

# Functional Social Organization to Obtain the Region of Origin Cotija Cheese Collective Brand

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To identify the functional elements which impact the processes of patrimonial activation to obtain the Region of Origin Cotija Cheese Collective Brand, through collective social action as the basis of territorial development in the Sierra of the states of Jalisco and Michoacán.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** A qualitative study was conducted, based on the tradition of rural sociology, where the categories of analysis of the Localized Agrifood Systems approach were used. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews with different social actors were applied where there was an inquiry about the technical, organizational, economic and political aspects that have an impact in obtaining seals of quality, destined to the protection and differentiation of emblematic foods.

**Results:** After an attempt to obtain the Denomination of Origin, given the particularities of the Localized Agrifood System involved in the production of Cotija cheese, the decision was to obtain a Collective Brand whose prerequisites adjusted better to the characteristics of their productive systems. Obtaining the seal was an important achievement in terms of the horizon that this signal generated for producers and for the territory. However, this is only the beginning in a process of constant valuation that must be redefined throughout time.

**Study Limitations/Implications:** It is an exploratory study that only addresses the internal dimension of the productive system of Cotija cheese; a deeper analysis ought to broaden the study of the social networks implied in the processes of valuation, including actors outside the territory.

**Findings/Conclusions:** Mexico's agrifood heritage is a strategic resource that must be protected for cultural, economic, food security and health reasons. This should be assumed as an obligation of the State in co-responsibility with academia, producers and consumers. Obtaining a collective brand is only one step within an unfinished valuation process that must be maintained through collective action and market stimulus.

**Keywords:** Collective brand, heritage valuation, artisan food, Cotija cheese.

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## INTRODUCTION

Localized Agrifood Systems (LAFS) are productive conglomerates linked to a specific territory that implies a set of activities, where the dynamics that take place are closely linked to the inhabitants, with their knowhow and lifestyle in a specific spatial scale (Muchnik, 2006).

The evolution and studies that have been developed based on the LAFS methodology have allowed understanding various dynamics around agrifood products, which are related to the social interactions generated within and outside the



territory (Muchnik, 2006; Boucher and Reyes, 2011; Quiñonea-Ruiz *et al.*, 2016; Boucher and Riveros-Cañas, 2017).

In turn, this approach has allowed making an incursion into a new form of interaction between institutions and producers, through participation-action in beneficial processes that have a positive impact on the territory, by means of strategies for patrimonial activation (Boucher and Riveros-Cañas, 2017; Ramírez, 2018, Pachoud *et al.*, 2019), which according to Boucher and Reyes (2011, p. 15), include four phases: “preparative, diagnostic (with stages of approaching and deepening), dialogue (validation, strategic analysis and action plan), and accompaniment (implementation, monitoring and evaluation)”.

This is complemented with the processes of patrimonial activation that have two types of collective actions: i) structural, where a formal group of producers is created and there is an exchange of learning; and ii) functional, where there is a construction of a resource to give value to the product and to the territory, such as a Collective Brand (CB), and the economic stimulation of the territory achieving an activation of specific resources (Boucher and González, 2016; Boucher and Riveros-Cañas, 2017; Pachoud *et al.*, 2019).

In this sense, the objective of this document was to identify the elements with which there was work done to achieve the patrimonial activation that falls in the Region of Origin Cotija Cheese CB, thus consolidating one of the first achievements that were proposed to reach territorial development of the Sierra in Jalisco and Michoacán, and therefore, to revitalize the agrifood heritage of the region.

The case of the Region of Origin Cotija Cheese (ROCC) is taken for the analysis, because the process of creating patrimony can be observed when obtaining a CB, accounting for the interactions between institutions and producers of the Sierra in Jalisco and Michoacán (JalMich), and giving rise to collective action directed at revaluing an agrifood and revealing the dynamics of the process (Quiñonez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2016; Ramírez, 2018; Pachoud *et al.*, 2019).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The theme set out was addressed from the LAFS approach, which allows observing a unit of analysis from different dimensions: i) a historical dimension, appreciating the formation of networks; ii) an institutional dimension, analyzing the relationship between social actors; iii) a technical dimension, which allows analyzing the knowhow; and iv) a dietary dimension, which accounts for the social, cultural and economic relationships of the agrifood product (Muchnik, 2006; Boucher and Reyes 2011; Boucher and Riveros-Cañas, 2017).

