THE SECRET INGREDIENT: WHEN TERRITORIAL IDENTITY ENSURES THE SUCCESS OF LOCAL ALLIANCES

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ABSTRACT
The paper analyzes two successful cases of strategic network alliances aimed at the valorization of the food and wine heritage of two specific Italian areas. Due to the limited dimensions of the majority of food and wine firms, especially in Italy, many forms of alliances among competitors are quite common in this industry since aggregations represent the only gateway to pursue a strategic growth.
Through this inquiry we investigate the opportunities that small competing companies gain, collaborating among each other, sharing knowledge and generating unique dynamic capabilities, and benefits for the territory where they operate, highlighting how the shared territorial identity is the secret ingredient that allow the networks success. With this paper we aim to offer two models that other regions, also internationally, might implement in order to explore local development through food and wine heritage.

Keywords: strategic alliances; creative industries; food and beverage; destination management.

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INTRODUCTION

Strategic alliances are voluntary agreements that involve exchange, sharing or co-development of services, technologies, and products by two or more firms/institutions (Gulati, 1998), connected in relationships that are not fully defined either by formal contracts or by equity exchange (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 2004). Being part of a strategic alliance provides firms with access to knowledge, resources, markets or technologies (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). Alliances are primarily based on cooperation, but face continuous coordination challenges for the differences and the task interdependencies among the involved partners. As a consequence, coordination mechanisms are essential as they allow partners to exchange information and to engage in common practices that help managing internal differences and environmental uncertainties (Gulati, Wohlgezogen and Zhelyazkov, 2012).

According to current literature, strategic alliances are moved by the desire to acquire partners' knowledge (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 2004). However, especially in cases of small companies where alliances are primarily moved by the need of dimensional growth, knowledge access becomes one of the crucial factors of strategic management. Since coordination mechanisms are the main tools for efficient knowledge sharing (Gulati et al. 2012), we aim to provide a better understanding about the more informal, hidden, and tacit coordination mechanisms that allow inter-firm knowledge sharing in informal strategic alliances.

Our research questions are: what are the informal, hidden, and tacit coordination mechanisms that allow spontaneous and horizontal aggregations among competitors to work? How do they contribute to knowledge sharing among partners? How are they strengthening their effectiveness while the alliance is growing?

In this paper we analyze two successful case studies of strategic alliances in the food and wine sector among small competing companies that decided to cooperate through more ore less formal structures. The aim of the analyzed alliances is to pursue growth in terms of single companies performance, in terms of scope of activity, and in terms of local development. Through this inquiry we aim to investigate the opportunities that small competing companies gain, collaborating among each other, sharing knowledge and generating unique dynamic capabilities, especially explaining their similarity based on the specific territorial roots. The paper offers two potentially replicating models of local aggregation dedicated to territorial development.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Strategic alliances and coordination mechanisms

The term strategic alliance has been used to refer to 'agreements characterized by the commitment of two or more firms to reach a common goal entailing the pooling of their resources and activities' (Teece, 1992, p. 19). Alliances involving two or more companies encompass cooperative relationships that are not fully defined either by formal contracts or by ownership structure. Usually, the activities might refer to alliances between suppliers and buyers, collaboration in joint research projects, shared new product development, shared manufacturing arrangements, common distribution agreements, cross-selling arrangements, and franchising (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 2004). Strategic alliances are not necessarily managed formally, in fact most of the time they are represented by informal pacts (clan relationships) but they also might involve contractual agreements and equity links in more structured cases. If we assume a resource based view approach, literature affirms that companies join strategic alliances especially in order to acquire partners' unique resources. This idea is particularly valid if we think to small enterprises that need partnership to pursue growth and stability over time.

A significant stream of work suggests that strategic alliances operate as sources of resource access, allowing partners to reach and exchange valuable resources and social capital, beside the economic and technological assets (Soda & Zaheer, 2012). This issue assumes extreme relevance since more than 50% of alliances are between competitors (Harbison & Pekar, 1998), that - even after establishing cooperative relationships – continue to compete with each other, leading to the so called "co-opetition" phenomenon (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996).

As Gulati et al. affirmed (2012) cooperation and coordination are two of the most relevant issues of strategic alliances. Alliances are primarily based on cooperation, but face continuous coordination challenges for the differences and the task interdependencies among the involved partners. As a consequence, the coordination mechanisms are essential as they allow partners to exchange information and to engage in common practices that help managing internal differences and environmental uncertainties.

The need for cooperation to work makes companies select partners moving from information regarding prior partnerships, proximity, status, and similarity/homophily. Usually companies select partners that can be judged as more similar in commitment level to the partnership and similar for main goals and motivation. In the cases that we will develop in the paper similarity comes primarily from sharing an identity that is based on the

same geographic territory. Many authors call for a joint consideration of the two aspects of cooperation and coordination as interrelated. Since they work through mutual reinforcement logic, they can equally impact alliance performances as well as problems.
In this paper we assume a network perspective as a mechanism of integrating strategic alliances, where networks are loci of resources with three types of network resources flows: asset flows, information flows, and status flows (Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001). In this context, cooperation and coordination mechanisms might vary also due to the nature of the resources flows and of the alliance (e.g. formal or informal).

