Fruiturisme: the boost of fruit tourism in Catalan rural areas

Abstract

This research involves an in-depth study of tourism as an economic driver in rural areas, specifically in those with prominent entrepreneurship and diversification in agrarian family businesses. We base it on a case study of Fruiturisme, a tourism project being developed in the small town of Aitona (Catalonia) which offers the experience of viewing fruit trees in bloom. In-depth interviews to local stakeholders are used to collect data and provide arguments to reinforce entrepreneurship and diversification in agrarian family businesses. We highlight the characteristics that foster the development and continuity of such agrotourism projects in domestic and international markets, as well as the sustainability of agrarian family businesses. The support and developmental drive by Aitona Town Council, together with the endogenous collaboration of the residents of the entire municipality, has generated an ideal scenario in which to create a tourist product that is recognized nationally and internationally. The contribution of this article is to highlight this cogovernance of different staketholders to implement tourism activities and ~~It is recommended~~ to go on with this collaboration to diversify the business activity of different farms and entrepreneurship in the town. Otherwise, rural places will have an uncertain future, but agriculture and tourism are a pairing of great value. Furthermore, this cogovernance and community participation raise as key strategies to develop sustainable tourism.

Key words: tourism development, rural entrepreneurship, agrarian family businesses, fruit tourism, agritourism

Introduction

The transformation of arable farming in recent decades has decisively shaped the landscape and consequently increased the shift towards monoculture, specialization, mechanization, and the intensification of production (Sumane et al., 2018; Suess-Reyes, 2016). At the same time, the constant reduction in agricultural income (Glover et al. 2013), the lack of generational replacement and an increasing aging of the farming community suggest growing difficulties for survival that mainly affect family farms. Hence, the diversification of economic activities has emerged as an essential strategy for rural development and as a means to support and complement these family farms. Rural tourism, or agrotourism, is in vogue in Europe, whereby visitors seek direct contact with nature and the products generated therein, as well as the opportunity to connect and interact with the producers in an environment that is far removed from normal purchasing activity (Sharpley and Vass, 2006). In this vein, farmers represent one of the central players of rural tourism and their land-management behaviour contribute to form the landscape (Rob et al. 2011).

The objective of this study is to analyse tourism activity as a driver of economic development in distant regions from major urban tourist centres, with a specific focus on entrepreneurship and diversification of family-based farming. The article begins with

a review of the scientific literature that has analysed the agricultural sector and rural tourism. This is followed by a case study of *Fruiturisme*' (Fruit Tourism) in the municipality of Aitona (Catalonia, Spain), a project that encourages and supports the diversification of family businesses and income by offering didactic tours of its local orchards. The main attraction of the perfectly aligned, pruned and in full blossom fruit trees is the colour they provide, a veritable sea of pink and what it represents, the production of a healthy and wholesome fruit. A spectacle that invites the tourist to stroll through the plantations and feeding with this kind of fruits, bonding tourism with healthy and quality food.

Qualitative technique is used in this exploratory research. Secondary data on the project provided by the Aitona Tourism Council and primary data collected from in-depth interviews with most of owners of agrarian family businesses is used to test both research questions on fruit tourism as a new trend in agrotourism and as a driver of socioeconomic change in rural areas and of diversification and entrepreneurship among family farms. The study concludes with some proposals for practical action to tourism managers of this small town to reinforce the consolidation of fruit tourism.

Tourism: driver of economic development

Tourism is considered to be one of the most important drivers of local development and growth. Its companies are viewed as the pioneers in creating happiness (Pearce, 2009; Pearce et al., 2011) and in recent years there has been a proliferation of tours and itineraries in every corner of the planet (Hernández Ramírez, 2011; López-Guzmán and Sánchez Cañizares, 2008; Rengifo, 2006, Cardoso et al., 2018) to satisfy the desire to discover unusual, authentic places, one of the primary requirements being to learn about local culture and knowledge (Salazar, 2005; Crespi-Vallbona and Mascarilla-Miró, 2020).

Development of a competitive tourist destination needs suitable resources, attractions to be admired (Ritchie and Crouch, 1993) and media campaigns to manage its attributes and create brand awareness (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999; Cracolici, et al., 2008). Destinations seeking a competitive and sustainable advantage in the tourism sector need to build an attractive image for visitors (Glinska and Florek, 2013), and to generate a positive narrative to encourage loyalty and recommendation. The main characteristics on which this image is based need to be sought and refined (Glinska and Florek, 2013), while also bearing in mind that these can change over time. There is also an indispensable need for continued marketing actions to monitor and rectify deficiencies and dispel negative perceptions. Therefore, in order to succeed, destinations need to be converted into viable, attractive and, consequently, marketable products (Pulido, 2006).

Tourists are attracted by the added value generated by responsible destinations, while resources that are repetitive or lack differentiation, mainly due to overexploitation of the product and (over)exposure to homogeneous stimuli (Davey, 2005), are less appealing. Moreira and Iao (2014) define destination fatigue from the traveller's perspective as a consequence of over-exploitation that negatively affects a destination's image and generates a decrease in intentions to travel there. Saturation due to an excessive number of visitors and over-commodification of the product has this negative

