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## Authenticity and Product Geography in the Making of the Agritourism Destination

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## Abstract

Agritourism is emerging as a common solution to sustain agriculture-based communities bereft of economic viability. Drawing from the intersecting literature of product country-of-origin and destination branding, we use a case study to show how agritourism in Messinia, Greece creates and houses a multitude of meanings suitable for tourism consumption. The study highlights the challenge for the destination to sustainably convey experiential authenticity and interpreting its role in a greater product geography to sustain that capability. The agritourism destination must develop consistency in addressing the multitude of meanings it embeds while simultaneously addressing its stakeholders' divergent needs.

*Keywords: Agritourism, Experiential Authenticity, Destination Branding, Country-of-Origin, Product Geography, Sustainable Tourism.*

## Introduction

Agritourism, which denotes activities and practices using farms to provide recreational and educational experiences to the public (Barbieri, 2013), has become a mainstay in recent tourism literature (Fitz-Koch et al., 2018). The potential benefits of agritourism's sustainable growth on rural areas are economic (McGehee et al., 2007), socio-cultural (Nickerson et al., 2001), environmental (Barbieri, 2013) and recreational (Grala et al., 2010) as compared with mass tourism development initiatives (Cai, 2002). With the global integration of agricultural markets (Oosterveer, 2007), agritourism represents one of the few means available - beyond innovative production means and tools, access to globalised funds and the promotion of farming among younger generations (Santacoloma et al., 2005) - for the long-term economic viability of many small-to-medium agricultural enterprises (Sharpley, 2002). Indeed, agritourism contributes to the creation of more sustainable multifunctional rural areas (Anthopoulou and Mliessourgos, 2013) through farm diversification and natural and cultural resource conservation. Given the significant implications for the future of agricultural economies, there is a pressing need to better circumscribe what constitutes the conditions for its success (Sharpley, 2002).

The literature on the antecedent conditions driving tourists' propensity to visit and revisit a destination highlights the importance that it convey a sense of "experiential authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973); a state of being (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006) experienced by tourists when encountering what they regard as sublime (Brown, 1996) to restore and reconstitute themselves when on holiday (Graburn, 2001). The degree of authenticity in the tourism experience is what Phillip et al. (2010) identified in their typological framework of agritourism as a key factor in the debate addressing the confusion in its definition.

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3 Consequently, the range of products and activities enabling an experience within highly  
4 differentiated practices at agritourism destinations are of significance. The connection  
5 between the place and the encounter (Rickly-Boyd, 2013; Wang, 1999) is pivotal to the long-  
6 term success of a tourist destination (Di Domenico and Miller, 2012). An agricultural  
7 operation, which comes pre-packaged with historical and cultural content repurposed for  
8 tourism, could therefore be poised to convey experiential authenticity.  
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12 The tourism encounter effectively allows for the agricultural productionscape to become a  
13 destination consumptionscape for visitors to appreciate augmented agricultural products. For  
14 example, the websites of two major European farm networks, Farm Stay UK<sup>1</sup> and Bienvenue  
15 à la Ferme<sup>2</sup> explicitly connect producers with consumers by offering farm products, food,  
16 hospitality, recreation and leisure. International visitors are often familiar with such  
17 agricultural practices and traditions through the products they consume as exports before  
18 visiting the agritourism place itself, highlighting the importance of provenance associations  
19 that not only “implace” the product (see Casey, 1993) but also play a discrete world-making  
20 role, whereby exports serve as creative promotional devices for the place. Thus, marketing  
21 and promotion of brands like Mercedes-Benz include specific representations of the place  
22 (Germany), its people (efficiency) and history (superior engineering), beyond other  
23 representations of the same product category (ibid). While the effects of a product’s country  
24 of origin (COO) on consumer preferences have been well established (e.g., Verlegh and  
25 Steenkamp, 1999) and discussed in terms of quality inferences based on product attributes  
26 (Bilkey and Nes, 1982) or of “contagion” as an enabling factor in consumers’ perception of  
27 authenticity in brand transference (Newman and Dhar, 2014), the literature at the intersection  
28 of COO and tourism destination marketing is still developing (Ryu et al., 2016). Studies by  
29 Nadeau et al. (2008) and Moulard et al. (2015) have drawn parallels between destinations and  
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3 products. Ryu et al. (2016) demonstrate that attitudes regarding products from a place can  
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5 predict intentions to visit that place, revealing that products can influence attitudes towards  
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7 destinations.  
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12 The present work explores how different products constitute *artifacts of promotion* of the  
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14 destination itself. In agritourism, this principle is amplified as the link between place and  
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16 product reaches its most palpable synergic potential. Using as empirical context the Greek  
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18 Peloponnese region of Messinia, which is renowned for its olives and olive oil, this study  
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20 uncovers the process by which the promotion of agricultural products integrates the  
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22 destination image through agritourism as consumption mythologies of the two “commodities”  
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24 overlap. To that end, we develop and employ theoretical links between experiential  
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26 authenticity (Wang, 1999) and mythologies derived from a symbolic geography of agri-  
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28 product exports to unpack the making of an agritourism destination. Such a geography  
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30 renders a form of social imaginaries (Appadurai, 1990) of experience resulting in what  
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32 L’Espoir Decosta and Andéhn (2018) call a “product geography,” an alternative symbolic  
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34 account referring to a system of places joined by the commonality of an association to a  
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36 particular product or category (ibid).  
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45 While the marketing of Messinia’s staples already draws on their emplacement, their state of  
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47 being necessitates being in place (Casey, 1993). That benefit is pertinent with regard to  
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49 country-to-good (White, 2012); i.e., the brand marketing of olive products enjoys the effect  
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51 of its origin of Messinia and Kalamata’s product-country image (PCI). It is the cultivation of  
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53 a synergic relationship through which the PCI can be leveraged to shift the tourism  
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55 destination image (TDI) away from mass tourism, for which Greece is renowned, to an  
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57 alternative that holds untapped promise (see Ryu et al., 2016). We posit this potential is  
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3 especially pronounced for agritourism in Messinia because the product of olive oil in  
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5 conjunction with the “tourism product” of the olive grove agri-hotel can provide the symbolic  
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7 backdrop for experiential authenticity. In effect, consumption of an implaced commodity  
8  
9 creates residual meaning that can be re-appropriated to promote a tourism product (Smith,  
10  
11 1994). This process draws on the meanings and mythologies connected to commodities and  
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13 destinations, becoming intertwined through agritourism. Such a process subsequently  
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15 accounts for the evocation of place, which is contingent upon its associated mythologies.  
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17 Thus, different evocations are drawn into consumers’ consciousness when, for example, a site  
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19 known for its olive groves and oil production is viewed as a potential destination to visit  
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24 (Figure 2).  
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FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