Network multiplexity
In particular, with this paper we propose an integration of the study of strategic alliances and coordination mechanisms, adopting the lens of network multiplexity. In social network studies network multiplexity is referred to a structural property of network ties that entails the existence of more than one type of relationship between two actors (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). It might occur for instance when actors in a relationship play different roles, have different affiliations, or engage in different types of exchanges. In inter-organizational networks, network multiplexity represents the breadth of the involvement of participating organizations (Ferriani, Fonti & Corrado, 2012).
Multiplex ties usually feature both an economic and a social component (Uzzi, 1997) and in inter-organizational networks they assume particular relevance as they are at the core of the social embeddedness perspective (Granovetter, 1985). In fact, multiplexity explains why some transactions often become embedded in multiplex socioeconomic relationships based on affective relationships more than on instrumental ones.
We propose to integrate literature on strategic alliances with a perspective on multiplexity, since almost all the literature on strategic alliances does not focus specifically on the nature of the tie existing between two or more companies before the alliance is set.
On the contrary, network studies on multiplexity might offer a new insight on alliances based on whether relationships are for example formal or informal, instrumental or affective. The informal networks are based on factors as homophily, agency, and attraction and usually informal ties provide contents such as advice, information, friendship and affect (Soda & Zaheer, 2012). Greater familiarity can build trust, it can facilitate cooperation and coordination since the familiarity with the partner might increase the coordination capabilities and development of relationship-specific coordination routines (Gulati et al. 2012). The underling idea of multiplexity is that the nature of social ties provides additional information about potential partners' competencies and reliability (Gulati & Gargiulo, 1999), which facilitate the creation of an economic tie.
In this paper we analyze under an exploratory perspective two cases where networks are founded on informal and affective ties that led to the generation of two effective forms of strategic alliances.

Methodology
The paper provides a qualitative inquiry based on two case studies, which insist on two different geographic territories. The exploratory nature of the study is the reason that leads us to adopt a qualitative method. This research strategy allowed a deep understanding of the dynamics present within single settings (Eisenhardt, 1989: 534). The empirical field is food and wine and specifically high quality cuisine. We considered food and wine as cultural heritage and their production as a relevant portion of *made in Italy*. High quality restaurants represent just a niche of food and wine field, but still they can exert a pulling function for the entire industry and can act a focal role in tourism development, as well as in the generation of new entrepreneurial activities (Slavich, Cappetta & Salvemini, 2013). The two cases illustrate two potential paths that small food and wine companies can follow in order to strengthen organizational capabilities and to enhance local food and wine heritage.
The first case that we report is the case of "Friuli Venezia Giulia, Via dei Sapori" a Consortium founded in 2000 by a group of Friuli Venezia Giulia Italian Region restaurateurs with the aim of enhancing the local food culture through high quality cuisine. Currently, the consortium is made up of 21 high-end restaurants. Affiliated with the consortium in a three-year agreement are over forty producers, so called artisans of tastes, and winemakers who work together, particularly organizing events/dinner to be attended by 500 to 700 people. The second case describes the experience of the "DoloMitici", an informal network born in 2000, made up of a group of three hoteliers from Alta Badia (again in a northern Italian district) who started an unstructured partnership aimed at promoting the tourist destination where they operate. The driving force of their project is high quality cuisine, as the three entrepreneurs own top-level hotels each of which is home to a restaurant with at least one Michelin star. Over the years the hotels developed a very high profile and constantly attract a fairly high level of clientele. The general goal of this union is to promote Alta Badia through high quality food, in particular through their starred

restaurants, which have become drivers of the promotion of an entire tourist destination.
Data gathering was conducted through multiple semi-structured interviews. For the Friuli case we interviewed restaurant owners, winemakers and food producers. For the DoloMitici case we interviewed all the hotel owners and the respective chefs. For both the cases we conducted interviews with local stakeholders. In addition we analyzed secondary data as documents and videos. We structured data analysis according to procedures for inductive theory-building (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). Interviews and secondary data were used to build individual case studies. Then the cases were compared to develop the conceptual insights for a grounded model.

Destination management and food and wine

Food and wine, is one of the biggest cultural heritage in Italy. The industry is constellated by small and medium family businesses where there is a huge lack of managerial skills. Most of the times the only choice that excellent realities have to emerge is to ally with their competitors. Aggregations among companies allow managing the tension towards the dimensional growth that local and international markets require, as they allow sharing strategies, costs, and services (Salvemini & Soda, 2001). Aggregations can assume different forms for the more structured as consortia to the more informal pact and initiatives. We selected these two cases as currently they represent the only experiences in Italy of local aggregation among restaurants aimed at local development. Actually, other local associations exist, but they mainly carry out activities of promotions and address issues pertaining to the single restaurants. The two cases are different in terms of location, number and nature of the involved companies, structure, and complexity. These differences allowed us to have richness of data to compare in organizations that have similar aims to achieve. With regard to our theoretical issues, it is worth to mention that in this field it is very uncommon to find spontaneous collective projects. As a consequence it makes it the ideal field to inquire into the mechanisms that helped the analyzed informal organizations to work.

FINDINGS

In this section we report briefly the two selected cases in order to provide a general understanding of their nature. Then we will describe the organizational differences and similarities that we discovered with the aim to identify potential guidelines to follow in cases of potential analogous contexts.

Case 1: The Case of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Via dei Sapori
The Consortium "Friuli Venezia Giulia, Via dei Sapori" was founded in 2000 by three restaurateurs, with the aim of enhancing the food culture of their region through high quality cuisine. Friuli Venezia Giulia is a region located in the North East of Italy, it is a generous land, characterized by an extremely varied geography, ranging from the Alps to the Adriatic, without forgetting the strong Slovenian influences in the local language and culture that contributed to a huge diversity in the local traditions. When the project started the area was clearly manifesting the signs of decline in the food culture, in the knowledge of how to cultivate, breed, process, and cook the food of an ancient and rich land. The founders of the project believed that the restaurant can become a key element in the process of rediscovering and promoting the cultures of food, farming and manufacturing. They believed that it was necessary to preserve the knowledge related to the cuisine and the products linked to the territory and its history. Aldo Morassutti, Franco Marini and Elio del Fabbro, asked themselves, at the end of the 90's, a simple question:
"How can we create something that will bring visibility and prestige to our traditional food?"

