

ENHANCING THE AGRO-FOOD POTENTIAL OF BUCOVINA: MARKET PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The promotion and valorisation of locally specific agro-food products represent a fundamental pillar of sustainable development in rural areas, playing a crucial role in strengthening the local economy, preserving traditions, and reducing environmental pressures. The present study explores the market opportunities associated with Romanian agro-food products, with a particular focus on the Bucovina region – a territory renowned for its distinctive gastronomic identity and high-quality agro-food resources. Drawing on a review of the specialised literature and the most recent statistical data, the analysis outlines the theoretical and institutional framework for promoting local products, highlighting current trends and the main challenges in the field.

The case study conducted in Bucovina reveals successful models developed by local producers, the role of associative structures, and initiatives aimed at integrating these products into both domestic and international markets. Based on these findings, the paper proposes public policy directions designed to support the certification process, the development of short supply chains, increased collaboration among producers, and the inclusion of traditional products within sustainable tourism offerings. The conclusions emphasise the necessity of multisectoral cooperation between authorities, local communities, and consumers in order to transform Bucovina's agro-food heritage into a viable instrument for economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Bucovina, local products, sustainable rural development, agro-food heritage, short supply chains

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INTRODUCTION

The promotion and valorisation of local agro-food products is no longer, in the current context, merely a marketing option or a passing trend, but rather a pressing necessity for revitalising rural areas and ensuring balanced and sustainable development [1]. Romania, with its deeply rooted agricultural heritage and impressive diversity of natural resources, has all the prerequisites to transform this direction into a true vector of national development. An increasing number of consumers are seeking products “with a story”—foods that not only provide nourishment but also convey something about their place of origin, the hands that harvested or prepared them, the seasons, customs, and communities behind them [2]. This reconnection to the source of food, often lost in the context of globalisation and standardised supermarket chains, brings authentic values back to the forefront, along with the benefits of a healthy diet adapted to local specificities.

On the other hand, supporting local products has tangible economic and social effects: it contributes directly to maintaining a vibrant rural fabric by offering small farmers—often marginalised within traditional distribution chains—a real chance of economic survival. In a fragmented agricultural landscape, where more than 90% of Romanian farms operate on less than five hectares, the ability to access local or regional markets can make the difference between continuity and abandonment. Equally concerning is the fact that almost half of Romanian farmers are over the age of 65, a statistic that should alarm policymakers and motivate them to actively support the integration of young people into agriculture by providing real prospects for the future [3].

In this context, local products become a means through which tradition and innovation can coexist. Promoting cheese produced in a mountain village, honey extracted from an ancient forest, or wine from a hillside with centuries of history does not merely mean selling a product; it means preserving a piece

of a community's cultural identity. Moreover, the local economy benefits from this short supply chain: the money spent on local products remains within the community, supporting the development of related businesses—from packaging to rural tourism. In a sense, the local product is not only a food item but also a bridge between generations, between past and future, between the need for authenticity and the demands of the present.

The Bucovina region, located in the north-east of Romania, represents an emblematic example of a rural area in which the past and present coexist in a subtle dialogue that is highly relevant for analysing the market of local agro-food products [4, 5, 6]. With a well-defined cultural identity and an agro-food biodiversity reflecting centuries of adaptation and rural creativity, Bucovina offers fertile ground—both literally and metaphorically—for such research. Far from being merely a picturesque corner of the country, with serene landscapes and painted monasteries attracting tourists and scholars alike, the region is particularly interesting due to the contrast between its evident potential and the real challenges it faces.

Although local hospitality and traditional cuisine have become almost emblematic for Romanian rural tourism, behind these idyllic images persist social and economic tensions [7, 8]. Agricultural incomes remain low, land fragmentation continues to limit competitiveness, and labour migration—especially among youth—weakens the capacity of local communities to regenerate [9]. Paradoxically, these very constraints may serve as catalysts for innovation if viewed not as insurmountable barriers but as realities requiring creative solutions that are well grounded in the local context.

Within this framework, we consider that local agro-food products from Bucovina—whether smoked cheese, vegetable spreads prepared according to recipes handed down through generations, or syrups made from hand-picked forest fruits—may constitute not only a source of income but also a means of identity reconnection and of strengthening social capital. Their value lies not only in their authentic taste or absence of additives

but also in the story behind each product, in the direct relationship forged between consumer and producer, and in the attention paid to the land and to the natural rhythms of agricultural work. From this perspective, the market for local products is not solely an economic dimension but one with significant cultural and symbolic implications [11].