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### *Agritourism and Experiential Authenticity*

The recent rapid growth of agritourism is believed to be supply-driven and a consequence of the increasingly competitive and less lucrative productivist agricultural industry (Kirschenmann et al., 2004), encouraging a policy shift towards agri-environmental concerns and diversification by farmers (Capt, 1997; Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997; Roberts and Hall, 2001). Agritourism represents the most popular form of such diversification because of the relative ease with which it can be combined with agricultural activities, its positive impact on the work-life balance of farmers, and its potential for generating income (Tew and Barbieri, 2012). As such, the study of agritourism achieves economic relevance as it impacts the survival of small-scale agriculture and rural communities in desperate need of economic

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3 regeneration (Veeck et al., 2006). This may be especially true for the struggling Greek  
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5 economy after defaulting on its debt in 2012 (Krugman, 2012), making the examination of an  
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7 increasing preference for authentic agritourism operations and products particularly timely. In  
8  
9 their call for a conciliatory definition of agritourism, Arroyo, Barbieri and Rich (2013) argue  
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11 it “should include staged and authentic agricultural activities or processes occurring in  
12  
13 working agricultural facilities either for entertainment or educational purposes” (p.45). The  
14  
15 emphasis on product customisation, independent forms of travel, special interest tourism, and  
16  
17 demand for eco-friendly alternatives as part of a return to more authentic natural and cultural  
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19 experiences (Urry, 1990; Poon, 1993; Long and Lane, 2000) have bestowed upon agritourism  
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21 the potential to address new tourist consumer needs (Hummelbrunner and Miglbauer, 1994).  
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28 One highly established condition for the long-term success of destinations is their ability to  
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30 convey experiential authenticity (MacCannell, 1973). There is a natural fit between  
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32 experiential authenticity and agritourism, as the latter allows tourists to “...experience the  
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34 farm setting and the context of rurality as a whole...[and] to create their own understanding  
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36 of the farming way of life” (Di Domenico and Miller, 2012; 292). Authenticity is itself  
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38 inherently problematic (see Belhassen and Caton, 2006) and has been subject to significant  
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40 debate, yielding diverse strands of critical understanding (see Wang, 1999). This frustration  
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42 essentially concerns the definition of the antecedent properties of being perceived as  
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44 authentic, or “true to oneself” (Trilling, 1974), as it is nearly impossible to ascertain the  
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46 essential characteristics of the destination itself. The edited work of Rickly and Vidon (2018)  
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48 charted the various trajectories of scholarly works on authenticity in a tourism context to  
49  
50 posit that “authenticity *does* matter” (p.1). However, scholarly consensus has congealed in  
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52 the conversation that the experience of seeking authenticity is, if not an exhaustive  
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54 explanation for consumption of tourism products (Urry, 1991), at the very least a reference  
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3 point for activity-based consumption (Wang, 1999). In view of the foregoing, we see  
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5 experiential authenticity as both a (performative) process informed by meaning (Knudsen et  
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7 al., 2014) and an outcome, as the activity-based agritourism experience can yield  
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9 authentication of the site, defined by Cohen and Cohen (2012: p.1296) as “the social process  
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11 by which the authenticity of an attraction is confirmed,” including the objects therein and the  
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13 encounter (de Andrade Matos and de Azevedo Barbosa, 2018).  
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19 Broadly understood as encompassing activities that are part of the experiential economy  
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21 (Schmitt, 1999) and rurality discourse (Bunce, 1994), agritourism can convey experiential  
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23 authenticity through recreation (Nickerson et al., 2001), as it offers visitors activities and  
24  
25 experiences typically linked to agricultural and farming production (Choo, 2012) and  
26  
27 agricultural landscapes (Vanslembrouck and Van Huylenbroeck, 2005). Related literature  
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29 reveals diverse views on achieving authenticity, including disagreements on objectives and  
30  
31 experiential, cognitive and affective modes of engaging with authenticity (Di Domenico and  
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33 Miller, 2012). However, the intersection of experiential authenticity with the broader cultural  
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35 framework of agritourism is understudied. Agritourism in Messinia provides the cultural  
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37 context to our investigation, at the intersection of cultural framework, international marketing  
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39 and experiential authenticity.  
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### 47 ***Product geography: Situated product mythologies as tourism products***