effect. Indeed, in addition to the traditional economic, sociocultural and environmental pillars of sustainability, another one can be added when analysing the impacts of tourism: the quality of the experience offered to the tourist (Crespi-Vallbona et al., 2019). Butler's life cycle of a destination (1980) describes different phases, namely exploration, implementation, development, consolidation, saturation, decline and (or) rejuvenation, with varying numbers of tourist arrivals according to each phase. The exploration and development phases require the design of fashionable products and a trendy image through the introduction of something new, different and unique with regard to what is already available. Added value and competitive advantage are created by outdoing the opposition in the offer of what is vital for tourists (Hassan, 2000, Dwyer and Kim, 2003). D'Harterre (2000: 23) defines competitiveness as "the ability of a destination to maintain its position in the market and share and (or) improve it over time." Being a competitive tourism destination boosts the local economy (Dwyer and Kim, 2003). Ritchie and Crouch (2000) consider that competitiveness connects with sustainable development not only economically, but also ecologically, socially and culturally. Specifically, in the case of nature-based tourism, Boukas (2019) states that tourism in natural engagements acts as an instrument for the conservation and renaissance of rural society and culture. Furthermore, Sidali et al. (2015) focus on the distinctiveness of these places, regarding its cultural and natural capital. As Hakim (2014) suggests, fruit plants field are a potential resource for tourism attraction. Not in vain, these discovery visits to blooming fields bring participants the opportunity to enrich their knowledge about the processes, contexts and meanings associated with the production, harvesting, processing and consumption of fruits, in line with food tourism approach of Knollenberg et al. (2021).

Miossec (1976) focuses on littoral destinations and describes the development of tourism regions over time and space, identifying specific phases with distinct changes in the number of destinations within the region, transport links to and within the region, tourist behaviour or knowledge of the region, and the attitudes of decision makers and the host community. His research identifies that there tends to be a pioneering destination that leads the way in terms of tourism development, which ultimately spills across to neighbouring municipalities to create a whole tourism region. His theoretical approach bases on the dissemination of innovative proposals to other places and organizations that adopt these pioneer strategies. This also happens in destinations that use blooming plants and/or the moment when trees bear fruits to carry out events and tourist activities, such as the cherry blossom festivals in Japan or USA, tulip festival in Netherlands or narcissus festival in Austria, fruit plans in Indonesia and fruit-picking activities in China (Liu et al., 2016). As Liu, Chen, Ge and Li (2016) state, currently tourists want to visit the flowering and leaf coloration changes of plants and trees, as well as to participate in the fruit-picking activities during seasons when fruit ripen, even savour and taste them. These events and tourism events attract tourists from a wider geographic market, not just local or regional visitors ((Hall and Mitchell, 2005; Hjalager and Corigliano, 2000).

Not in vain, Hjalager (2020) states the need to better understand the prospects of agriculture and food production entities to better connect tourism and gastronomy and interlink social, cultural and economic aspects. Ma and Hassink (2013) refers to the

coevolutionary process of tourism sectors, tourism products and institutions at multiple levels. Fullerton and Brouder (2019) analysed this interaction and coevolution in rural tourism environments, specifically grape and wine production in Niagara and the potential of this conjoined perception. Farming communities are dominant in these enclaves where agriculture is the principal activity. In these places, tourism is seen as a complementary opportunity, and the endeavour to mix both is motivated in terms of sustainability. Consequently, agritourism appears as a means of diversification for farm holdings and a great attraction for tourists interested in new experiences, as Crespi-Vallbona and Mascarilla-Miró (2019) stated in Pla de Bages (Catalonia), combining food, wine, nature and cultural heritage settings. However, farmers believe that they back yard has no interest and do not pay attention on it (Hjalager, 2020), but tourists are curious and like visit production fields and plantations. This involves collaboration, partnership, and the governance of destination management organizations (Richards, 2012; Crespi-Vallbona, 2022). As Kuchi, Salma and Kabir (2017) state, the success of horti-tourism (another way to refer to tourism, which involves visiting a horticultural farm, such as fruit orchard or vegetable garden or ornamental garden) needs good relations with neighbours, local businesspersons and community members.

In this sense, Destination Management Organizations (DMO) play a crucial in this appearance, as they are the institutions in charge of planning, managing and/or marketing tourism destinations (Pike, 2016). Despite their territorial, organisational, legal or economic differences, DMO usually share certain common characteristics, such as trying to involve public and private stakeholders, as well as the local community, in tourism businesses (or programmes) and in decision-making processes (Hall, 2011). This community-based approach to the planning and management of local events or projects reinforces their sustainability and support, when community participation and involvement is definitely assured (Crespi-Vallbona, 2022).

Furthermore, agricultural economies associated with intensive agricultures have experienced major shifts in recent decades (Arsel, M. et al. 2012; Helm, 2017) representing one of the most intense scenarios where changes have taken place (Bosc et al. 2019), especially when society's demands on farming shift "from something that provides one good (food) to something that supplies many (food, access to green spaces, healthy rural environment, reduced greenhouse gas emissions)". Consequently, farming are perched on the brink of major changes (Chiswell, 2014) resulting from wider transformations related to new social and economical demands. According to Coopmans et al. (2021), the future of farming relies on farmers, next-generation farmers, agricultural workers and local residents. Furthermore, different scholars (Renko, et al., 2010; Donaldson, et al.,2011; Fleischer, et al., 2018) agrotourism has a significant and positive impact on the profitability of farms and the environment where are located and permits to understand the role of food in rural tourism development. Definetely, as Putri et al (2015) state, native fruit plants can be preserved thanks to its potential for tourism attraction, besides of an additional income for people.

Based on the foregoing, we propose the following research questions:
1) Are fruit fields icons of identity and tourist attractions?
2) Is sustainable tourism a driver of economic and social development in rural settings?