The aim of the present research is therefore to rigorously analyse—while recognising the complexity of the phenomenon—the market opportunities for local agro-food products in Romania, using Bucovina as a case study. On the one hand, the analysis seeks to highlight the importance of such products in shaping sustainable development, both economically and socially, while on the other hand examining the theoretical and policy frameworks that influence the dynamics of this sector. The case study brings to the forefront concrete examples of local initiatives, good practices, and the difficulties faced by producers, particularly with regard to distribution, certification, and promotion on wider markets. Based on these findings, we formulate recommendations for public policies and tailored strategies designed to support not only the economic viability of local products but also the ecological sustainability and social cohesion of rural environments.

The concept of local agro-food product (often used interchangeably with traditional or regional product) refers to foods produced and processed on a small scale, according to traditional recipes or methods, within a defined geographical area. Such products frequently represent an important component of local cultural heritage and contribute to the identity and image of rural regions [11]. The literature highlights several benefits of local products. First, the consumption of traditional foods supports the preservation of cultural heritage and community ties centred around culinary traditions [12].

Traditional products are perceived by consumers as tastier, more nutritious, and often more affordable than industrial supermarket goods. Moreover, their distribution through short supply chains—from producer directly to consumer—confers

a competitive advantage: better prices for producers and increased freshness for buyers [13]. In this way, traditional foods capitalise on alternative sales channels and can successfully compete with mass-produced items. Another key theoretical aspect is the contribution of local products to rural economic development. Studies show that producing and marketing such foods within the local economy generates added value in the community by creating jobs and income [14, 15, 16]. Small family farms and artisanal producers can remain competitive on the market through such products, avoiding direct competition with industrial agribusiness. At the same time, by maintaining economic activity in rural areas, demographic decline is reduced and traditional knowledge (local know-how) is preserved.

Beyond these aspects, social sustainability is strengthened through such initiatives, as they reinforce the sense of identity and pride that rural communities feel toward their own products.

At the European and legislative level, quality schemes exist to protect and promote traditional agro-food products. The European Union recognises products with Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), or Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG), granting them legal status and visibility on the single market. Although Romania possesses a rich heritage of traditional products, relatively few have been registered at European level. From the country's accession to the EU in 2007 until 2022, only 12 Romanian food products obtained PGI or PDO status (such as Magiun de Topoloveni, Salam de Sibiu, Telemea de Ibănești, Smoked Danube Mackerel, etc.) [18]. This situation indicates significant untapped potential, as many local foods could benefit from European certification to protect their originality and enhance their competitiveness on broader markets.

Nationally, Romania has developed its own systems for certifying and promoting traditional products [19]. An important legal act adopted in 2013 defined the procedure for granting the Traditional Product certification. As a result, the number of such certifications increased significantly. Approximately ten

years after its implementation, the Romanian market included more than 700 certified traditional products, supported by a growing local entrepreneurial network. According to official data from the Ministry of Agriculture, between 2020 and 2022, 764 products were certified as traditional, and following reauthorisation under new regulations, Romania had 732 valid certified traditional products in 2022, spread across 37 counties [20].

Additional national schemes include the “Romanian Established Recipe” scheme (for products made according to renowned recipes) and the “Mountain Product” scheme (for products originating from mountain areas). For example, the number of certified Mountain Products reached 1,319 between 2017 and 2022, indicating strong producer interest in emphasising the mountain origin and superior quality of their goods [21]. These quality schemes allow products to stand out on the market through specific labels and logos, helping consumers identify them easily. Participation is voluntary, yet increasingly considered advantageous by small producers seeking authentic promotion channels and access to premium markets. Nonetheless, obtaining such certifications involves financial and administrative efforts, which may pose challenges for small-scale producers.

The theoretical framework for local product promotion therefore also encompasses the issue of producer organisation (associations, cooperatives) and the institutional support needed for them to meet market standards. Cooperation is often seen as a key solution: through collective organisation, small farmers can share the costs of certification, processing, and marketing, thereby increasing their chances of market success.

To facilitate better understanding of the quality schemes designed to promote and protect local agro-food products in Romania and across the European Union, we have developed a comparative table that synthesises the most relevant information: scheme name, main characteristics, year of implementation, and key observations. The table is followed by a conclusion that

contextualises these data in relation to the development potential of the traditional agri-food sector.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research approach adopted in this article is qualitative in nature, combining an extensive review of the scholarly literature with a case study focused on the Bucovina region. The research process unfolded in several stages. First, an extensive documentary analysis was conducted, examining scientific sources and relevant official reports published between 2018 and 2025, with the aim of identifying major trends related to consumption, production, and policy frameworks for promoting local agri-food products in Romania. Subsequently, academic journal articles, national scientific works, official statistics, and strategic documents were consulted. This theoretical stage laid the foundation for understanding the key concepts and the broader contextual landscape.