They decided to bring together their experiences and their different entrepreneurial realities toward a specific goal: the rediscovery of the land and its food culture, through a transformation in the way of serving food.
They understood that the individual ambitions and competitive rivalry were no longer sufficient to feed their entrepreneurial projects:
"We came to it almost by accident, it was a moment of despair in which we said we must do something for the territory and for ourselves. We were sitting around a table and we said, let's unite and make an effort to form a group, to be more credible, to better sell our services in the territory, to make ourselves known. Because alone we would never have faced the problem of doing something".

The structuration of the group in a Consortium

The initial group enlisted immediately the aid of Walter Filiputti, a consultant in the food sector, a former restaurateur and wine maker who is highly esteemed and respected by everyone in the area and he is recognized

as one of the key opinion leaders of the agribusiness sector in Friuli Venezia Giulia. Strengthened by Walter's collaboration, who immediately assumed the role of Chairman, and confident about his charismatic leadership, the group began its operations, expanding to other restaurateurs who, in the opinion of the group's historic nucleus, were guided by the same principle of quality. It was September 12, 2000.
Today, more than ten years later, the Consortium is made up of 21 high-end restaurants spread throughout the Region. All the members are entrepreneurs and almost all have been active for three or four generations. Some of them count even 100 years of history behind them. Many of them play a role in both the hotel and restaurant activities. Each restaurant has its own individuality and a very distinct cuisine. Although all the Consortium restaurants are united by a similar market position in terms of price, the same attention to the highlighting of local resources and by the same standards of quality, they have huge differences in terms of location (city, countryside, mountain, sea), size, organizational structure (ranging from the two owners of *Sale e Pepe* to the approximately 40 employees of *Là di Moret*), and nature of the business (11 restaurants are also hotels). Table 1 shows the names of the restaurants, their location and the 2012 scores assigned by the *Michelin* and *L'Espresso* guides.

Table 1 – The restaurants of the Consortium with their locations and ratings

Restaurants	Location	Michelin	L'Espresso
Ai Fiori	Trieste (TS)		13
Al Bagatto	Trieste (TS)		13,5
Al Ferarùt	Rivignano (UD)	*	15
Al Grop	Tavagnacco (UD)		
Al Lido	Muggia (TS)		
Al Paradiso	Paradiso di Pocenia (UD)		12,5
Al Ponte	Gradisca d'Isonzo (GO)		
All'Androna	Grado (GO)		14,5
Campiello	San Giovanni al Natisone (UD)		14,5
Carnia	Venzone (UD)		12,5
Costantini	Collalto di Tarcento (Udine)		
Da Nando	Mortegliano (UD)		
Da Toni	Gradiscutta di Varmo (UD)		13,5
Devetak	Savogna d'Isonzo (GO)		14
Là di Moret	Udine (UD)		13
Là di Petròs	Mels (UD)		
La Primula	San Quirino (PN)	*	15
La Subida	Cormons (GO)	*	14,5
La Taverna	Colloredo di Monte Albano (UD)	*	14
Sale e Pepe	Stregna (UD)		13
Vitello d'Oro	Udine (UD)		13,5

From the initial collaboration between restaurateurs, the group began to expand its boundaries with suppliers to create an entire collaborative supply chain of taste. In this network of entrepreneurs that is organized horizontally (between competitors) and vertically (upstream), the restaurants are just the creative and distributive component of a network of artisans and companies possessing knowledge and know-how of the highest level and that produce food and raw materials linked to tradition. The Consortium distinguishes itself from many other associative experiences for having involved in its activities a large group of producers and growers. To date, there are 19 producers and 22 winemakers (the so-called "artisans of taste") affiliated.
Table 2 shows the artisans of taste and the business partners, while Table 3 shows the winegrowers. The artisans of taste offer differentiated and complementary products. For each type of product there is a single manufacturer, in order to avoid overlapping and cannibalizations.

Table 2 – The artisans of taste of the Consortium

Product Category	Tha artisans	Location
Dairy	Consorzio per la tutela del formaggio Montasio	Codroipo (UD)
Desserts	Della Negra Srl	Mortegliano (UD)
Services	Eurocar Italia	Tavagnacco (UD)
Fish	Friultrota	San Daniele del Friuli (UD)
Different Products of th friulian Dolomites	"Gusti Eccellenti Dolomiti Friulane": Il FigoMoro de Caneva La Pitina Dorth 1931 Apicoltura avianese Latteria Pradis	Maniago (PN)
Distribution of the gastonomy	Jolanda de Colò srl	Palmanova (UD)
Truffles	Muzzana Amatori Tartufi	Muzzana del Turgnano (UD)
Spirits	Nonino distillatori	Percoto (UD)
Coffee	Orocaffè srl	Tavagnacco (UD)
Bread	Il Forno di A. e C. Rizzo	Tarcento (UD)
Desserts	Pasticceria Simeoni	Udine
Cold cuts and sausages	Prosciuttificio Dok Dall'Ava	San Daniele del Friuli (UD)
Cutlery	Qm. Qualità Maniago	Maniago (PN)
Cold cuts and sausages	Salumificio Dentesano	Percoto (UD)
Oil	Ueli	Villanova di San Daniele del Friuli (UD)
Cold cuts and sausages	Vecchio Sauris	Sauris (UD)

Table 3 – The winemakers of the Consortium with their locations and ratings

The wine growers	Location
Castello di Spessa	Cormòns (GO)
di Lenardo Vineyards	Ontagnano (UD)
Edi Keber	Cormòns (GO)
Ermacora Dario e Luciano	Premariacco (UD)
Eugenio Collavini	Corno di Rosazzo (UD)
Fondazione Villa Russiz	Capriva del Friuli (GO)
Forchir	Provesano (PN)
Giorgio Colutta	Manzano (UD)
Il Carpino	San Floriano del Collio (GO)
Jermann	Villanova di Farra (GO)
Livio Felluga	Brazzano di Cormòns (GO)
Livon	San Giovanni al Natisone (UD)
Marco Felluga - Russiz Superiore	Gradisca d'Isonzo (GO)
Mario Schiopetto	Capriva del Friuli (GO)
Petrussa	Prepotto (UD)
Primosic	Oslavia-Gorizia (GO)
Produttori Ramandolo	Nimis (UD)
Ronco delle Betulle	Manzano (UD)
Tenuta Villanova	Villanova di Farra (GO)
Venica & Venica	Dolegna del Collio (GO)
Vistorta	Sacile (PN)
Zidarich	Duino Aurisina (TS)