The binomial of agrotourism and agrarian holdings

The development of rural tourism and agritourism has increased in recent decades (Sharpley and Vass, 2006). This success is due to the decline of the agricultural sector (Busby and Rendle, 2000) and the need for producers to reinvent themselves by finding alternative sources of income. Extensive academic literature has analysed how farmers have turned to tourism as a viable means to diversify their businesses (Lobo et al., 1999, Jolly and Reynols, 2005, McIntosh and Bonnemann, 2006). Meanwhile, for consumers, agrotourism presents urbanites with an opportunity to connect with the land, their roots and essential simplicities of life. In this sense, Choo and Petrick (2013) have analysed meetings between agrotourists and service providers, local residents and other rural tourists to lean about the degree of satisfaction among agrotourists with regard to these social encounters and exchanges of experiences. These tourists describe a vital need to socially interact with local residents, service providers (Solnet, 2007) and other clients (Huang and Hsu, 2010). The concept of servicescape based on a physical environment created between service providers and customers is especially important.

Meanwhile, the agricultural sector is currently confronting very severe changes on an economic, social and environmental level, including those to food safety, quality standards, changing customer tastes, climate change and intense farming, together with an expansion of production areas and adaptation to mechanization (Alsel et al., 2011).

Volatility in market prices (Darnhofer et al., 2010), the application of new technologies to agricultural activity and the need for intensified production have had direct consequences on the production system (Suess-Reyes & Fuetsch, 2016). In the case of fruit farming, these consequences have been reflected in the characteristics of agricultural holdings, which are increasingly more extensive, with some uniforming of crops and varieties. In this sense, rural tourism brings new opportunities to traditional businesses (De Jesús & Medina, 2021; Varisco, 2016).

Agricultural holdings tend to be family farms (European Commission, 2014), hence the future of agriculture in Europe is in the hands of the next generations of these family businesses (Grubbström et al, 2017). However, the data indicates an alarming lack of generational replacement with the consequences that this entails: abandonment of arable and livestock farms, depopulation and a reduction in biodiversity (Eurostat, 2014).

A fundamental reason for the survival of family farms is their resilience and their flexibility in the face of changing technological, economic, social and political circumstances, on and off the farm (Gasson & Errington, 1993)

Milestad et al. (2012) argue that recent decades have brought such profound changes to our understanding of agricultural systems that farms can no longer be seen as a stable element of the environment but instead as units that evolve, adapt and respond to an ever-changing environment. And tourism has emerged as one of the best solutions to

diversify activities, whereby the essence that lies behind agricultural products can be sold as an authentic experience.

Farmers not only have to face uncertainty about the direction of agricultural policies and markets, but also contradictory demands to increase food production and thus support the ever-growing world population while at the same time reducing the carbon footprint of intensive production methods (Darnhofer et al., 2016).

Darnhofer et al. (2016) describe different spheres of adaptive capacity, one of which is the farmer's own ability to use his/her resources and perceived options and potentialities to respond differently, depending on his/her own values. Within this same sphere, these authors also describe the personal capacity for adaptation as well as the influence that the environment can have on the farmer's role (Peerlings et al.,2014

This adaptability of the agricultural sector also involves the need to diversify activities (Meuwissen et al., 2020), mainly with regard to family farms (Slijperl et al.,2021) for which Glover and Reay (2015) describe this as a key driver for continuity. Such diversification may not only mean growing a wider range of produce, but even specialization in the creation of high added value gourmet or artisans' products, marketed either via almost direct sales chains to the end customer or through suppliers that specialise in handmade products.

Based on this, we propose the following research questions:
3) Are family farms resilient and adaptive businesses?
4) Does diversification help agricultural holdings to survive?

Fruiturisme. Contextualization

There is a long tradition of fruit farming in the province of Lleida (Catalonia), traditionally within the framework of family farms. However, in the current climate of globalisation, there has also been intense penetration in recent years of huge farms and companies from other sectors in the form of vertical integrations. Furthermore, the introduction of technology and mechanization to production methods has increased the total costs, and the decrease in agricultural income has consequently led to the use of diversification as a survival strategy.

Lleida is one of Europe's leading producers of drupe. The region's landscape is shaped by large expanses of fruit trees whose characteristics vary from season to season. Therein lies the inspiration for the Fruiturisme project, which is mainly based on the flowering periods of these expanses of fruit trees.

Fruiturisme is an original project that exploits and enhances the richness of a region based on a specific product, i.e. different varieties of peach, and which is the essence of its associated tourism and business activities. It aims to economically revitalise Aitona, using its fruit as a hallmark of the local identity, heritage, landscape and culture, but the lack of precedents in the use of fruit as a tourist attraction means the idea is set to spread to other fruit-growing regions of Catalonia.

The project was launched by the town council in 2011, with the aim of promoting a natural and scenic treasure, namely the flowering of fruit trees for two weeks, generally around the middle of the month of March. This flowering has been used as a tourist attraction, called “Aitona, a sea of colour” (Figure 1), defined as "the rose sea", due to the colour of the flowers that later turn into drupes.

Figure 1: Aitona, a sea of colour



Source: Aitona Town Council

This project has just received a major boost: recognition by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF, 2011-2015) of the enthusiasm, effort and involvement of all local agents in the form of financial aid to support Aitona town council’s implementation and development of the project, due to its originality, innovation and commitment to the economic development of the region.

In short, Fruiturisme offers a seasonally adjusted tourism product that didactically presents the arable activity in the municipality of Aitona. In summer, visitors are taken on tours where they learn about the different varieties of peaches and pick fruit directly from the trees. In autumn, the ochre landscape of falling leaves offers a wonderful opportunity to listen to nature before the trees take a well-earned break in the winter season. Spring brings their rebirth, and this is the period that Fruiturisme is at its most intense as it promotes the visual splendour of pink fields of peach blossom, ready for harvest in summer, thus closing the life cycle of the fruit trees.