In the second stage, Bucovina was selected as a case study to explore in depth how market opportunities for local products materialize within a concrete regional context. The choice of Bucovina was motivated by its well-established reputation for traditional products and its active local promotion initiatives, which provide a rich setting for observing both good practices and specific challenges. The case study involved collecting region-specific information through multiple methods: analysis of local documents, as well as informal interviews and discussions with local stakeholders conducted between 1 March and 15 April 2025. Furthermore, concrete market initiatives in Bucovina were examined—from farmers' markets and mobile fairs to the participation of local producers in international exhibitions—in order to capture how short food supply chains operate and which marketing strategies are employed.

The collected data were interpreted using a descriptive-interpretative analytical approach. The findings synthesise key insights at both the national level and within Bucovina, highlighting market opportunities (such as the growing consumer demand for

local products) and persistent barriers (including certification and distribution challenges). In the discussion section, the results are compared with the existing literature and with similar cases, emphasising novel elements and examples of best practice.

The Bucovina case study is presented in a dedicated section, offering concrete examples and outlining the good practices identified, which may also be transferable to other regions. It should be noted that the main limitations of the research stem from its predominantly qualitative and exploratory character. While this approach provides rich contextual insights, it may limit the generalisability of the findings to the entire country. Nonetheless, the triangulation of sources—academic, statistical, and local—ensures a robust foundation for formulating well-grounded conclusions and policy recommendations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis reveals a series of positive trends that represent market opportunities for local agri-food products in Romania. First, consumer demand for traditional products is high. A recent study on consumer perceptions indicated that the vast majority of respondents (approximately 90%) consume or are interested in Romanian traditional food products (Soare et al., 2023). More specifically, 89.8% of survey participants expressed explicit interest in such products, while fewer than 10% were uninterested or undecided—though some in the latter category may still develop interest in the future. These figures confirm a broad population-wide inclination toward local products, an interest that transcends demographic categories. Consumers associate these foods with positive attributes—tradition, authenticity, and quality—and perceive them as part of a healthier lifestyle. A significant proportion (68%) of respondents declared a preference for healthy traditional food over “fast-food” products, and younger generations are becoming increasingly informed and conscientious in their dietary choices. This shift towards local and healthy diets constitutes a market opportunity, suggesting that important consumer

segments—including younger cohorts—can be cultivated and retained through appropriate promotion of local products.

Another notable finding concerns the diversification and expansion of the supply of officially certified traditional products. According to the MADR data synthesised earlier, Romania currently has over 700 certified traditional food products, covering a wide spectrum: dairy products and cheeses, meat products, bakery goods, processed fruits and vegetables (jams, vegetable spreads), beverages, and honey. This extensive portfolio indicates the presence of a large number of small producers who have invested in formalising the traditional status of their products. Moreover, the very high number of certified mountain products (over 1,300)

reflects Romania’s potential in the premium niche market, given that the “Mountain Product” label is associated with pristine ecological areas and environmentally beneficial extensive farming practices. Many of these mountain products are concentrated precisely in hilly and mountainous regions such as Bucovina, which represents a competitive advantage for the studied area.

To highlight the main directions in the evolution of the local agri-food market in Romania, the table below presents a synthesis of the research results. These findings encompass consumer interest, diversification of supply, penetration into the retail sector, and the niche potential of certified products, outlining clear opportunities for the development of this sector.

Table No. 2: National Trends in the Market for Local Agri-Food Products in Romania

Trend	Description
High consumer demand for traditional products	Studies show that approximately 90% of Romanian consumers express interest in or regularly consume traditional agri-food products. Consumers associate these foods with authenticity, quality, and healthier dietary choices, with 68% preferring traditional, healthy foods over fast-food alternatives.
Diversification and expansion of certified traditional products	Romania currently has over 700 certified traditional food products, ranging from dairy and meat products to bakery goods, processed fruits and vegetables, honey, and beverages. This reflects the increasing interest of small producers in formalising the traditional status of their products.
Growth of certified mountain products	With more than 1,300 certified mountain products, Romania demonstrates significant potential in the premium niche associated with clean ecological areas and extensive farming practices. Many of these products originate from hilly and mountainous regions such as Bucovina.
Presence of local products in modern retail chains	Certain categories of local products have achieved strong retail penetration: for example, 100% of eggs and over 94% of milk products on shelves in selected supermarkets are Romanian. Even in competitive categories such as vegetables, at least half of the assortment is domestically sourced, signalling retailer openness where consistent quality and quantity can be ensured.
Increasing opportunities for small producers through supply chain integration	Small producers can access wider markets by forming associations, collaborating with processors, or integrating into modern distribution chains. Organized cooperation supports better logistics, branding, and market reach.

