

Catalan agri-food: the challenges ahead

There is a Spanish saying: “Catalans make bread from stones.” Perhaps this is true in reference to the Catalan agri-food cluster. It is the second most important cluster in Europe and the first manufacturing sector in Catalonia, and with regard to the Spanish agri-food sector contributes 23.7% of production and 25.5% of exports. These figures show the relative importance of the sector and represent the “bread.” However, the data take on special meaning when it comes to the “stones.”

Catalonia is a very mountainous country, 50.5% of its territory has a gradient of more than 20% and a significant part of this is semi-arid. This means that natural conditions severely hinder competitive agriculture. These are the “stones”.

Various strategies have been used to overcome these difficulties. One positive aspect is that the mountains collect large water deposits, which then form rivers that cross the plains. This overcomes one difficulty, by irrigating a quarter of the cultivated land. Secondly, quality is used as a means to add value to Mediterranean products, for example, the wines of Penedès or Terra Alta, which increasingly attract higher prices in international mar-

kets, and *Arbequina* oil (a local olive variety) is a benchmark of quality. Given the lack of agricultural land and sufficient water, the third strategy, the most important in economic terms, has been to buy grain (cereals and soya) from countries that have water and agricultural land in abundance. Catalonia adds value to this grain through livestock farming and the meat and meat products industry, some of which, when exported, contribute to the balance of trade in this area. With this strategy rural areas that were doomed to abandonment today have great dynamism.

Competitiveness

Evidence of the competitiveness of the Catalan food industry is the evolution of its foreign trade. Twenty years ago, the coverage rate (exports with respect to imports) was 44%, today it is close to 100%, that is, a trade balance. To understand this competitiveness we should add a fourth element: the integration system. Integration consists of a contract –normally in intensive farming– where the farmer rears livestock on his property at a fixed price per produced unit, while the integrator provides feed and other inputs for livestock breeding. The farmer assumes the

risk of production and the integrator the market risk, coping with this more effectively because of usually having greater productive diversity and more productive links in the food chain (feed inputs, meat processing and even distribution.)

This reality, however, is not without its weaknesses and new demands. The rapid growth of intensive farming requires the adoption of countermeasures to prevent environmental impact. Dependency on imports shows the need to improve agricultural self-sufficiency. Water, as an essential resource, needs efficient and shared management and in this regard irrigation should be seen as an environmental tool, able to multiply its own productive potential. It is necessary to direct public resources to areas with greatest difficulty for reasons of regional balance and for environmental protection. And, undoubtedly, a unified vision is needed of ecosystem services and agricultural activity, which must be based on a single administration covering both areas. The government will need to act with courage to take on these challenges. An independent state will allow the Catalan government more resources to be able to rise to these challenges.

RANDOM THOUGHTS

TERRY PARRIS Writer

Inappropriate thoughts

Various thoughts for December: warm fires, cosy beds, gift-giving, Christmas trees, decorations... So my thoughts may seem inappropriate, but they have pursued me lately, and need to be expressed. Dear reader, they may even concur with yours.

They are this: the immense difficulty of accepting an unwanted change of circumstance. It may be something devastating, like losing your job, diagnosis of a serious illness, a bur-

glary, the death of a family member, or the impossibility of seeing one's grandchildren. Then there is the gradual but irrevocable approach of old age, the slowing of all that was rapid and fun, the loss of independence and dignity. How to accept any of these? How not to rage against life? How not to say: “But why me? I've done nothing to deserve this!”

Self-righteous Job said all this in the Old Testament. One way or another, we may all

have to face one of these circumstances. What if we don't accept what has happened? What if we fume and fret? Does it change anything? Do we feel better? Certainly not! We become victims, embittered, unpleasant to be around.

What if we accept ‘what is’? Does it change the situation? No, but our attitude changes everything – it is like a ‘light shining in darkness’. And as we transmit light, that is, positive attitudes, light is transmitted back to us.

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“Fortunately you have advanced and no longer do what the Inquisition did, which publicly burnt books and their authors. Today you limit yourselves to expelling us from our jobs” ERC senator Santiago Vidal

After the Supreme Court upheld the three-year suspension on Vidal for having drawn up a Catalan constitution, the former judge hit back in the Spanish senate, comparing the government to the Inquisition. A little over the top maybe, but point taken.