Methodology

This research is rooted in grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glasser and Strauss, 1967), with the aim to discovering theoretical insight from empirical data, which are systematically gathered and analysed (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). In doing so, the methodological basis of the present research is the case study.
According to Yin (2009), case studies are an appropriate method of analysis when complex phenomena raise questions about how and why certain actions or changes occur. To elaborate on this process, the research uses the Fruiturisme experience and the key stakeholders in order to obtain evidence.

A single-in-depth case study (Fruiturisme) can accommodate existing theory that has articulated a set of premises, as well as, the situation within the propositions is disclosed to be true (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009), challenging or extended theory. It also determines whether it validates the theory proposition or whether there is a relevant alternative explanation (Yin, 2009: 28, Alvarez, Young, Wooley, 2015).
Furthermore, using snowball sampling technique permits to obtain a survey sample selection that allows us to locate hidden populations as it is represented in this work.
The primary data provided by the tourism officer from the Town Council allowed us to observe the scope of the project, the involvement of the local population and businesses, as well as the visitors and profits generated. The primary data obtained through eight in-depth interviews with local entrepreneurs also helped to answer the initial questions of this research. Social scientists consider interviews to be essential tools for exploring social reality (Cresswell, 2013). The interviews were conducted virtually between May 11 and August 30, 2021, and lasted approximately one hour each. The interviewees were representatives of the following businesses: Marxantó Craft Beer, Torre Roca, Mirador Montefiu, Chocolate Pangea, Cal Kika Jams, Mel de l'Oest and Nous Calzada (Table 1). The interviews were conducted in Catalan and were recorded for later analysis.

Table 1: Interviewed businesses

Code	Business	Owner's gender	Age	Description of business	Number of years within the business	Number of years within tourism-related sector	Date of interview
N1	Cal Kika	woman	48	Agricultural family business that has diversified from fruit production to jams, juices, and syrups. Its star product is called "chirlets", nectarine pearls that consumers can enjoy as a gourmet product all year round.	1940	2018	11/5/2021
N2	Chocolate Pangea	man	52	Artisan chocolate maker. The entrepreneur moved from a family farm to other activities, to later return to the agri-food sector as an artisan, which he views as the result of that latent passion that always exists among people who have been linked to agriculture. The product has been recognised internationally by the Academy of Chocolate Awards, in 2016, 2017 and 2018.	-	2016	1/6/2021
N3	Torre Roca	man	43	This family business has expanded by producing jams and marmalades from the fruit harvested on its own farms. In addition, the historical	2016	2018	7/7/2021

				fourteenth century farmhouse has been restored and adapted for rural tourism accommodation.			
N4	Mirador Montefiu	man	56	Campsite. This is a joint-venture by two friends to replace another investment project by one of the partners that ultimately didn't work out.	-	2019	14/7/2021
N5	Nous Calzada	man	56	Family farm that evolved from fruit crops to nut crops.	2001	2011	26/7/2021
N6	Cervesa Marxantó	man	49	Family beer business that is mainly characterized by its strong commitment to the promotion of local fruit, helping to raise awareness of the unique quality and variety of the produce and the efforts of local farmers.	-	2020	3/8/2021
N7	Mel de l'Oest	woman	38	A young beekeeping business, which exploits the flowering that occurs in Lleida to directly produce and sell different types of honey.	-	2016	11/8/2021
N8	Aitona Town Council	woman	51	Tourism officer	2011	2010	10/9/2021

Source: Own elaboration

The selected business cases must be based on a certain criterion (Kuzel, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). In this case, these businesses have either been created since the start of the Fruiturisme project or they already existed and have diversified or adapted to new demand in the fruit sector in Aitona as a result of it. These seven cases are most of all business activities carried out in the context of this project in the agri-food or tourism sectors (there are two business that declined their participation), together with the entity that promoted the activity of fruit tourism. They were asked questions derived from the Literature Review, as shown in Table 2, with the aim to confirm or reject the initial research questions. The rest of business in this small town have to do with the traditional fruit production (a total of six cooperative business), with shops of groceries (three), and gastronomy (two bars and two restaurants). They are part of the town, but were not founded or refocused due to Fruiturisme, therefore they do not participate in the qualitative data collection.

Our almost structured interview guide included questions about fruit fields, sustainable tourism as a driver of economic and social development, administration involvement and continuity in this kind of family farming, description of the Fruiturisme project and the involvement of key stakeholders. While those questions offered starting points for the data collection, interviews were advancing.

Table 2: Questions for interviews

Research questions	Related questions	Authors
Are fruit fields icons of identity and tourist attractions?	Are the people of Aitona proud of Fruiturisme? Do you consider Fruiturisme to be sustainable? Why? What is the added value of this project?	Hakim, 2014; Li et al, 2016; Kuchi et al., 2017; Putri et al., 2015 ; Salazar, 2005; Boukas, 2019; Crespi-Vallbona & Mascarilla-Miró, 2020; ~~Crouch & Ritchie, 1999~~; ~~Cracolici, et al., 2008.~~
Is sustainable tourism a driver of economic and social development in rural settings?	Would you have started your business without Fruiturisme? Does Fruiturisme benefit your business? Has the people's welfare improved with the launch of Fruiturisme? Have you actively participated in the design and execution of the project, or was it solely the work of the Local Administration? How does your business contribute to this added value?	~~Miossec, 1976;~~ Hassan, 2000; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; ~~D'Harterre, 2000; Glinska & Florek, 2013; Ritchie & Crouch, 2000~~; Hall, 2011; Boukas, 2019; Knollenberg et al., 2021; Sidali et al., 2015; Crespi-Vallbona, 2022; Richards, 2012.
Are family farms resilient and adaptive businesses?	Have you diversified / changed your business due to Fruiturisme or had you planned to do so before? Have you taken advantage of previous knowledge acquired in agricultural activity to be successful in your new project? Would it have been possible to start the project if you had not had the family farm? Do you consider it necessary to diversify / change your business in order to survive? Is diversification / renewal of the business a necessity?	Slijperl et al.,2021 Meuwissen et al., 2020; Peerlings et al.,2014; Darnhofer, 2016; Adger, 2000; Glover & Reay, 2015; ~~Miossec, 1976~~
Do diversification of agricultural holdings contribute to their survival?	Do you think this innovation will help the family business to survive? Will your relatives continue your own business?	Adger, 2000; Corsi, 2004; Glover & Reay, 2015; Gasson & Errington, 1993; Suess-Reyes & Fuetsch, 2016;