The study also revealed several insights regarding the presence of local products on the shelves of large retail chains—an important aspect of emerging market opportunities. Although traditional products are primarily distributed through local markets and direct sales, certain categories have managed to achieve substantial penetration in modern retail chains. For example, an analysis conducted in 2024 on the assortments of two supermarkets in Bucharest found that, for certain basic product

categories, the share of Romanian products was remarkably high: for eggs, 100% of the products on the shelves originated from Romania, while for milk, over 94% were Romanian brands [23]. Even in the case of vegetables—where imported products represent strong competition—at least half of the assortment was domestically sourced.

This suggests that when local production can ensure consistent quantity and quality (as in the case of dairy, eggs, and certain vegetables), major retail chains are

willing to include Romanian products in their offerings. For small producers, this may translate into a potential market opportunity, particularly if they manage to form associations or collaborate with processors who can integrate them into modern distribution chains.

Case Study: Bucovina – Best Practices and Local Challenges

Bucovina (the southern part within Romania, mainly Suceava County) is a region with rich gastronomic traditions, renowned for dairy products (fresh cheese, whey cheese, smoked cheese), meat products (sausages and smoked pastrami), bee products (honey, syrups), and preserved foods (mushroom spreads, wild berry jams). Over the years, more than one hundred food products from this area have been certified as traditional by the Ministry of Agriculture—ranging from Horodniceni cheese and Izvorul Alb smoked cheese to Bosanci smoked pastrami [24]. However, no Bucovina product has (yet) achieved EU-level Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status, highlighting an untapped opportunity for international branding.

Producer Association – The Case of “Produs în Bucovina”

A notable best practice in Bucovina is the existence of local producer associations designed to promote the region’s products through an integrated approach. The “Produs în Bucovina” Association, founded in 2009 by 25 founding members, is a pioneering example in this regard. This non-governmental organization has assumed the mission of promoting Bucovina’s products both in Romania and abroad. Today, the association comprises dozens of members across all agri-food sectors: meat and dairy farms, beekeepers, fruit producers, traditional bakers and confectioners, and even a local craft beer producer. This diverse membership demonstrates the integrated vision—the regional brand “Produs în Bucovina” encompasses a wide basket of local specialties, generating recognition and trust among consumers.

Through its initiatives, the Association has organized local fairs and participated in national exhibitions, enhancing visibility for

its members. A notable accomplishment is the partnership with the “Produs de Cluj” Association, which enabled Bucovina producers to sell their goods at events in Cluj and vice versa, thus expanding their market beyond traditional geographic boundaries. This exchange brought mutual benefits: producers gained access to new consumers, while the public in different parts of the country had the opportunity to discover new products, strengthening the national network of traditional Romanian foods [25].

Local Fairs and Markets

A successful initiative in Suceava is the “Din Drag de Bucovina” Mobile Market, a periodic market dedicated exclusively to local producers. It serves as a launching platform for small farmers and artisanal food producers, offering them direct access to consumers. One example of the visibility generated by this market is its role during the AgroExpo Bucovina 2025 agricultural fair, where it became a central attraction, allowing visitors to purchase natural local foods, including traditional fasting products [26].

Such events blend commercial, educational, and cultural components: the public encounters the story behind the products, the people who make them, and gains a deeper understanding of the added local value. The mobile market has also become an external promotional platform: products represented by members of the “Gustă din Bucovina” Association were showcased at the 2025 International Green Week (Grüne Woche) in Berlin, Germany [27]. This participation, supported by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Suceava Agricultural Directorate, enabled the international promotion of Bucovina’s gastronomy, highlighting the authentic taste of local natural products and the quality certifications they hold (traditional, mountain, organic). This is a clear example of best practices in which authorities directly support small producers in reaching wider markets.

Examples of Successful Local Producers

The case study identified several local businesses from Bucovina that illustrate how tradition blends with innovation and entrepreneurial spirit [28]:

1. **“Văcuța Ica” Farm (Verești, Suceava)** – a small dairy farm that has obtained Traditional Product certification for its cheeses. The farm operates under an integrated “from farm to fork” model, controlling the entire cycle from animal feed to final product. This model ensures consistent quality and traceability, serving as an example of small-scale vertical integration.

2. **Bucovina BeeZum (Volovăț, Suceava)** – an apiculture business started by a young entrepreneur who manages approximately 500 bee colonies. Its products (polyfloral honey, acacia honey, and derivatives such as propolis) are certified as Mountain Products and Organic, guaranteeing both clean mountain origin and the absence of chemical residues. This combination of certifications allows access to premium markets (health stores and exports to countries seeking organic products). BeeZum demonstrates how a local producer can orient toward superior quality and sustainability, harnessing Bucovina’s natural advantages.