The consortium structure was adopted for legal reasons and to facilitate the institutional activities of the group. The Consortium expanded over time through a self-selection "snowball" mechanism based on the criterion of the quality of the offering. Even the choice of the artisans of taste and of the winemakers took place through their being pointed out by the same restaurateurs who indicated among their trusted vendors, those considered consistent with the context of the Consortium. Especially in more recent times, the selection has also occurred through voluntary applications.

From the organizational point of view, the restaurants are the only members of the consortium, while the affiliated companies participate by entering into a three-year agreement. The Consortium is administered by a Board, composed by nine restaurants that change in rotation, by the President and an administrative secretary. The board meets once a month to discuss the projects to be implemented, those in progress and the accounts of completed projects, as well as to evaluate, check and approve new members or affiliates. The board also acts when problems arise meriting discussion at the group level. Twice a year, all the associates and affiliates are invited to a general meeting, but as reported by the President:
"Half of them come, and I go talk to the rest, because they don't have the time or they have different needs... it's my job to handle the coordination."

The President performs the activities of coordination, planning, and design. He generates the ideas for projects and initiatives, and for the events, and he is in charge of keeping up relations with all associates and affiliates. The importance of his role is emphasized by all the members, who attribute him the magic of the Consortium and the ability to keep the restaurants linked, with their different personalities, histories and cuisines.
All the Consortium's projects are self-funded to maintain autonomy both concerning decision-making and its finances, from external organizations, whose participation is always limited to individual initiatives. The resources come from the subscriptions of group members and from the events. There are also partnerships - such as the one with the Chamber of Commerce of Udine for the project Excellence in Tour, which takes place mostly abroad - where costs are split between the Chamber of Commerce and the Consortium.

The activities
The highest aim of the Consortium is to serve as a vehicle of local heritage development, basically through three main types of activities: 1) organization of ad-hoc events that bring together restaurants, artisans of taste and winemakers; 2) participation with restaurant owners and producers in events organized by local authorities or by the Chamber of Commerce of Udine; 3) publication of texts on the agrifood culture of Friuli Venezia Giulia.
The Consortium organizes three or four major events a year geared towards wine lovers and journalists. The format provides for the simultaneous presence of all the members of the Consortium and all the affiliated companies. Each restaurant prepares a dish with its own chef who cooks live, according to a predefined theme, entertaining and engaging the public in dialogue and telling them about their products and the dish. Each restaurant is flanked by a wine grower who explains the pairing with a selected wine, while the artisans of taste are involved - depending on the type of product - in the hors d'oeuvres, in the end dishes, or alongside one or more restaurants. The most important events are organized in very specific contexts, are almost always quite formal, and involve 500 to 700 people who pay - with the exception of the VIP guests - for an entrance ticket averaging € 55, a very favorable price to the public considering the very rich menu consisting of over 21 dishes to sample, 20 products and 22 different wines. The dishes are not necessarily traditional, but they somehow take up the best of Friuli.

The benefits
Being a part of this group has resulted in several benefits for the participants. According to one of the founders:
"Thinking of doing these events, as an organization and as far as the financing costs, it would be unthinkable ... the funding ultimately comes from all of us ... in ten years we've made a return on the investment, thanks to the results of visibility on the market that we've obtained... It's a remarkable effort, certainly, but it's rewarded by the return in the region and beyond ... customers come to us because they've attended here, and the costs are immediately repaid!"

The main benefit is related to an increase in visibility for everyone, both with the final consumer and with local governments who often contact the Association to request its presence at its own events. As one of the associates affirms:
"One advantage of this group is that we are taken into account by all the institutions. If there is an event to do, the most beautiful ones, without mentioning the feasts or festivals, they call us ... for example, the region has organized an event with tourism buyers from around the world and has called us ... we are seen as an element of quality of the Region and this is a victory. To do it on our own it would have been impossible."

It would have been impossible to activate the same channels of promotion independently. Similarly, from the producers' perspective, being part of this group and adding their own product to a quality restaurant, assures high image benefits, even when the public at the event is not the company's end customer. In addition, the events

have created the opportunity for restaurateurs to get in touch with each other, get to know the small and hard-to-reach local businesses and allowed restaurants to establish an even more immediate and privileged relationship with the territory.
The group was formed to allow restaurant owners to share ideas and projects, through events, board meetings and general meetings, but even more to share relationships with customers. It often happens that the same customer visiting a restaurant stays in the territory and the next day visits another restaurant, and, why not, decides to visit even one of the artisans and wine growers for a complete gastronomic tour of the area, relying on the Consortium's selection. This "concept" of the Consortium in large part explains the name "*Via dei Sapori*" ("The Flavour Road"), which recalls the idea of a path between nodes along the network, alternating restaurants with food artisans and winemakers. A culinary journey in the gastronomic and artisanal tradition-innovation of Friuli Venezia Giulia driven by mechanisms of co-option and entry into the network.
It hasn't been easy to achieve this. In fact, it was necessary to deal with an initial dose of mistrust and competitive spirit between the parties. Over time, all the employers involved were convinced that it was actually a *win-win* game, as one of the consortium members illustrates:
"A good 90% of customers who enter into this circuit don't stop at just one restaurant, but are stimulated to visit the others and with them, also the supply chain. This was one of the major forces that fuelled the growth of the Consortium, but it was a difficult task, because at first we were skeptical, animated by a spirit of competition because we believed that our strength lay in that, and not in collaboration. Then we realized that if we each took a single step back, it meant all of us would take two steps forward.