Source: Own elaboration

All participants were not anonymized and being described as members of the economic activity where they belong to. After data collection, all of the interviews were transcribed. Interviews and the analysis were carried out in Catalan, and the quotations presented in this paper have been translated from the original language into English. We ended up with 35 single-spaced pages of transcripts which the authors coded to generate key themes for further analysis. As part of the analysis of the interviewees' responses, a process of codification and categorization into thematic topics was

conducted, discussed and agreed by the authors of the paper. Inductive and open-coding of the data allowed us to identify the most pertinent details boosted by our participants. According to Yin (2009), a thematic analysis is useful to ordered categories to data analysis. According to Yin (2014), a thematic analysis is useful to order categories to data analysis. In this sense, from the data analysis and according the research questions, four main topics were identified: (a) fruit tourism as a new way to enjoy natural environments; (b) tourism activity as a driver of economic and social development in rural settings; (c) the capacity of entrepreneurs and family farms to be resilient and adaptive in their businesses; and d) business diversification as a mean to survive in rural settings.

Analysis of results

This section analyses the collected data and gives answers to the four research questions. Question 1 that "**Fruit fields are icons of identity and tourist attractions**" is confirmed. Not only does the DMO representative defend fruit fields as tourist attractions and icons of identity, but so do the other interviewees and the description of the project itself. Fruit trees have generated a new form of tourist interest and motivation. Not in vain, these discovery visits to blooming fields bring participants the opportunity to enrich their knowledge about the processes, contexts and meanings associated with the production, harvesting, processing and consumption of fruits, in line with food tourism approach of Knollenberg et al. (2021).

> *… The richness of fruit is a hallmark of identity and a significant tourist attraction*
> *… Through Fruiturisme, Aitona Town Council is making its commitment to fruit tourism known to the world, making fruit a tourist attraction and presenting it as a benchmark for fruit-farming areas throughout Catalonia, offering visitors a new concept of rural tourism and agrotourism.* (N8)

According to its own description, Fruiturisme identifies itself as a pioneering project that started in Aitona and is spreading the word about its local fruit to boost the region's economy. Its main objectives are to promote fruit culture and transmit the values of arable farming by disseminating it as a form of tourism activity. It also offers activities in which visitors get to taste not just the fruit, but also the heritage, landscape and culture of Aitona, which in turn generates new opportunities for economic development in the region. The design of its fruit-themed logo (Figure 2) defines the project, combining a yellow / red nectarine or peach with a garnet coloured paraguayo, topped by a green leaf.

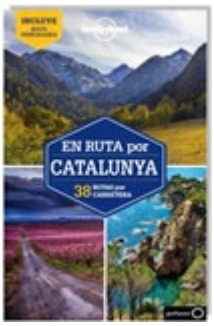
Figure 2: Fruiturisme Logo



Source: Aitona Town Council

Through successive advertising campaigns appearing in different media in recent years, the Fruiturisme brand has become established as a tourist destination in Catalonia. The famous photo of the "rose sea" of Aitona fields in flower has even appeared on the cover of an issue of Lonely Planet (2018) travel magazine dedicated to Catalonia (Figure 3), in the movie "Second Origin" and as a Windows screensaver.

Figure 3. Lonely Planet cover (2018)



Source: Aitona Town Council

> *In short, when Carles Porta released the film, we invited him to Aitona for a conference attended by all the guides and farmers, because we created the "Route of the Flower of Second Origin" in the 2016 season*. (N8)

Aitona has gone from being a small town in the province of Lleida that is unknown to most of the Catalan population to being constantly present in the media because of its fruit crops. Consequently, it has become a talking point and trending topic on social networks, such as Instagram, which have echoed the promotion of visits and the spectacular nature of the pink landscape between late February and mid-March. The general-interest press has been covering the major success of Fruiturisme since it began in 2011, and how it has become one of the country's most relevant agricultural tourism landmarks. There has been exponential growth in the number of visitors, from 1,500 in the first year, reaching almost 20,000 in 2019. It is not only about domestic tourism, there are international visitors of many different nationalities. The local DMO has no record of the number of visitors, but does differentiate three types of tourist: a) **Local tourists** from nearby municipalities in Lleida, Tarragona and Aragon. Apart from the pandemic year of 2021, interest in visiting Aitona has constantly increased among people from the city of Lleida and nearby towns; b) **Domestic tourists** from the rest of Catalonia, mainly from the provinces of Barcelona and Girona; and c) **International tourists**, international students (ERASMUS, Chinese from UdL). In March 2020, Japanese tourists even arrived from abroad.

In short, Fruiturisme has created a narrative that has captured visitors. It has not only been recognized by the public in the form of a rising number of visits, but has also received recognition from the Generalitat de Catalunya in the form of the 2019 "Best Tourist Experience" award, one of its highest tourism awards that each year honours the Catalan tourism sector for its contribution to making Catalonia a leading international destination.