3. **Strămoșia SRL (Bălcăuți, Suceava)** – a small meat processing unit run by a young couple (the Popescu family) who revived traditional pork recipes. They certified five traditional products (chișcă, cured muscle, haiducești smoked breast, pork jowl, and sausages), all made from pigs raised on their own farm. By integrating livestock raising, processing, and selling through their own shop, their business also follows the “farm to fork” model and ensures maximum authenticity. Strămoșia highlights the region’s gastronomic heritage (as its name suggests) and shows that young entrepreneurs are willing to continue ancestral food craftsmanship while adapting it to contemporary demands.

4. **“Bunătăți de la țară din Inima Bucovinei” (Cajvana,**

Suceava) – an initiative of the Covalschi family, who returned to their native village after several years abroad. They decided to valorize local vegetables and fruits using traditional recipes inherited from their grandparents, producing natural spreads, jams, and preserves with no artificial additives. This story is an emotional example of the diaspora returning to agriculture: the experience gained abroad, combined with nostalgia for home, led to a local business that revives culinary heritage. Today, their products are present at fairs and appreciated for their authenticity, inspiring other young people to see Bucovina’s villages not only as places of departure but also as places with opportunities for return.

These examples of best practices underscore several key elements: most of these businesses emphasize certification and quality, the narrative behind the product (which becomes part of the marketing strategy), and value chain integration to maintain control over quality and costs. They also benefit from collective promotion (fairs, associations) and demonstrate adaptability—whether through modern technologies (professional beekeeping, authorized processing units) or through innovation in presentation and packaging.

Specific Challenges in Bucovina

Despite the many successes, producers in Bucovina also face notable challenges. One concerns infrastructure and logistics: the distance from major urban centres leads to higher logistical costs for delivering fresh products (for instance, it is costly for a farmer from the Bucovina mountains to supply a shop in Bucharest on a regular basis with fresh cheeses). A possible solution could be cooperation among producers for joint transport or the development of online sales supported by an appropriate cold chain—both of which, however, require investment.

Another challenge is generational continuity: many traditional productions rely on the know-how of elderly artisans or farmers. If younger generations do not take over these occupations, there is a risk that

certain products will disappear once current producers retire. This is why initiatives such as those of the Covalschi family or the young entrepreneurs from Strămoșia are vital, and why public authorities could design support mechanisms specifically for young rural entrepreneurs (grants, gastronomic mentorship programmes with traditional masters, etc.).

Finally, access to finance and broader markets remains a cross-cutting challenge. Although European funds are available, bureaucracy and lack of information can discourage small producers from applying. Associations such as “Produce în Bucovina” can play a role in facilitating access, but public policies also need to simplify

procedures and provide advisory services. In terms of markets, Bucovina could benefit from stronger national promotion: the tourism brand of Bucovina (currently associated mainly with monasteries and natural landscapes) could be expanded to clearly include the gastronomic component, making culinary tourism a priority in county-level strategies.

Although Bucovina is one of the regions with remarkable agri-food potential—thanks to its traditions, biodiversity, and cultural identity—local producers face a series of systemic and contextual challenges. The table below summarises these difficulties, along with relevant field examples and possible solutions proposed in the research.

Table No. 3: Specific Challenges Faced by Agri-Food Producers in Bucovina

Challenge	Description	Cases	Possible solutions
Poor infrastructure and logistics	Distance from major urban centres increases transport and distribution costs, especially for perishable products.	Mountain-area farmers unable to deliver consistently to Bucharest	Cooperation for joint transport, investment in cold chains, online sales with integrated logistics
Low generational continuity	Young people do not take over traditional crafts and agricultural activities, creating a risk that some products will disappear when older producers retire.	Local artisans without direct successors, e.g. individual cases from Strămoșia	Grants for young people, gastronomic mentorship, promotion of applied rural education
Difficult access to finance	Although European funds exist, bureaucracy and lack of consultancy and information discourage small producers from applying.	Farmers without support in drafting project applications	Simplification of procedures, free public consultancy, an enhanced role for associations (e.g. “Produce în Bucovina”)
Low national visibility	Local products are insufficiently promoted on markets outside the region; the tourism brand of Bucovina does not clearly include the culinary component.	Tourism limited to monasteries, with weak promotion of gastronomy	Integrating gastronomy into tourism strategies, national campaigns for certified products
Fragmentation and lack of cooperation	Many producers work individually, without cooperative networks that would allow them access to larger markets or collective investments.	Only part of producers are members of “Produce în Bucovina”	Support for the creation of cooperatives, policies that encourage local partnerships

Source: authors’ elaboration based on case studies

The case study therefore illustrates a microcosm in which both success factors—cooperation, diversity, certification, and ad hoc support from authorities—and aspects requiring improvement—infrastructure, youth involvement, and expansion towards national and international markets—are present. The main lesson is that when the local community joins forces (producers, authorities, NGOs), traditional products can become a driver of local development, but this effort must be

sustained and scaled up through coherent policies.