The creation of a collaborative mind-set is, as was pointed out by one of the member winegrowers:
"The largest and most historical deficiency of our territory."

This lack is interpreted by some as a real anthropological characteristic of Friuli as illustrated by a historical partner of the Consortium:
"People from Friuli Venezia Giulia are jealous and don't like to belong to groups, they're loners, they talk little and work a lot, they keep their head down and work hard... ".

From the cultural point of view, many of the participants were able to escape the trap of the trade-off between cooperation and competition, interpreting them as complementary strengths of an entrepreneurial system:
"We understood that being together, and collaboration can be a point of strength in an entrepreneurial and individualistic atmosphere. Working together is an act of strength, not of weakness."

On the other hand, perhaps the most important result reached by the participants in the Consortium has been a deeper and more difficult change concerning the mentality, the spirit of the participants in the Consortium and the ability to work together.
The comparison between different, excellent companies each time stimulates a sort of challenge based on a comparison of the dishes presented, encouraging chefs and restaurateurs to offer something better
"Even though the events were created for promotional reasons, they are ever more becoming an important educational opportunity, especially for our employees who spend time together, they form a group and compare."

Case 2: The DoloMitici
The DoloMitici project is based on the idea of the owners of three award-winning restaurants based in three luxury hotels in Val Badia, a tiny mountain area in the North East of Italy, under the Dolomites Mountains. The aim of the group is to promote the local area through fine dining. The trio is made up of Michil Costa, patron of the La Perla hotel and the La Stüa de Michil restaurant, Hugo Pizzinini, owner of the Relais Chateaux Rosa Alpina and the St. Hubertus restaurant, and Stefan Wieser, owner of the Ciasa Salares hotel and the Siriola restaurant. The DoloMitici team is supported by the three executive chefs in the respective establishments: Fabio Cucchelli at La Siriola, Norbert Niederkofler at St. Hubertus and Arturo Spicocchi at La Stüa de Michil.

The three establishments

Hotel Ciasa Salares
Founded by Wieser's great-grandparents, over the years it has become a landmark in an area that straddles Alta Badia and Cortina. The establishment has 50 rooms and some apartments. Today the patron of the hotel is Stefan Wieser and the restaurant is managed by Fabio Cucchelli who replaced Claudio Melis in the kitchen a couple of years ago. Together with Siriola, the restaurant that has boasted a Michelin star since 1995, an Espresso 'hat' and two Gambero Rosso 'forks', the culinary service is completed with a less formal restaurant and an extremely well-stocked wine bar. The hotel also has a wine cellar that each year generates a turnover of 350 labels, many of which are biodynamic (around 30%). The Ciasa Salares hotel has a top-class SPA with treatments and products that respect natural local resources.

Hotel la Perla
Developed in 1956 on the basis of a project by Ernesto Costa and his wife Anni. Today the patron of the hotel is son Michil, who was the first to understand the importance of focusing jointly on top-quality food and high-class hotel accommodation. La Stüa de Michil, awarded a Michelin star in 2002, an Espresso 'hat' and three Gambero Rosso 'forks', is managed by Arturo Spicocchi. Alongside the gourmet restaurant the hotel also has a more informal offering with two restaurants/osterie, a wine bar with a wine list of over 1410 labels and a cellar, "Mahatma", with one of the finest wine collections in Italy. The hotel has 52 rooms and a large wellness area.

Hotel Rosa Alpina
Located at the heart of San Cassiano. It began life in 1940 when Engelbert Pizzinini acquired what was then just a farm and began creating a luxury hotel. In 2000 the hotel became part of the Relais et Chateaux chain. The establishment has 51 rooms and a spa with plenty of facilities. Hugo Pizzinini has focused closely on the idea of an environmentally sustainable hotel, which involves the careful use of energy resources and a close focus on local products. The hotel's jewel in the crown is without doubt the St. Hubertus restaurant headed by Norbert Niederkofler, which boasts two Michelin stars (the first of which won in 2000, the second following in 2007), three Gambero Rosso 'forks' and 2 Espresso 'hats'. As well as the St. Hubertus restaurant, the culinary offer also includes two other less-formal restaurants.

The three entrepreneurs, united by a decade-long friendship and the common goal of communicating the quality and excellence of their establishments and the local area, started their joint adventure by organizing a series of events, such as a picnic on the tops of the mountains and the organization of the catering for the VIP lounge during the Skiing World Cup.
Michil Costa describes the underlying vision that guides the DoloMitici, a shared vision that enables three establishments with high quality services and a high profile clientele, all with Michelin-starred restaurants, to understand that instead of competing among each other it is better to do things differently:
"I view the DoloMitici as a business that has developed common values and which has come together sharing these values. These common values are based on creativity, ethics, culture, inspiration, the courage to do, the strength of perseverance, a simplistic approach, playing to one's strengths to meet one's goals and lastly, but encapsulating all of these, perceived interior wellbeing."

Alta Badia
The Alta Badia is the southern part of the Val Badia. This zone is characteristic for its favorable position in the heart of the Dolomites and for the cultural diversity that makes this place so unique. The area has been associated with quality tourism for years but which, at the same time, has managed to maintain its traditions and a strong local identity. An example of this is the persistence and the bond with the Ladin culture, which is still extremely alive in the valley, so much so that the population's native tongue is Ladin and the valley is officially trilingual (Italian-Ladin-German). The economy of the Alta Badia is essentially based on quality tourism. Even at this time of economic crisis, the Alto Adige continues to attract very decent numbers of tourists. At the present time, the Alta Badia is number two in the world in terms of the density and concentration of Michelin stars in such a small area (three starred restaurants within 5km).