… In fact, Aitona now appears day after day on TV3, on the news and in weather forecasts…. (N1)

… and our town is known in Barcelona… that wasn't the case before (N3)

Aitona and Fruiturisme offer the unique experience of being able to see fields of sweet fruit up close, and to learn all about the flowering, ripening, harvesting and treatment processes involved in the marketing of this agricultural produce through the region's Cooperative and [local wholesaler] SAT's. Likewise, they reinforce the concept of agrotourism, by raising awareness of fruit farming. The project's versatility and uniqueness have led to its expansion with new initiatives in various fields, including those that have emerged as a result of local agri-food products. (N8)

The roots of nature, and the essence of the land and its produce, reinforce a sense of identity among the locals, who feel that Fruiturisme enhances the value of the local land, its cultural and natural identity, and its ancestral traditions, which in turn have become specific icons that attract tourists. This nature-based tourism and its positive effects in local society and culture aligns with Boukas (2019).

*Urban people like to see a different landscape that they do not usually get to see, and that only lasts two or three weeks ... The countryside and nature offer a different perspective, a different philosophy, and people like to see the chain that food comes from, from the moment when you plant a tree to the moment the fruit appears ... etc., this interest in knowing about each product that comes from the field, knowing how they are made and breaking from the daily routine to find out where the food they eat comes from … (*N1)

Now our culture, our way of life, has become known…." (N3)

And Fruiturisme has not only besotted tourists. Locals love it too. At first, they did not appreciate the local scenery because it was what they saw every day, but now they admire it and are proud of belonging to a place with which they so strongly identify.

We do not appreciate the countryside because it is our environment ... and we do not notice its beauty, for us when the trees begin to bloom, life gets harder because it means a lot of work ..., but visitors, people from elsewhere, have made us see what we have here and appreciate it… There are many local people who go out on Saturday and Sunday and do the same as foreign Fruiturisme visitors …, they feel proud of their town's landscape … (N1)

It's funny to see people with cameras in our town. (N2)

We'd been seeing flowering peach trees all our lives but now we see something different… we did not appreciate them …. The people feel very proud to be from Aitona, because it's a name that people are familiar with everywhere… It's funny… (N4)

Finally, Fruiturisme has undeniable added value, which can be seen not only in the town that sparked this interest (Aitona) but also in the neighbouring towns that have followed suit by offering tours of their own fruit trees. Aitona was the pioneering municipality, but others are now doing likewise. In this sense, this fruit tourism development in Aitona and surrounding towns ascertains Miossec theory (1976) of development of tourism regions starting from a pionner place.

> *Fruiturisme is a new, unique, innovative project developed in the municipality of Aitona that, through the dissemination of local sweet fruit, aims to promote the economic revitalization of Baix Segre...*(N8)

> *But of course a lot of people come ... and I think it will get be too much for us unless they expand these visits to other towns that ... Nowadays, other towns like Alcarrás, Soses and Torres de Segre are offering our product... but of course Aitona is the best place ... Fruiturisme will need to be reformulated so that the surrounding towns are also given an opportunity. The event has already become too big here and I don't know if it will be able to cope with so many people ....* (N3)

In sum, this modality of tourism related to blooming of fruit trees deepens started in Aitona and expanded in the near surroundings confirms the current trend of rural tourism or agrotourism, whereby visitors seek direct contact with nature and the products generated therein, as well as the opportunity to connect and interact with the producers (Sharpley and Vass, 2006; Sims, 2009).

Research question 2 that "**Sustainable tourism is a driver of economic and social development in rural settings**" is also confirmed. Tourism projects certainly boost the economy in rural settings. In Aitona, without the drive generated by the Fruiturisme event and its promotion, many of the businesses that have appeared since 2011 would not exist, such as tourist accommodation and local food producers. One of the most paradigmatic examples is the Mirador Montefiu campsite, which serves as an important complement to Fruitutisme visits by offering an excellent panoramic viewpoint.

> *These tourist projects like Fruiturisme boost the economy ... and they gave us enough strength to start working on the farmhouse and opening rural accommodation* (N3)

> *Small producers are too small to be able to make themselves known by their own means, advertising is very expensive ... and if there is no help from the administration, it is very difficult for these businesses to get the word out so Fruiturisme has helped a lot… It's certainly a sustainable event, people go to Japan from around* the *world to see cherry trees covered with blossom... you have to sell well and continue to do things well* (N2)

> *…No doubt … As a result of the increase in visitors to the municipality, various entrepreneurial activities have arisen among local producers that have either been created and / or reinforced via the Fruiturisme project* (N8)

… If something works, people dare, and perhaps more companies will emerge... (N4)

As for economic revitalization, the growing interest in visiting Aitona, specifically when the peach trees bloom in March, has made it possible to increase the volume of services and boost existing ones, such as bars, restaurants and shops. The business initiatives that have emerged out of Fruiturisme in recent years have created a synergy of support and dissemination in the Terres de Lleida agricultural community, triggering decisions to finally start new businesses or refocus old ones with a guarantee of commercial success. Without the encouragement and support of the local administration, start-ups would not be successful. This management and intervention of local DMO is in line with Hall's governance approach (2011) to join all the stakeholders in the success of Fruiturisme.