In this sense, only the institutional dimension was analyzed to understand the work conducted with the cheese producers and the strategies, individual and collective, that they followed to attain the seal of quality: in this case the CB given by the Mexican Institute of Industrial Property (Instituto Mexicano de la Propiedad Industrial, IMPI) in the year 2005 (Barragán and Ovando, 2018). For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were performed with five participants, selected by the following criteria: i) involvement during the period when the dossier was integrated (2000-2003), to set up the application before the IMPI, ii) participation within the process: representative of cheese producers, government

official, representative of academia, lawyer with knowledge of intellectual property, veterinary doctor with knowledge of the region and the elaboration process.

The interviews were examined considering, in general, the following categories: i) institutional requirements to gain access to a DO, ii) perception about obtaining the CB, iii) levels of conflict and consensus between participants, and iv) conformation of associations to drive the process.

### Study Zone

The region recognized as the zone where the authentic artisanal mature Cotija cheese is protected (Figure 1) is characterized by an uneven relief and a disperse and scarce population, it is limited generally by the municipalities of Quitupan, Santa María del Oro and Jilotlán de los Dolores in Jalisco, and Cotija, Tocumbo and Buena Vista Tomatlán in Michoacán, all belonging to the basin of the Tepalcaltepec River (Barragán and Ovando, 2018).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The CB that was given in the year 2005 (Figure 2) represented, for the processes of creating patrimony for an artisanal food, together with obtaining a seal of quality and the collective action (Quiñonez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2016; Ramírez, 2018; Pachoud *et al.*, 2019), one of the first works elaborated with joint efforts: research centers, public institutions, but mostly the collaborative work of two states in the Mexican Republic: Jalisco and Michoacán.

Within the joint efforts, there was the participation of Colegio de Michoacán (COLMICH), Centro de Investigación y Asistencia en Tecnología y Diseño del Estado de Jalisco (CIATEJ), and Centro de investigación y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), as well as representatives of the Mexican Institute of Industrial Property (IMPI), the National Council for Science and Technology (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, CONACYT), and the National Fund for Social Enterprises (Fondo Nacional de Empresas Sociales, FONAES) (Barragán, 2010).

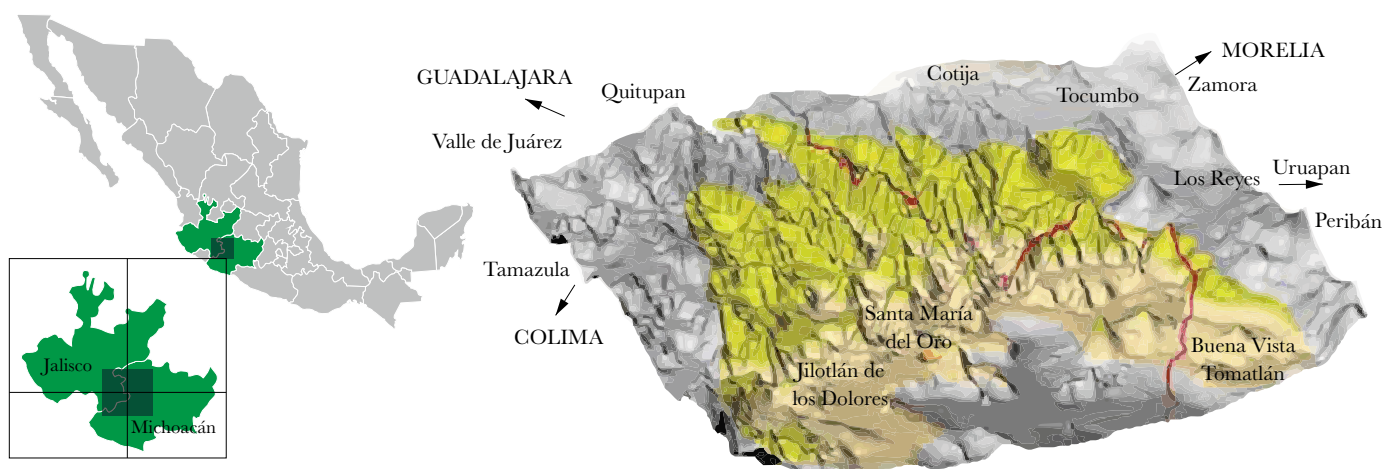


Figure 1. Map of the JalMich mountain range (Barragán and Ovando, 2018).