Identified Market Opportunities

Based on the information collected, several opportunity areas can be identified for the market of local and traditional agri-food products in Romania:

- **Integration into rural and gastronomic tourism:** Local culinary offerings have become a pillar of tourism attractiveness in rural areas. In Bucovina, for instance, almost half of

tourists (48.9% in a sample studied) indicated traditional gastronomy as an important factor that enriched their experience, after natural landscapes (74.6%) and local hospitality (56.6%) [3]. This highlights the synergy between local products and tourism, opening up opportunities for producers to sell directly to visitors, agritourism guesthouses, or local-themed restaurants. A constant flow of tourists, both domestic and foreign, creates seasonal markets where the price paid for authenticity is often higher than on the general market, thus increasing the profitability of these products.

• **Domestic urban market interest in tradition:** In large cities, consumers increasingly seek products that evoke the “taste of the past” or are perceived as healthy and artisanal. The emergence of delicatessens and traditional product shops in urban centres (including specialised chains) confirms this demand. Some counties have organised inter-regional promotion events, bringing local products into markets in other cities. The collaboration between the “*Produs în Bucovina*” and “*Produs de Cluj*” associations is a successful example whereby Bucovinian and Transylvanian producers have exhibited each other’s products at fairs in Suceava and Cluj, attracting new buyers from outside their home regions [25]. Such partnerships broaden the market horizon of local producers and demonstrate the appetite of urban consumers for traditional specialties from different regions.

• **Emerging institutional support:** Although small producers have long acted individually or informally organised, recent years have seen growing governmental attention to promoting local production. The creation of the Agency for the Quality and Marketing of Agri-Food Products (envisaged

since 2022) signals political will to institutionalise the promotion of these products [29]. Through its objectives, this agency is meant to promote quality schemes and guarantee the authenticity of traditional and mountain products. If implemented effectively, such a structure could facilitate producers’ access to markets (for example, by organising participation in international fairs such as the 2025 Green Week in Berlin) [30] and launch communication campaigns to educate the public. At the same time, the 2023–2027 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) includes measures dedicated to short supply chains and local markets, which Romania can use to co-finance local projects. One example is the encouragement of agricultural cooperatives as a means to improve farmers’ market position—an aspect highlighted by policymakers, with cooperation being viewed as “the only way” for small farms to thrive in a competitive market.

• **Quality certifications and strong local brands:** The possibility of obtaining Traditional Product, Mountain Product, or Organic certifications represents a differentiation opportunity. Many products from Bucovina already benefit from such certifications—for example, cheeses certified as traditional products or honey certified as mountain and organic. These labels add value and credibility, enabling producers to reach consumer segments willing to pay a premium for guaranteed quality. In the medium term, there is also the possibility that some emblematic products (e.g. specific cheeses, meat products, or bakery goods from Bucovina) may obtain European recognition (PGI/PDO), which would further open markets (both domestic and export). The export potential in niche segments should not be overlooked: the Romanian diaspora in Western Europe

and enthusiasts of Eastern European gastronomy already constitute a market for products such as vegetable spreads (zacusca), fruit preserves, cheeses, and traditional cured meats. Once protected and promoted, Bucovinian products could become more visible in ethnic or gourmet shops abroad.

• **Convergence with ecological and health trends:** Local products, often obtained in small, extensive farms with limited use of chemicals, align well with the growing preference for ecological and sustainable foods. For example, honey and other bee products from Bucovina certified as organic and mountain enjoy a dual reputation—both as traditional and as “clean” products from nature [28]. Environmentally conscious consumers may see in local products a lower carbon footprint (due to shorter transport distances) and a contribution to biodiversity (many traditional products use local breeds or varieties, helping to conserve them). Moreover, recent crises (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic) have stimulated interest in the resilience of short food supply chains and local provisioning, which constitutes an opportunity for Romanian villages to become important suppliers for cities in times of uncertainty.

The above results outline an optimistic picture of opportunities but also highlight the need to address concurrent challenges. The following section discusses these aspects in detail, integrating the findings into a critical and comparative perspective, before delving further into the Bucovina case study.

The analysis confirms the initial hypothesis that there is significant market potential for local agri-food products in Romania, yet full realisation of this potential depends on how actors—producers, authorities, distributors, and consumers—manage to collaborate and overcome current obstacles.

High demand: The fact that around 90% of consumers declare an interest in

traditional products [3] does not automatically translate into an equivalent market share for these products. While traditional products dominate supply at local markets and specialised fairs, their share in modern retail remains modest (with the exception of the basic categories mentioned earlier). Thus, there is a gap between declared attitude and actual consumption behaviour, partly due to the accessibility of these products. Urban consumers, for example, appreciate products from Bucovina or Maramureş but can only purchase them occasionally, at fairs or via direct online orders, as they are not readily available in neighbourhood supermarkets. This underscores the importance of expanding distribution channels—a topic that future policies must address (for example, by facilitating cooperation with retailers or supporting alternative schemes such as home-delivered product baskets).