The DoloMitici events
The three partners organize events connected with cuisine and Alto Adige quality, with the aim of communicating the excellence of products and cooking in one of the most highly regarded and well-known mountain regions in the world. The first initiative was the *Picnic d'alta quota*, which dates back to 2002. The original aim of the Picnic was to create a summer event to attract food enthusiasts and to ensure guests enjoyed a marvelous day eating great food in the open air. During the *Picnic* each chef prepares a dish using the products of the local farmers who arrive dressed in traditional clothes on the uplands of Piz Sorega. As the name suggests, the *Picnic* is an informal lunch where Michelin-starred chefs come face to face with traditional peasant recipes, where the stars are the products of the Alto Adige/Südtirol. In recent years the *Picnic* has grown from 120 guests in 2008 to 250 in 2011.
After the *Picnic* came *Sciare con gusto* and the *Chef's Cup*, which has by far the biggest media profile of the DoloMitici events. *Sciare con gusto* was conceived by Norbert Niederkofler and launched 5 years ago to combat the mundaneness of the mountain refuge menus and to offer the public a more attractive idea, at the same time displaying variety and diversity. The project unites around ten Michelin-starred chefs – initially only hailing from the Alto Adige and the Dolomites, but now from all over Europe – with 11 refuges. The aim of the project is to combine hospitality, the landscape and winter sports with fine dining, promoting wines and products typical of Südtirol. During the event the chefs produce dishes based on a specific products, prepared in different ways by the guest chefs. The dishes are introduced to the original menu of the refuge and offered to the public at a reduced price for the entire winter season. For some time the DoloMitici have also held open-air cooking courses based on traditional local raw materials, with the aim to involve also smaller and less visible establishments.

The Chef's Cup
The *Chef's Cup* was launched in 2004 from an idea by Niederkofler and the desire to hold meetings with internationally-renowned chefs in a friendly setting to discuss and reflect on the evolution of fine dining. Although the *Chef's Cup* was launched as a biennial event dedicated to chefs, industry operators and producers, over time it has enjoyed such success that in 2008 it became an annual event. This innovation also led to an increase in attendances: from 70 participants in the first editions, in 2012 around 400 guests attended the event. The event has also evolved from "three days" dedicated to a specialist audience, to an entire week dedicated to a much broader public than the original target. The idea of using food to attract international cooks has been an unqualified success because, as Hugo Pizzinini says:
"*The chefs are the best ambassadors in the world for the things they see here".*

As Fabio Cucchelli describes:
"There has been a huge increase in attendances since last year. The event continues to take shape and we look to involve chefs and personalities of a certain calibre and from all over the world."

Whilst on one hand the event seeks to create a meeting place for chefs and industry operators, on the other it informally involves businesses and the public with competitions and cooking schools, cooking demonstrations, dinners in the refuges, meetings on diet issues and, obviously, skiing and snowshoe competitions. There is a charge for attending the event but every year all of the proceeds go to a different charitable cause. According to Fabio Cucchelli:
"Since the launch of the Chef's Cup there has been a major evolution in all senses: from the point of view of the press, the people involved and also the human factor. Also for the local population too for sure."

The *Chef's Cup* is the most complex event from an organizational perspective. Each of the three companies has its own role: the entrepreneurs seek out sponsors and suppliers and activate the institutional channels. The three

chefs make arrangements for their contacts, which will be participating in the event as a token of friendship (without receiving any payment). According to Arturo Spicocchi:
"The strength of the event is its excellent organization, particularly by the Rosa Alpina, which assigns a couple of people to the event all-year round".

The chefs are responsible for the "creative" side of the event: choosing the guest chefs to invite, defining the dishes, creating the menus and organizing supplies of raw materials. In this respect, Niederkofler provides most support. Additional support, in terms of promotion and communications, comes from the Val Badia Tourism Association.
The event enjoys the support of a main sponsor, Audi, and the involvement of around fifteen sponsors connected with the agri-food sector, including San Pellegrino, Selecta, Longino & Cardenal, Cecchi, Nespresso, and Verrigni. The big names are obviously joined by small local producers that boast the hallmark of "Qualità Alto Adige".

How the group works
Over the years, the DoloMitici have never set up a formal company dedicated to the management of events or the corporate management of the "DoloMitici" brand because, as Michil Costa explains:
"*We are happy the way we are... Everything we do, we do it independently, although always with the emphasis on cooperation.*"

As Cucchelli explains:
"The great thing is that we have a wonderful relationship, both from a human and a working point of view, and this also acts as an incentive, leading to new things and introducing new people."

Excluding the organization of events, the three entrepreneurs manage their businesses completely independently and do not share production activities. The group organizes periodic informal meetings. The meetings involve the three entrepreneurs, the three chefs, or all six together when more important decisions have to be made. As for the relations between the chefs, Fabio Cucchelli remarks:
"We have regular meetings and all of us are always involved (chefs and entrepreneurs). We discuss problems, ideas... being a group, a team of six people, something positive always comes out... Our relationship is excellent, we see each other often, we talk, there is a professional exchange of influences and ideas, but also of suppliers. If I find a supplier for some specific products I pass on the contact to the other two so they can buy from him too"

Niederkofler also reveals how the team spirit and chemistry that exists between them is key to the smooth functioning of the project, just as how maintaining the independence of the individual businesses is crucial:
"You have to respect the group, then everyone goes back to their own homes. We only work together when there are joint initiatives. After that everyone does their own job."

And Pizzinini - once again enthusiastically - underlines the results achieved, also from the perspective of the group:
"Managing to bring together three different institutions, generations, philosophies, and families, with family-run businesses ... but if the end goal is the same it is a win-win situation where everyone has something to gain... it works if everyone has something to gain; if someone gets more from it than the others it falls down."