**Figure 2.** Region of Origin Cotija Cheese Collective Brand (Barragán, 2010)

In this sense, it can be observed that multidisciplinary work and collective action directed at the patrimonial revitalization of an artisanal food attains concrete objectives (Quiñonez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2016; Pachoud *et al.*, 2019), although it becomes necessary to consider that not all actions should begin immediately when a decrease in production or threat of disappearance is observed due to abandoning the trade, as in the case of the DOQC, which according to Barragán and Chavéz (1998) was the detonator for recovery efforts to be implemented for a food that is part of the agrifood heritage of the territory.

Due to the decrease in cheese production that was observed, actions started from academia to promote a distinctive protection seal that could give a new opportunity to producers of traditional Cotija cheese, which is why the first step was taken in the necessary field work: visits to ranches that are established in the sierra and are part of the producing region, documentation of the elaboration process, campaigns to have certificates of herds free of brucellosis and tuberculosis, as well as periodic meetings with the union to train them, understand their concerns and drive the creation of an association of producers that would legitimize the processes and could function as a legally constituted associative figure, for the process that would have to be made before organizations such as IMPI, the Ministry of Internal Revenue and Public Credit and the Ministry of Health, among others.

The sum of efforts and the work conducted resulted in the proposal of achieving a Denomination of Origin<sup>[1]</sup>, understood as “the product linked to a geographic zone from which it is native, as long as its quality, characteristics or reputation are due exclusively or essentially to the geographic origin of the prime materials, production processes, as well as the natural and cultural factors that impact it” (Ley Federal de Protección a la Propiedad Industrial, 2020, p. 61), given the definition and since the cheese belongs to a geographic region of the country and its quality is due exclusively to the geographic medium and to the natural and human factors that comprise it, the viable and logical option was to attain the DO.

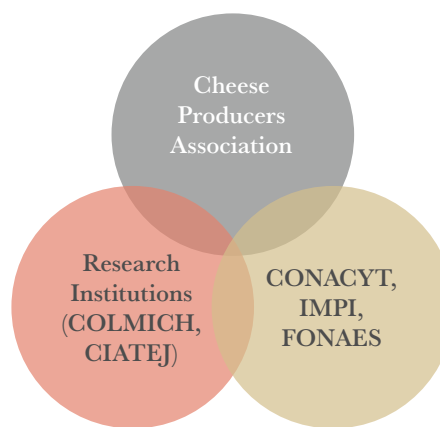
<sup>1</sup> Until 2018, the protection figures that the IMPI granted to agrifood producers were the Denomination of Origin and the Collective Brand, in that year's reform the figure of Geographic Indication was accepted.

### The Path of Creating Patrimony

To attain the differentiated seal as a DO it was necessary to understand the requisites proposed by the IMPI and since that moment to create a strategic plan. For that purpose, the regulations were reviewed, among which there were the following: i) the name, address and nationality of the applicant, and in the case of a company, the nature and activities it is devoted to should be described; ii) to indicate and confirm the legal interest of the applicant; iii) to mention the denomination of origin that was the object of the request; iv) to establish a detailed description of the products that are intended to be protected with the Denomination of Origin, addressing their characteristics and components, extraction forms, processes of elaboration and production; v) to determine the place or places of extraction, production or elaboration of the product, delimiting the territory of origin in agreement with the geographic traits and respecting the political divisions; and vi) to mention and detail the links between the denomination of origin, the product and the territory (IMPI, 2017; Barragán and Ovando 2018, Ley federal de protección a la propiedad industrial, 2020). Likewise, it should be mentioned that the official norms that the product is subject to must be described, as well as the modes of packaging, wrapping or packing.

Addressing to the regulations from IMPI, the process was started with the creation and constitution of the Regional Association of Cotija Cheese Producers, which would be the company that would confirm the activity and the legal interest, and in addition to it the application and payment of rights were made in the IMPI, mentioning the name of the DO that wanted to be obtained. Through the constitution of a dossier<sup>[2]</sup> where the form of elaboration and the production zone of the product to be protected (Cotija cheese) was detailed clearly, emphasizing in particular the existing relationship between the product, the territory and the origin, aspects that flaunt more than 400 years of historical depth (Barragán, 2003; Barragán and Ovando, 2018).