The role of producer associations emerges as a decisive factor. The Bucovina case study shows that where producers have organised into associations such as “Produs în Bucovina” or “Gustă din Bucovina”, the visibility and market access of local products have increased significantly. Associations can provide a common marketing platform, build strong regional brands, and negotiate more effectively with public authorities for support. The collaboration between Bucovina and Cluj County in mutual promotion of traditional products shows that such structures can transcend local boundaries, creating an inter-regional network of traditional markets. By contrast, in areas where producers remain fragmented, opportunities can be missed—for example, an isolated producer may lack the resources to participate in an international fair or to certify their product, whereas an association can cover these needs for its members.

A key discussion point concerns public support and policy frameworks. Over the last decade, Romania has launched multiple initiatives to support small producers—from European funding via the National Rural Development Programme (NRDP), including sub-measures for short supply chains and local markets, to pilot projects such as the “Casa de Comerţ Agroalimentar Unirea”.

Unfortunately, not all of these initiatives have achieved the expected success. The “Casa Unirea” project, conceived in 2018–2019 to create a chain of shops selling Romanian products, faced administrative and financial difficulties and did not manage to fulfil its initial mission. This failure illustrates the difficulty of direct state intervention in a market that requires flexibility and commercially oriented management. By contrast, the recent shift towards an agency model under public–private partnership (such as the quality and marketing agency announced by the Ministry of Agriculture) appears more promising, as it actively involves the private sector and producer associations in promotion-related decisions. The key will be for this agency (and other support instruments, such as aid schemes for processing or external promotion) to operate transparently and efficiently, focusing on the real needs of local producers: logistics, consultancy, and market access.

From an environmental sustainability perspective, the discussion reveals an inherent advantage of local products: in many cases they are synonymous with traditional, environmentally friendly agriculture. Bucovina, for instance, has extensive areas of natural pastures where livestock are raised extensively, and traditional cheese-making often involves low-impact techniques (no chemical additives, use of local resources such as wood for smoking, etc.). By promoting these products, one indirectly supports the conservation of local landscapes and biodiversity, since farmers have an economic incentive to maintain traditional agricultural practices (e.g. seasonal mountain grazing, breeding local animal varieties) that are beneficial for the environment. Short supply chains also reduce long-distance transport, lowering the carbon footprint of food. In this way, promoting local products aligns with environmental objectives and can be integrated into circular economy strategies and sustainable rural development.

However, there are ecological and safety challenges as well: ensuring food safety and consistent quality in the context of artisanal production. Consumers love the idea of “traditional”, but they do not compromise

on modern quality requirements. Therefore, institutions must ensure control and producer training in compliance with sanitary standards, without eroding authenticity. Training programmes and investments in compliant micro-processing units (e.g. small village dairies or meat processing facilities, mobile or cooperative) are needed to reconcile tradition with current standards.

Comparing the situation in Bucovina and Romania with that of other European countries reveals differences in the maturity of local product markets. In Western Europe (France, Italy, Spain), local products and quality schemes have long been integrated into commercial circuits, and consumers are accustomed to seeking local AOCs and PDOs. Romania is still in a catching-up phase: domestically, important steps have been taken (numerous nationally certified producers), but externally visibility remains limited. It can be expected that in the coming years, as more products apply for PGI/PDO status and rural tourism continues to develop, the “Romanian traditional product” label will gain recognition. A positive emerging phenomenon is that of local gastronomic festivals (e.g. festivals dedicated to stews, mountain products, etc.), which not only attract visitors but also create networks between producers and chefs, laying the groundwork for a consolidated market for these products.

In conclusion, we can state that local agri-food products in Romania are positioned at the intersection of a favourable context—with growing domestic demand and increasingly explicit public support—but that turning identified opportunities into concrete results requires coordinated action. The Bucovina case study offers a grass-roots view of how these trends manifest in a local community, illustrating both achievements and difficulties, and providing valuable lessons.

To fully harness the potential of local agri-food products and transform them into a vector for sustainable development in Romania, we propose the following public policies and strategic initiatives as direct and applicable outcomes of the research:

1. Supporting certification and protection of local products

Simplifying attestation and certification procedures, alongside granting vouchers or financial support to small producers, is essential for expanding the portfolio of officially recognised products. Active support is needed for obtaining European certifications (PGI/PDO) for region-specific products.

2. Developing local markets and short supply chains

Investments in the infrastructure of mobile markets, modernisation of traditional fairs, and creation of public-private online platforms that connect local producers directly with urban consumers.

