THE EXPERIENCE OF AGROTOURISM IN ITALY

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Annotation: Italy is the only country within the European Union with specific laws regulating agritourism, which is considered an agricultural activity. The history of on farm hospitality goes back through the centuries, when travellers and pilgrims had to ask for food and shelter along the routes, whenever a monastery, a guesthouse or a trading post were not available.

Key words: agrotourism, agrotourism farms, agrotourism services, agrotourism activities.

Italy is the only country within the European Union with specific laws regulating agrotourism, which is considered an agricultural activity. The Italian tourism industry employs, directly and indirectly, about 2.5 million people and provides about 4 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product[1]. When all linked activities are computed, its relevance rises to 9.4 percent of GDP; in 2020, foreign tourists have brought to Italy about 29 billion euros. These figures position the whole Italian tourism industry at the fifth place, after France, USA, China and Spain, but there are wide margins for improvement[2].

In Italy within the tourism industry, in the last 30 years the phenomenon of agrotourism has represented the revival of ancient traditions, coupled with integrated rural development. Within the more general definition of multifunctionality, agrotourism represents one of the major sources of income for farmers. It has also allowed to diversify the tourist offer and to attract visitors out of the most famous mainly urban destinations[3]. The history of on farm hospitality goes back through the centuries, when travellers and pilgrims had to ask for food and shelter along the routes, whenever a monastery, a guesthouse or a trading post were not available. Rural tourism provides an opportunity not only to eat tasty and high-quality food, but also take with you as souvenirs expensive and rare wines or special products such as truffle or specialty cheeses and olive oil that are not supplied to city shops[5]. So, at present, more than 70 wine and gastronomic routes have been developed in Italy, which are largely associated with rural tourism.

Foreign and Italian tourists may now enjoy a day of cultural visits to the abundant cultural heritage and the next day can move to a nearby rural area for a food and wine tasting, or can spend a full week on a farm, relaxing near the swimming pool or engaging into some outdoor sporting activity. Agrotourism has exploded in the Italy

and it represents a viable source of employment and income for smallholders and estate owners in country[6].

An increasing number of tourists, not only in Italy, is searching new experiences and expresses the desire to reconnect with the cultural roots of foods, in the places where the ingredients are originated and where gastronomy was born[7]. Within this framework, agrotourism has played and will play a major role, because the farms are perceived by the urban consumers as the best places for leisure, and at the same time the farmers need to diversify their sources of income.

The supply of rural tourism services by farms in Italy is long dating. Pioneer example are reported in the sixties of the last century, however the agrotourism diffusion is observed since the second half of the eighties, when the first national law on agrotourism entered into force and regulated the accommodation and meals supply activities carried out by farmers (agrotourism farms).

Later, farmers tourism-related activities where considered crucial elements of the broader multifunctional role the society is demanding to agriculture, according to the definition of multifunctionality given by the 1992 Rio de Janeiro UN Conference and inspiring the EU rural development policy since 2000. According to this principle, farmers provide a wide spectrum of public and marketable services (e.g. food safety, sustainable development, landscape and environmental protection, rural areas viability, preservation of tradition-based cultural and societal values, recreation services) which complement the food supply.

Consequently, the multifunctionality of agriculture increases the role played by farmers of Italy in the provision of recreational services to rural tourists and to the society as a whole and this broader role was taken into account by the current Italian framework law on agrotourism. Examples of agrotourism services are: indoor and outdoor accommodation, restaurant or catering, own agricultural products and foodstuffs tasting, on-farm exhibition of traditional farming equipments, teaching and information activities on farming and on traditional food, seminars and workshops hosting, recreational or information activities aiming to valorise historical, environmental and landscape elements existing on-farm or in the territory, activities of wildlife watching, sport activities and excursions (horsing, walking, biking, etc.), recreational fishing and hunting, pet-therapy, thermal therapy – where available, hay therapy in the Alps, summer-camps and farm kindergartens.

In Italy agrotourism activities are linked to the so called “teaching farms” - where young children and students are informed about farming activities and, in some cases, directly participate in farming - or to the “social farms” – aiming at rehabilitating people suffering social, physical or psychological problems. Even if agrotourism is diffused worldwide, the Italian case is a crucial and successful example, having a positive economic and social impact on rural areas.

Two factors play a key role in strengthening the farm rural tourism growth in Italy: the richness and the diversity of the traditional food production and of the Italian cuisine and the diverse historical and environmental elements that characterise the Italian rural landscapes, attracting people from other regions and from abroad. On one hand, the most visited rural places in Italy are food-driven (olive oil, wine, cheese, traditional local vegetables producing farms). Thanks to this type of tourism, people are able to know the terroir (historical area of production and tradition-based know how) where traditional food are produced and to taste (and buy) them in the area of production.

Additionally, the effective organization of agrotourism activities in the Italian rural areas is an environmentally friendly and accessible tool for nature conservation and for the provision of public services. However, the Italian experience shows that agrotourism activity is an effective rural development tool only when the tourism supply is tailored on the rural area specific features and is based on a farms effective marketing strategies.

In Italy agrotourism activity has been regulated by a national law since 1985. A formal regulation of the agrotourism business was a crucial factor for the diffusion of the phenomenon, given that it defined the conditions under which a rural tourism activity can be considered agrotourism –i.e. carried out by a farm’s household and not by a tourism-related company – so taking advantage of a special legal and tax provision, more favourable than for the other service companies.

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