Stefan Wieser admits that for the three competitors to work together the trick is to ensure that this positive feeling remains:
"There aren't any evident differences between us, but each of us has our own views on opening and closing periods, on price management etc."

As well as culture, the mountains and their passion for quality, according to Costa they also share a common desire to grow and continue down this road which, like the absence of a clear economic interest, is the key to success also in a difficult period such as the one we are currently experiencing:
"It isn't a business strategy, we enjoy ourselves, it is off-the-cuff, we don't make any great plans, we are three friends and we approach it like three friends, like a pastime"

The three entrepreneurs have been friends for years. It is a relationship founded over generations. As Cucchelli describes the relationship between the three entrepreneurs:
"*I don't see any jealousy. Of course business is business, but from what I've seen they are very loyal to each other.*"

The three decided to create packages including a gourmet dinner at all three of the Michelin-starred establishments for a fixed price. The package is based on the exchange of guests between one restaurant and another, taking advantage of the different closing days of the individual establishments. Despite the friendship and the bond between the three companies, there is objective competition between them although this is not regarded as a negative factor, as Costa says:
"We all have a certain positioning, the same clientele, the same standards of quality, the same prices, so there is obviously competition, but this inspires us to improve... This can be positive because it pushes you to do better and to seek an even more specific type of customer and an even stronger position on the market."

The DoloMitici stems from an idea by the three entrepreneurs but is based on the excellence of the cuisine in their restaurants, which would not be so famous were it not for the chefs. According to Arturo Spicocchi:
"*We all benefit from our relationship, we help each other without any envy, jealousy, or hidden agendas.*"

As Pizzinini also remarks:
"The chefs are employees, yes, but they also have an important say because, in the end, they are the creative spirits of the group and they must really believe in what they are doing, it is their ideas that we evaluate... Norbert is the creative mind if you like."

Among the three chefs Norbert Niederkofler certainly has the most international reputation, and this provides the group not only with many contacts but also many ideas that come from contaminations with foreign chefs. As mentioned, many of the DoloMitici ideas come from him, including the Chef's Cup.

Benefits for the area
All of these events and the use of gourmet food as a driver for local development are seen as long-term investments. It is difficult for top quality restaurants, particularly small ones, to make profits in their own right, unless they have very strong media coverage. They are investments with high returns, which are diluted over time, but luckily the media coverage of the DoloMitici ensures fairly long-term returns. In Alta Badia Michelin-starred restaurants act as vehicles for increasing tourist flows and, as a result, greater levels of income than those generated by a single business. The events produce an increase in the number of tourists and get plenty of press coverage with the benefits being enjoyed by the entire zone rather than just the three businesses involved. However, hoteliers and restaurateurs in the area are often jealous of the attention afforded to the three entrepreneurs. Relations with other local entrepreneurs have changed in recent times with the media inevitably focusing on the three DoloMitici, but as Hugo Pizzinini points out:
"We would be delighted to have other Michelin-star winners in the area, but us Ladins are a bit peculiar, very proud, it would be nice to involve the entire population... other restaurateurs may envy us because we make a bit of noise, but we definitely attract more people that go and eat in other places, such as the refuges, and we generate economic flows from which everyone benefits."

To smooth the tension with local businesses, the DoloMitici are seeking a way of increasing the involvement of the community in their activities, increasing the participation of farmers and local businesses during the various events. In this context, the work of the Local Tourism Association is very important because it acts as a mediator between the DoloMitici and the local community. The presence and the actions of the DoloMitici in the Alto Adige have given impetus to a land extremely focused on the quality and excellence of its services. This new emphasis on attention to detail can be seen when visiting the establishments in the area, from the pizzerias that use sourdough to refuges that take greater pride in their menus. Thanks to the driving force of the DoloMitici, the Alta Badia is establishing a local and national reputation as a tourist resort connected with fine dining. The DoloMitici work actively to promote local producers, with whom they are starting to work, involving above all the farmers, exploiting the land and giving them confidence for the future. On one hand, the Alto Adige offers a series of high quality products and a deep-rooted tradition of agricultural production. On the other, as Niederkofler is always underlining:
"*The farmer is the face of the product and we give him the chance to earn money for his work.*"

COMPARISON OF THE TWO CASES

The cases illustrate two different organizations, aimed at the valorization of local food and wine heritage, which surged spontaneously, bottom-up, in two different specific territories. While we started the analysis of the cases looking for the coordination mechanisms allowing the functioning of the two organizations, we found out that there are additional elements meaningfully impacting the differences between them. Despite the evident shared common goal on food and wine heritage valorization, actually the two experiences report significant differences in particular in terms of: the organizational structure, the network structure, the virtuous balancing mechanisms that allow the functioning of the alliances, the coordination mechanisms, the leadership, and the results for the involved companies and for the territory (table 4).

Table 4 – Comparison between the two cases

FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA - VIA DEI SAPORI	DOLOMITICI
Organizational structure	
Consortium, formally structured and defined by a written statute	Clan
President	Informal organization
Board and Assembly	Heterarchy
Administrative secretary	Unstructured network
Network structure	
Vertical and horizontal expansion	Horizontal
Specialization network in the same production chain	Business partnership starting from informal and affective ties
Business partnership starting from affective ties and instrumental ties	Strong ties
Spontaneity of the network generation	Spontaneity of the network generation
Virtuous mechanisms	
Self-selection	Affective ties (friendship and trust)
Self-financing	Business independence
Distributional advantages	Collaboration on single projects
The absence of a leader from the members	Avoidance of direct competition
Not excessive competition among the companies	
Coordination	
The external leadership	Implicit coordination mechanisms
Knowledge sharing	Goals, culture, and value sharing
Creation of a common culture	Shared local identity
Formal meetings	
Shared local identity	
Leadership	
Clear and defined by actions and by the statute	Shared leadership
President (hierarchy)	Niederkofler among the chefs
The core of the Consortium (role of guidance)	Costa among the entrepreneurs
External leadership	Rosa Alpina among the organizations
Results of the partnership	
Knowledge sharing	Promotion of local food and wine culture
Visibility	Potenatial access to competitors' network
Commercial return	Knowledge sharing
Firms growth	Destination management
Professional development for the members	Firms growth
Changes in organizational culture	Internationalization of the area
Having access to others' network	Increase of quality in the destination offer
Increase acknowledgement on Friuli Venezia Giulia gastronomic heritage	