… We were always thinking about it, should we open, should we not open, do we, don't we… but Fruiturisme emboldened us. (N1)

… We are farmers, fruit growers, and come from several generations and Fruiturisme has been like a common thread to be able to diversify. In fact, we had a 14th century farmhouse that had to be renovated… and this was the impetus we needed and we started to make a small investment to restore the house and use it for something else. We started at the bottom, and built a restaurant and a kitchen … and then we felt more confident and built a house for seven people and then we did up the garden with a swimming pool ... and this was due to Fruiturisme ... without that project we surely would not have dared. (N3)

Most of the undertakings are in the gastronomic sector, one of the main ways in which tourists are able to feel involved in a destination and its cultural essence. Product tastings are of general interest and educate visitors and consumers about new food and beverages, while also generating interaction with end consumers. Such establishments are commonplace in craft markets, not only at the place of origin, but all around the country, where first-hand information can be obtained on the customer's interests and tastes. There is also a pedagogical purpose, to showcase the importance of quality fruit and other local produce at 0 km.

*The people are very open minded, and since these markets are on weekends and holidays… you talk a lot with the people on the street… and they all tell you their stories …. and they allow you to present good products that you like… and that are different from other products. (*N1).

I worked in farming for many years. Because of this project we produce this craft beer that represents the essence of our town with a taste of peaches and cherries. It all evokes our roots. (N6)

... The benefits don't happen overnight ... it takes years ... time to make a brand ... and to appreciate the quality of local fruit, which is different to fruit from Chile, for example (N2)

Moreover, Fruiturisme has made small local producers well-known and encouraged them to attend gastronomic fairs. They are promoting both the tourism project and their own businesses, generating synergies and collaboration. Network governance is a key factor in this success (Hall, 2011; Crespi-Vallbona, 2022).

> *So, for example, when we go to fairs, the Town Council gives us a Fruiturisme roll-up to promote it ... and it is a hook to promote what is done in the town ...* (N1).

In this vein, the Fruiturisme project has managed to involve different actors in the process of creating and developing this tourist activity. It has been managed on the basis of the idea provided by Aitona town council, which has succeeded in a process of gradual incorporation of the different main actors in this project, i.e. farmers, processing industries and a group of local tourist guides related to agriculture. Fruiturisme, which takes place during the flowering season of fruit trees, is the result of the coordination between different actors . The advantages of Fruiturisme are not only the landscape and the specity but the contact with local population as guided tours, who provide their personnel view and life experience, adding intangible assests represented by a sense of belonging to the land and a way of life that is family farming and the production of fruit.

Therefore, the project started with the Town Council, but it is constantly requesting the contribution and collaboration of the local populace, mainly farmers, artisan producers and business associations. People are also asked to make sure that the pavements and facades are kept clean and tidy for the event. However, the greatest collaboration is requested from the businesses that benefit the most and offer tourist services related to Fruiturisme. This reinforces the Crespi-Vallbona's community-based approach (2022) to support and keep sustainable local events or projects.

> *From its beginnings at the Aitona Town Council, farmers and fruit centres as well as institutions, associations, traders and the local people were eager to collaborate … Anyone who wanted to show visitors their agrarian identity, way of life, heritage and culture, … could work as local guides, for example.* (N8)

> *Every year they ask us how to make Fruiturisme more attractive…, for example, two years ago all the local producers added a product-tasting… which did not work but they asked us for help… There are other people from the town who work as guides ….* (N1)

Indeed, the local DMO is interested in introducing new itineraries to the Fruiturisme project.

> *..Both local guides and ourselves are preparing the "silence among peach trees tour". The microclimate among our trees when the blossom blooms and the fruit subsequently appears is a unique experience, another specific part of our identity...*(N8)

Research question 3 that "**Family farms are resilient and adaptive businesses**" is also confirmed. These companies tend to seek to differentiate their products and innovate,

foster added value and be resilient. Business diversification is a challenge and a necessity, especially after a long period of economic decline. The Fruiturisme project ultimately generates a greater entrepreneurial desire, even if it is in other businesses with different purposes. In fact, fruit products allow to diversify the forms of tourism in rural areas and act as a business opportunity to entrepreneurs (de Jesús & Medina, 2021; Varisco, 2016).

> *Fruit is a kind of product that only lasts three months ... The rest of the year the farmer also has to work the land ... but he only gets money for three months ... so we think about ways to make a profit for the rest of the year as well, and that's why we think about "calçots" and rural accommodation…* (N3)

A traditional agrarian background and self-training are therefore essential factors when aiming to diversify a business. Personal motivation is also a basic necessity, as is the ability to spot business opportunities and ways to attract tourists to the area.

> *…Without our agricultural backgrounds, without our land ... we would have barely been able to do what we have done*... (N3)

Resilience and the capacity to observe changes provide opportunities to adapt and survive in the market, and mean that it is possible to overcome the shortcomings of the farming industry. By being cognisant of the need to adapt to the environment, businesses and families can benefit from the chance to set up a new economic activity as a result of the recent boom of tourism in Aitona.

> *We started our craft beer activity after talking to family members about the Fruiturisme project and the opportunities that it could provide. A member of the family (he is a craft beer specialist) told me how it was possible to craft beer using fruit essences (plain peaches, nectarines…*(N6)

> *We didn't want to have to work hard for little money, with increasing costs year after year. That was why we switched crops from "peaches to nuts". We had been thinking about and planning all these changes for years. It was the price crisis that ultimately made us take the step … We engaged in it because of the Fruiturisme project, and we sometimes receive orders from new clients because they know about Aitona and Fruitorisme or have visited and enjoyed it…* (N5)

The role of women in the rural economy and in the continuity of agricultural holdings as managers of newly diversified businesses deserves new attention and studies.

> ...Cal Kika and Casa Roca were ideas that came from women, who made all the moves while the men continued working in the fields. The men helped with the new projects, but the promoters, the disseminators even, were the women and I would say that the business is registered in their name. (N8)

Research question 4 that the "**Diversification of agricultural holdings contributes to their survival**" is rejected. Notwithstanding that diversification is a key driver for the

continuity of family farms, this is not observed in this case. In fact, diversification or the creation of a new activity is part of the process of adapting to a new scenario.