In this sense, the project had high possibilities of being crystallized given the existing interactions between producers, academia and public institutions that joined the project (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Interactions to achieve the DO of Cotija cheese (prepared by authors).

<sup>2</sup> The complete information about the dossier is in the archive of the Rural Studies Center at El Colegio de Michoacán, A.C., in Zamora, Michoacán.

The state governments of Jalisco and Michoacán adhered to the work carried out jointly, and this brought a greater benefit since there was more support, the impulse that had been developed with producers had now been escalated up to government spheres, which was perceived positively, since by having support from the government of both states, there was the political capital to begin the necessary negotiations (Barragán, 2010; Barragán and Ovando, 2018).

However, the effort was not enough, or at least not in the terms set out since the DO was not attained, although the CB was, with which new proposals and strategies were started towards the protection and valuation of Cotija cheese. One of the weak points, so to speak, is that Cotija cheese at the time of presenting the request before the IMPI did not have an Official Mexican Norm that would back it based on the dispositions of the Federal Law of Industrial Property Protection (IMPI, 2017, Ley Federal de Protección a la Propiedad Industrial, 2020).

Despite having not obtained the DO at that moment, the suggestions were reformulated and with the work already established, what was necessary was done to consolidate the Region of Origin Cotija CB<sup>[3]</sup>, for which the Rules of Use were developed for the Region of Origin Cotija Cheese Collective Brand together with the producers, and the work started around the design of the labels for the product that would begin to be commercialized with the CB.

### **Leveraging the Brand**

With the distinctive seal attained, the goals were maximized, new channels of distribution and commercialization were imagined, but at the same time the bases were established to drive territorial development from the benefit. Through the creation of Mesón del Queso, actions of interaction with consumers would be promoted, through visits and tourism journeys, thinking of a Center of Productive Articulation (*Centro de Articulación Productiva*, CAP), where planning of the place with a zone for resting, recreational areas, and an outdoor space where the visitor could prepare food would be made through a feasibility study<sup>[4]</sup> where visits were made to know the optimal paths of access for visitors.

The idea of having visitors and generating local tourism (through the creation of a tourism route) that could benefit the region was part of the action plan to consolidate the CB, since the service providers would be the inhabitants of the place themselves, where the Mesón would be located, while the cheese producers could continue to be devoted to their activity without neglecting their production unit.

Unfortunately, the goals set out and the ideal of territorial development were decreased due to the lack of budgetary continuity and organizational efficacy of the state governments (the Inter-State Commission for the Development of the Jalmich Sierra, Comisión Interestatal para el Desarrollo de la Sierra de Jalmich, constituted in 2005, was dissolved at the end of the administration of the governors in office), the problems around distribution

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<sup>3</sup> The CAP's feasibility study is located in the archive of the Rural Studies at El Colegio de Michoacán.

<sup>4</sup> The distinctive sign given by the IMPI in 2005 (it was presented in 2003 but was given in 2005) is Region of Origin Cotija, the word Cheese is not part of the brand, although it is included in the design.

channels, which were not those expected due to the requirements and abusive contracts of supermarkets or transnational companies, and decisively, the climate of violence that was accentuated and remains in the region, which have made obtaining the distinctive seal surmise new challenges to be overcome.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mexico is a country with a vast agrifood heritage that should be protected, given the strong pressure that emblematic foods from the territory face within the context of the industrialized global food system. Safeguarding that heritage is a responsibility of the State, together with organized society, whether the groups of producers, conscious consumers, or academia from its tasks of connection with society and service.

Despite this, obtaining the seals of quality which allow the protection of the heritage, and of producers and consumers, is a winding path full of difficulties. It is necessary to develop public policies that reach small-scale producers, authentic guardians of the food heritage of Mexico.

The case of Cotija cheese illustrates the need to redefine clear and attainable criteria in the processes of valuation of local resources, as well as to improve the conception of protection of the foods, based on territoriality, historicity, and knowhow associated to an agrifood system. This not only has an impact on the improvement of the living conditions of rural producers, but rather also on the drive towards a quality, healthy, and culturally appropriate diet that is so necessary in such tumultuous moments as are experienced nowadays.

Future studies ought to include a deeper analysis about the networks of actors implicated in the processes of protection and valuation, from a socio-ecosystemic and biocultural perspective. Likewise, it is important to contrast the varied and irregular trajectories that different foods susceptible of valuation in Mexico have followed.

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