mechanisms Play in the Territorialization of Food in the Vicdessos?

- 33 The placing of agri-food issues on the political agenda during the 2014 changeover in Auzat is part of a wider context of the emergence of local food relocalization mechanisms, in an urban context (Fouilleux and Michel, 2020) and a rural context (Guillot and Blatrix, 2021; Rouquier and Perrin, 2022). At the *département* level, the *Pôle d’Equilibre Territorial et Rural* (PETR) of Ariège has been dealing with these issues since its creation in 2015, and in 2021 obtained funding for the implementation of a territorial food project (*Projet Alimentaire Territorial*—PAT) aimed at relocalizing the food system.
- 34 The PETR (2021a) has launched working groups, identifying specifically the “network of small farms” as an opportunity for the Ariège region. A “local food council” met for the first time on 3 March 2022. Its conclusions resonate with our survey: “The various actors of the local food council [...] are unanimous: the implementation of a food land policy will be a salient point of the PAT”; and the need to better “know the historical/abandoned products that are lacking today in the territory” (PETR, 2021b). It remains to be seen how producers in the valleys where agriculture is in decline will be involved in the CLA, as well as the effects of the policies it will recommend, particularly regarding land, which is crucial for cheese production in the Vicdessos. In 2017, the municipalities of the valley joined a new community of *communes* of Haute-Ariège, which includes dynamic territories in terms of food relocalization (Ax-les-Thermes, Les Cabannes, etc.). How will this institution carry the voice of the producers of the Vicdessos within the framework of the CLA and the PAT, and how will it defend the dynamics of food relocation in the valley?
- 35 Finally, we wish to emphasize the importance, for the cheese farmers of the Vicdessos, of the “toolkits” (zootechnical advice, support with access to land, commercial

promotion) offered by Affap and the PNR. Founded in 2009 and described in 2012 as having “not yet reached the full extent of its means of action”, the PNR now seems to be fully playing its role as a “third party actor” at the service of the territorialization of food (Milian *et al.*, 2012). This is a role that it will have to defend within the CLA and the PAT.

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NOTES

1. This is evidenced by the creation of a dairy in Vicdessos (now Val-de-Sos) in 1896.
 2. The *Association des fromagers fermiers artisans des Pyrénées* was created in 1985 to provide artisanal cheese makers with technical, legal, and sanitary support.
 3. First names have been changed to ensure anonymity.
 4. *Association Foncière Pastorale*: a group of landowners (private or public) with the aim of ensuring the development of a territory. The AFP is an appropriate framework for setting up farms in difficult mountain areas.
 5. Freedom of contract but conditions of duration and price must be within the limits set by prefectural decree: here for 9 years.
 6. Contracts that differ from tenant farming, which applies to small plots of land of less than 0.5 ha, for a period of 5 years. The annual lease amounts to a symbolic €1, as the land is granted to the farmer in return for clearing the brush.
 7. Here for 10 years.
 8. In French: the *Conseil local de l'alimentation* or CLA.
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ABSTRACTS

Throughout the 20th century, the development of the Vicdessos valley (department of Ariège, French Pyrenees) was oriented almost exclusively towards the aluminum industry, leading to the decline and then total disappearance of local cheese production. Once renowned, Auzat cheese, made from sheep and then cow's milk, was an important resource in the local economy until the middle of the 20th century. Based on documentary research, interviews and ethnographic observations, this article traces the social biography of this cheese since the middle of the 19th century. It analyzes the conditions of the decline of its production and the blurring of its memory. While, for the last twenty years, this post-industrial valley has turned towards the development of tourism, the article provides an understanding of the constraints that have prevented any renewal of cheese production until recently. Indeed, since the end of the 2010s, several initiatives have emerged, without the link with the valley's cheese-making past being cultivated for the moment. These initiatives show the new favorable conditions, but also the persistent obstacles, to the relocation of food circuits in this post-industrial rural territory.

Pendant tout le xx^e siècle, le développement de la vallée du Vicdessos (département de l'Ariège, Pyrénées françaises) s'est orienté presque exclusivement vers l'industrie de l'aluminium, conduisant au déclin puis à la disparition totale de la production fromagère locale. Autrefois réputé, le fromage d'Auzat, de brebis puis de vache, a constitué une ressource importante de l'économie locale jusqu'au milieu du xx^e siècle. À partir de recherches documentaires, d'entretiens et d'observations ethnographiques, cet article retrace la biographie sociale de ce fromage depuis le milieu du xix^e siècle. Il analyse les conditions du déclin de sa production et du brouillage de sa mémoire. Alors que, depuis une vingtaine d'années, cette vallée post-industrielle s'est tournée vers le développement touristique, l'article donne à comprendre les contraintes ayant empêché tout renouveau de la production fromagère jusqu'à récemment. En effet, depuis la fin des années 2010, plusieurs initiatives ont vu le jour, sans que le lien avec le passé fromager de la vallée ne soit pour l'instant cultivé. Ces initiatives donnent à voir les nouvelles conditions

favorables, mais aussi les obstacles persistants, à la relocalisation des circuits alimentaires dans ce territoire rural post-industriel.

INDEX

Mots-clés: alimentation, fromage, relocalisation, territoire rural, Pyrénées

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