> *We have not diversified to ensure or to strengthen the family farm so that our children can continue it; our new activity responds more to an opportunity that has been presented to us…" (N5).*

> *Diversification allows us to survive as a company and to think about the success of the business for our children ... Xavier wants to work at home when he finishes school, ... In fact, it was him who came up with the idea of "calçots" ... but he feels that I should not create obstacles and should instead support and follow through on those ideas* (N3)

> *Hopefully my children will continue the business … But anyway, that's not why we started it … We only encountered problems everywhere … We started two weeks before the pandemic … and the only reasons we started were motivation and desire, not thinking about our children's futures.* (N4)

Until now, family farms tend to have been consistently handed down from generation to generation. But notwithstanding that farming represents the most hereditarian of occupations (Glover et al. 2013), only one of the respondents says that the farm will be continued by his descendants (N3). For the others, passing the family business down through the generations is not a key aspect, mainly because their children want to make their own way.

The lack of intention among next-generations to run the family business is expressed in the interviews:

> *There is no chance of my daughters continuing the business that I have started. In fact, they see me as very daring and a bit out of touch with reality. They have made it clear to me that they do not want to continue the bee business. But for me, this business has been a matter of personal fulfilment* (N7).

Keeping the family business going is more of a pipe-dream than a real possibility. In this vein the relationship between the product and the family name represents a powerful reason to expect such continuity, showing the importance of the emotional attachment among their managers.

> *The craft beer that I have created bears the family name. That's the only reason why it would be very exciting for my daughters to keep it going. The name represents how it originated in our family*. (N6)

Conclusions

This research is based on agrotourism, and specifically on a new form focused on fruit tourism, developed in Aitona, a small town in Lleida province (Catalonia). The main aim of Fruiturisme is to create value from arable farming and to raise didactic awareness of

Aitona's specific varieties of peach trees. The *Aitona amb molt de gust* (Aitona with a lot of taste) brand has spread beyond the town itself to the whole Baix Segre region, and its iconic towns, fruit trees and farmers. In that sense, this modality of tourism related to blooming of fruit trees deepens the current body of knowledge related to rural tourism, or agrotourism, whereby visitors seek direct contact with nature and the products generated therein, as well as the opportunity to connect and interact with the producers (Sharpley and Vass, 2006; Sims, 2009).

The support and developmental drive by Aitona Town Council, together with the endogenous collaboration of the residents of the entire municipality, has generated an ideal scenario in which to create a tourist product that is recognized nationally and internationally. Fruiturisme has helped to diversify the business activity of different farms, being a clear example of the relationship between the creation of a tourism project, entrepreneurial activity in rural areas and public-private collaboration. Fruiturisme reinforces the need of a network governance in local projects to achieve success and sustainability (Hall 2011; Crespi-Vallbona, 2022), this is, the real involvement and participation of neighbours, local businesses and community.

The added value of this tourist destination is undoubtedly associated with its agricultural activity, which is so rooted to the land and the primary sector, as well as the transformation witnessed by this ancestral tradition in recent years. Rural entrepreneurship is stronger the more it is linked to an experience that attracts tourists who are aware of nature and attachment to the land, and who seek direct contact with the producer-artisan. This reinforces other academic contributions based on the significance of cultural and natural capital (Sims, 2009; Knollenberg et al., 2021; Sidali et al., 2015).

There are two common elements shared by all these entrepreneurial activities. The first is a direct or indirect link with the agricultural sector, either now or in some previous period of the lives of the people who have started or diversified their business. The second is the weight of the Fruiturisme project, which brings people together, creates synergies, and encourages entrepreneurs to make their bold move.

Hence there is clearly an intense relationship between rural entrepreneurship and the existence of a tourism project that is rooted in the land, in nature, whereby the explosion of life and colour represented by the "rose sea" of peach trees can subsequently be used to explain all the different phases involved in the production, harvest, transformation and sale of sweet fruit (peaches, nectarines, paraguayos and platerines).

This research confirms other empirical studies on the capacity of family farms to adapt (Darnhofer et el., 2016; Peerling et al., 2014). Diversification as a strategy is closely related to structural factors such as the exploitation and modification of products and the search for new ones, the existence of new opportunities created from a new product (in this case, Fruiturisme) and the willingness to adapt to these new opportunities.

These results demonstrate the importance of diversification, entrepreneurship and adaptability for present-day family farms, but also suggest that diversification is not

motivated by the need for direct descendants to continue the family business, which is not viewed as a priority or main objective.

Management implications

DMO is usually the key stakeholder in the planning, implementation, promotion and management of local events or projects. In this specific town, Aitona, there are some recommendations for its policy-makers. Firstly, is to implement a system to collect visitor data: number, nationality, interests, etc. to provide sufficient information to support the creation of new tourism schemes and evaluate visitors' satisfaction. Secondly, it is required to stablish a network with the DMO of the surroundings towns to create other activities and visit options to attract more visitors and avoid seasonality. In this sense, it should be interesting to involve the respective resident community to this design thinking process.

Research limitations and Future research

This is a sole case study and limits conclusions of our research. Therefore, it will be interesting to find out more similar fruit tourism cases to confirm our hypotheses. Case studies have been criticized for being descriptive more than critical, and storytelling as opposed to analytical. However, using theory as the initial point instead of trying to theory produced from data, many of the objections on the use of case research are overcome. Furthermore, as so many of the new entrepreneurs in this case study are women, future research could focus on the role of women in the rural economy and the continuity of the agricultural holdings. It also would be interesting to analyse the perception of visitors of fruit tourism.

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