3. Improving marketing and regional branding

Designing a national strategy for promoting traditional products and coordinating participation in international fairs under strong regional brands (e.g. “Taste of Bucovina”). Supporting producer associations in creating promotional materials and in digitalising their public presence.

4. Supporting cooperatives and associative forms

Providing fiscal incentives, logistical support, and consultancy for developing cooperatives that integrate

production, processing, and distribution. Cooperation is essential for increasing delivery capacity and bargaining power on the market.

5. Integrating local products into tourism and gastronomy

Implementing county-level strategies for gastronomic tourism, developing culinary routes, supporting themed festivals, and creating a certification system for restaurants using local ingredients.

6. Education and training for sustainability

Training programmes for producers in areas such as safe traditional processing, digital marketing, and management, as well as integrating food education in schools to cultivate preferences for local products from an early age.

7. Innovation and digitalisation

Supporting the digitalisation of local businesses (e-commerce platforms, eco-friendly packaging, online branding) through grants and mentoring offered in partnership with universities and NGOs.

To provide better visualisation and understanding of the direct impact of these policies, the table below summarises the main directions proposed in the research, along with concrete measures and expected effects on the local agri-food sector.

Table No. 4: Policy Proposals for Supporting Local Agri-Food Products in Romania

Strategic domain	Proposed measures	Type of intervention	Estimated impact
Certification and protection	Simplifying procedures, grants for certification, support for PGI/PDO	Financial, legislative, administrative	Increase in the number of certified products; access to premium markets
Local markets and short chains	Investments in mobile markets and fairs, online platforms for direct sales	Infrastructure, digitalisation	Bringing producers closer to consumers; reduced distribution costs

Strategic domain	Proposed measures	Type of intervention	Estimated impact
Regional marketing and branding	National strategy, participation in international fairs, support for digital branding and promotional materials	Communication, promotion	Increased visibility and attractiveness of Romanian products domestically and abroad
Cooperation and association	Fiscal incentives, consultancy, support for establishing integrated cooperatives (production–processing–distribution)	Economic, organisational	Higher competitiveness and capacity for consistent supply
Tourism and gastronomy	Development of culinary tourism, gastronomic routes, festivals, certification for restaurants using local ingredients	Tourism, culture	Integration of local products into tourism offerings; diversification of income sources
Education and training	Courses for producers (processing, marketing), food education in schools	Educational, formative	Strengthening rural know-how; increased informed demand for local products
Innovation and digitalisation	Grants for e-commerce platforms, online branding, eco-friendly packaging; partnerships with universities and NGOs	Technological, partnership-based	Modernisation of production and promotion; increased appeal to younger generations and global markets

Source: authors' elaboration based on research findings

We consider that implementing these policies will help transform local agri-food products from a limited niche into a strategic pillar of Romania's rural economy and national sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

Promotion of local agri-food products represents one of the most promising pathways for sustainable development in Romania, in a global context in which consumers are increasingly attentive to the origin, quality, and social and environmental impact of food products. These products are not only carriers of economic value, but also repositories of collective memory,

gastronomic traditions, and local biodiversity. They connect producers and consumers through short and transparent supply chains, in which trust plays an essential role.

The research conducted in this article, combining an analysis of the national framework with a case study of the Bucovina region, confirms that there is genuine appetite for such products among both Romanian and international consumers. At the same time, it shows that when local producers join forces, benefit from institutional support, and gain access to modern promotional channels, they can achieve notable performance in terms of market penetration and consumer loyalty. The case of Bucovina clearly illustrates these

premises: the development of regional brands, participation in international fairs, involvement in gastronomic tourism, and product certification are concrete steps that have contributed to the valorisation of local agri-food heritage.

On the other hand, the analysis also revealed numerous challenges that limit the scaling-up of these good practices at national level: producer fragmentation, lack of access to major markets, excessive bureaucracy in certification processes, as well as an acute need for entrepreneurial and digital education in rural areas. In addition, a significant share of authentic agri-food production still relies on the know-how of older generations, which raises the issue of continuity if young people are not encouraged to take over and modernise these businesses.

In light of the above, we argue that an integrated, long-term approach is required from public authorities, private actors, and civil society. The policy proposals formulated in the final section—aimed at supporting

certification, developing local market infrastructure, strengthening associative forms, integrating products into tourism, and promoting education for sustainability—should not be viewed as isolated initiatives, but as components of a healthy and resilient local food ecosystem. Implementing these measures could transform local agri-food products from a niche sector into a strategic pillar of the rural economy and of the national brand.

Romania has sufficient natural, cultural, and human resources to become a relevant actor in the field of sustainable traditional food, both at European and global level. What remains is for these resources to be activated through coherent policies, intelligent institutional support, and, above all, through the genuine mobilisation of local communities around their own values. The promotion of local agri-food products is not merely an economic opportunity—it is a strategic mission for the future of rural Romania.

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