

"Adopt these sheep and get organic cheese and yoghurt"

by Claudio Sampaolo

Antonio Meloni and his brother Marco have set up an organic farm that has started producing quality products in just five years. Their star product is yoghurt known as a national excellence.



The shepherd for the third millennium still holds on to his (almost) inevitable Sardinian roots, although he speaks in thick Perugia slang. His 250-strong flock grazes over 50 hectares of land, surrounded by virtual fences which he checks by satellite and GPS, and he has invented a long-distance adoption scheme for his sheep, lambs and rams, including a certificate, photo sent in the post and even the option to call them on a mobile phone attached to their collars. He uses Facebook as his primary means of communication, and produces mainly yoghurt ("yobèè..."), along with traditional ricotta and pecorino made from unpasteurised milk, in an organic farm where additives, thickeners and fertilisers are all banned. In Fontemanna, 1 km above Colle San Paolo, the small business set up by Antonio and Marco Meloni has made a name and a reputation for itself, following in the footsteps of their parents Gesuina and Salvatore, who arrived here 40 years ago from Sarule, Barbagia, in Sardinia, bringing 300 sheep with them on board the ferry. In fact, according to Antonio Andreani, who teaches "the anthropology of food" at the Università dei Saperi and has reviewed shepherds and "milk factories" in Umbria, Fontemanna produces

"one of the best sheep's milk yoghurts in Italy".

Is that possible? Apparently, it is. In fact, the small fridge in the small shop of the small dairy has almost sold out by five in the afternoon.

"We have only recently started selling sheep's milk yoghurt, which is much less acidic than cow's milk. First plain, then with honey from a local beekeeper, and now we do lots of other fruit flavours: lemon, strawberry, forest fruits, cereals, peach melba and our latest addition, pineapple. Fortunately, the quality sells itself, and word of mouth does the rest. We don't produce huge quantities, but everything sells - some from here, some through local shops, even as far as Perugia, and in restaurants that use only products with a certified production line, where our zero kilometre organic products are really appreciated".

Antonio, 30, knows exactly what he wants: he works the land, he produces dairy products with his mother, and he takes care of distribution; Marco, 38, looks after the web and innovation side.

"He was the one who invented the "Belefono" (Baa-phone)", laughs Antonio. "In practice, it's a miniature mobile phone that we attach to the sheep's collar that picks up on the first ring and transmits audio live. If you're lucky, you can hear bleating or grazing. It's definitely a marketing idea in line with the long-distance adoption and virtual flock control. Instead of having shepherds who have to stay with the flock for hours and hours, we have introduced a more innovative method, putting GPS chips on the collars and following their movements on Google Maps. That way, we know exactly when the flock goes off our land, and a software notifies us with a text or email, so we can intervene. It doesn't happen very often, though, because sheep are pretty habitual."

Just one GPS for 300 sheep?

"Yes, that's all it takes. They always stay together, if one moves, they all move - none of them ever go off on their own."

It sounds like the evolution of the black sheep theory, with one every 40-50 white sheep. All we need to do is count the black ones every now and again, and if one's missing, then it means that we're probably missing quite a few white ones too...

"Yes, but that theory was impossible to prove. With technology, we can relax. The long-distance adoption, on the other hand, is new in

Umbria, although it was first used in Abruzzo, where it was a useful financial tool for flocks of thousands of sheep. Here we are still only just starting, if you think that we officially opened in January 2009, but lots of people have already signed up, especially from the north. Some time ago a family came from Pavia to see the sheep they'd adopted, and to find out if it really existed or if it was only a clever marketing plan. They went away happy..."

How does it work?

"Easy. We start by offering a lamb for adoption, which costs €21 a year. We send a photo in the post along with news and an adoption certificate. The contribution will help it grow into a sheep. Since lambs don't make milk, in exchange we give a discount by the kilo for our dairy products ordered by email. Adopting a sheep costs €70 a year, but apart from the "gadgets", the adoptive family gets a taste of cheese, with two kilos of fresh and mature cheese and a bottle of our organic olive oil.

A ram costs €98 a year, and you get 3 kilos of cheese (half fresh, half mature) and two litres of oil. Of course, we can't send yoghurt and ricotta, but anyone who can drop by can pick up these products, with tasting selections included in the adoption package."

Is choosing to be a shepherd/farmer at the age of 24 or 25 a way of following the family tradition, an obligation, or a future for young people looking for jobs that don't exist?

"Both. Marco and I were born here, but we feel our Sardinian origins strongly. Dad is 76, and he's always been a shepherd. Mum is 70, and she is an expert in making cheese. We grew up with them, with our farming tradition which has very strong roots, with festivals for milking and shearing, watching the cheese-makers at work, learning to smell the odours of the cheese, whether it's hard, aged, to be cut using a scalpel, or the scent of fresh ricotta. For years Mum and Dad only produced milk, as much as 300 litres a day, and sold it on to dairies. They used the money for day to day living and expenses. Then the wind changed, and they needed to take on hands and expand the flock. So we stepped in, and decided to start producing cheese, with all the red tape, licences, controls, mortgages to pay and equipment to learn how to use. Just moving on from a fire to a steam generator for heating milk or working with an automatic milking system made a big difference. Now it's 5 pm, and I finished making cheese five minutes ago. We started milking

early this morning, then we took the milk into the dairy and started working on it straight away. I love this job, and the results we achieve. Especially when I go to deliver our products, and meet people who are really enthusiastic about them, who appreciate and look forwards to getting them. It's hard work, with rules, but it's what we chose and neither of us regret it."

What does organic certification involve?

"It means following strict procedures, in order to offer guarantees to consumers. For example, using a precise rotation scheme for the crops which the sheep eat: alfalfa, clover, sweet corn, barley or beans. We avoid any fodder that would make the sheep grow faster, but make them get sick easily. Instead, this way, they live for around 10 years, 5 or 6 of which are productive. At the end of their careers we sell them, but they're really not worth much at all, €15 each, without even weighing them. What about the wool? No one wants it anymore, and we'd need specialised shearers from New Zealand to do it. They're highly specialised and very fast, they cost around €1.70 per sheep, but the 2 or 3 kilos of wool they get is not even enough to pay them. On the market, wool is worth around 18-20 cents per kilo."

In your herd, have you still got any of the DNA of the sheep your father brought here 40 years ago?

"Maybe, but there is a rigorous turnover, every five years, including rams, to avoid mixing the genetic heritage. The only descendents of that ferry from Olbia are probably my brother and I..."