The two experiences are extremely different under the organizational structure point of view. If in the Friuli Venezia Giulia case we have a really structured and defined consortium, with a specific statute and a hierarchical definition of roles – a President, a Board, an administrative office – in the DoloMitici case we have an informal structure, a clan, based on heterarchy where the decisional power is shared among the partners. The alliance in the first case assumes the aspect of a more structured network that is specialized in terms of capabilities both vertically and horizontally, while in the second case we have a horizontal network among competitors.

The nucleus of the network in both the cases starts from informal and affective ties that become source of instrumental ties. Being the first case more formalized, the network in appears ready to lead a new stage of further development in perspective years, while the DoloMitici case hides more issues in the potential expansion of the project (new partners, new events...).

The main organizational mechanisms that allow the success of the project over time in the first case are primarily related to the self-selection of the members of the Consortium. There is reciprocal trust and recognition of others works' value. The fact that no firm abandoned the Consortium is a great sign of success. In addition, the awareness on the project need of success is also related to the self-financing process. The presence of an external leadership, a quite uncommon characteristic in agrifood consortia where usually the President is a member of the group, guarantees a balance among the partners. Despite the centrality of these elements, in our opinion there is not a direct competition among the companies involved in the project. First, the restaurants are almost all in different locations, second, the producers are all selected in a way that avoids cannibalization. This "right amount" of competition allows distributional advantages for all the members of the partnership that understood how collaborating works more than competing or even worst ignoring. In the DoloMitici case the main elements that allow the success of the project are the independence of the businesses, the avoidance of direct competition among the firms and a consensual agreement of equally shared power among the actors.

The two strategic alliances work since individuals and firms are coordinated by several mechanisms. In both the cases these mechanisms can be more hidden and implicit, such as the knowledge sharing and the existence of common culture, shared values and goals, or they can be represented by explicit mechanisms like less formal meetings and formal boards. What our data reveal is that one of the most relevant hidden mechanisms allowing a successful cooperation is the shared territorial identity. Territory seems to be the essential ingredient fostering both cooperation and competition among the firms, supporting the competitive advantage of the firms and of the entire territory (Boari & Lipparini, 2000). This genius loci that encompasses a common cultural identity, provides not just a mechanism that allows the whole organizations to work, but seems to be the main tie linking the partners of the projects. If all the members of the analyzed alliances share an affective tie that inspired them to collaborate towards a common goal, they also are intrinsically connected with an invisible tie that is the connection with a unique territorial root.

The role of leadership represents another relevant element of discussion in the comparison of the cases. While in the first case there is a clear leadership, represented by the President of the Consortium and the core members, in the DoloMitici case there is not a declared and formal leadership of the project, although from the informants narrations it emerged that Niederkofler is the "creative leader" (a kind of "primus inter pares"), Costa seems the inspirational leader among the entrepreneurs (for sure the most charismatic one), while the Hotel Rosa Alpina is the firm that offers the majority of resources among the three hotels (it can be considered the "champion" in the domain).

Finally the two experiences differ also in terms of impact generated for the partners and on the territory. In the first case the main results of the partnership are: the knowledge sharing among the partners, the acquisition of higher visibility for small dimension firms, eventual commercial return, the sense of belonging to a group in an individualistic industry, professional development, changes in organizational culture, the possibility to access to other partners network, the increased acknowledgement on the quality of regional gastronomic heritage. In the DoloMitici case the main results are related to the increase of the quality of hospitality services in the area after an imitation process, an increase of tourists flux in the area and of media coverage, a higher attention to local gastronomic heritage.

In both the cases the alliances actually turned out to be a tool for the expansion of the value chain. In the first case, many of the affiliated companies were already in the network of suppliers of the consortium restaurants, but many others, thanks to the consortium, have acquired new contacts and partners. This process has allowed for a gradual spontaneous expansion of the network upstream in the supply chain. An expansion of the value chain that is more related to the offer side is clear especially in the second case, where the creation of common packages increase the possibility to share common clients.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper illustrates how spontaneous aggregations among competitors can work and what are the main informal, hidden, and tacit coordination mechanisms allowing the alliances to succeed. The explorative analysis revealed that the analyzed companies, acting in small network alliances - most of time starting from affective ties that are source of future instrumental ties and of more structured alliances - can represent on the one hand drivers of the local heritage development and on the other hand can reinforce the strategic capabilities of the single organizations, providing new knowledge and new relationships eventually contributing to an expansion of their value chains. In both the cases the alliances contribute to generate a positive influence not just for the single partners but also for the entire destination where they are active redistributing the benefits on the local territory, shedding new light on the way local informal networks can be organized, acting in the absence of direct economic returns. The cases enlighten the extreme relevance of firms aggregations, playing a substantial role in the meta-management of destinations – in conjunction with local tourisms associations or Chambers of commerce – with activities dedicated to regulation and coordination aimed to eventually enhance the competitiveness of a specific area (Parolini, 2005).
Finally, the two successful cases that we analyzed can provide insights and suggestions for local aggregations based on food and wine heritage valorization. In this perspective, we suggest that these two cases of localized networks can be most likely replicated in other regional contexts characterized by the same needs and by similar configuration in terms of organizations and local resources.

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