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Seasonality as a vector for agro-ecological transition? The case of Fin Gras du Mézenc

Signs identifying quality and origin are often seen as ideal tools for agro-ecological transition, particularly geographical indications (Casabianca, 2018; Vandecandelaere et al., 2021). Adopting a novel approach that brings together the zootechnics of livestock farming systems and the history of the present, we analyse the trajectory of the Fin Gras du Mézenc PDO, a French beef product that has had a designation of origin since 2009. We examine why and how the seasonal nature of rearing and marketing practices, which structure the typicality of the product, promotes several of the principles of agroecology (Dumont et al., 2013; Loconto et al., 2018; Barrios et al., 2020). To this end, we conducted semi-structured interviews with farmers in order to construct farm trajectories, supplemented by life histories from stakeholders and the examination of public and private archives.

Implementing agro-ecological principles means accepting a major constraint that has a long-term impact on the area's livestock farming systems: winter fattening of "long-cycle" animals in mountain grasslands. This involves a feeding system based on grazing, winter finishing using hay with specific floral qualities (Chabrat et al., 2014), and marketing the animals, which is also seasonal, from February to June, on a local and regional market via fairly short distribution channels (restaurants, local sales and direct sales to butchers).

Cattle farmers in the Mézenc have used this seasonal feeding system as a key factor in a path that has enabled them to emancipate themselves from dependence on the dominant beef production model since the 1990s (Pflimlin et al., 2009). These practices define a specific product quality, both in terms of organoleptic and technological qualities (Trift, 2003), and in terms of when it is marketed (Ingrand et al., 2001). This original approach does away with animal genetic resources, which are key levers in the agro-ecological transition of livestock farming systems (Jouven et al., 2022).

However, new dependencies seem to be emerging. Farmers using selected breeds for production purposes are experiencing a tension between specific quality and standard. At the same time, farms in the region have continued to grow in size, calling into question the collective model, and in particular fodder resources.

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