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51 We address the concept of “product geography” through the country-of-origin effect (COO)  
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53 (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). COO studies generally explicate the  
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55 effects of provenance associations in the context of marketing of brands (Andéhn and  
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57 L’Espoir Decosta, 2016), products (Bilkey and Nes, 1982) and services (Javalgi et al., 2001).  
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3 However, the link between COO and tourism as an area of scholarship is relatively  
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5 underexplored, given how they intersect in a highly palpable manner (Nadeau et al., 2008). In  
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7 fact, both deal intrinsically with the marketing of a place. It is only recently that scholars have  
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9 considered linking marketing *by* place to the marketing *of* place (see Zeugner-Roth and  
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11 Žabkar; 2015; Lee and Lockshin, 2012; Elliot et al., 2011). In their study of product-place  
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13 dyads to convey experiential authenticity in the form of enacted narratives, L'Espoir Decosta  
14  
15 and Andéhn (2018) use the illustrative cases of Napa Valley in California (USA) and the  
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17 triangulo de café in Cali (Columbia) to show how the symbolic consequence of a system of  
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19 provenance associations drawn from geographical entities results in “product geography.”  
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26 The concept of “product geography” as a system of places can be organised around any  
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28 commodity, including products (goods), services, or intangible consumables, such as music,  
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30 practices or brands. Its defining characteristic is one or more implacement properties that  
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32 exert an influence on the place in which it is symbolically situated (Casey, 1993) and where  
33  
34 commodity mythologies form both an anchoring and a reverberating system. Such is the case  
35  
36 for South Korea, whose success in manufacturing exports enhanced its visibility and  
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38 eventually contributed to its burgeoning success as a tourism destination (Ryu et al., 2016).  
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40 Similarly, the geography of tourism refers to the spatial consequences of practices and how  
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42 tourists, hosts and producers reshape the new localities of the destination. For example,  
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44 advertising by the Canadian government serves to generate national symbols and myths to  
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46 direct the conversation about citizenship (Rose, 2003) and to shape national and local identity  
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48 building (Robb, 1998) through myth-making via tourism, including heritage (Nilsson &  
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50 Blom, 2018; Palmer, 1999). As such, the “tourism state” (McKay, 1994) in Nova Scotia,  
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52 Canada, essentialises geographical identity through ideological narratives that turned the  
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54 industry into the moteur for myth-making (Hollinshead, 2009). In McKay’s study, the myths  
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3 are (political) messages transmitted and reinforced by the media (see Brody, 2012). Thus,  
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5 within discourse, the narration of place generates a plethora of marketable cultural events,  
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7 artifacts and readings of the place. In that sense, products, services or brands serve as tropes  
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9 of the narrative that in the aggregate constitute the mythomoteur of the place.  
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14 Agritourism provides the frame for such tourist spaces, and this study explores the  
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16 authentication process of these places, or lack thereof, through product origin narratives. This  
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18 presents a conundrum in the tourism context: a destination is invariably also a place, a  
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20 symbolic assemblage with a spatio-territorial correlate, albeit not always fully crystallised.  
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22 The subsequent implication for agritourism is that the cultural effects of commercial practices  
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24 within such a space transcend mere borders through a combined place and product image  
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26 association (Kalamata > olive > olive oil > Greece), thereby evoking the notion of a product  
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28 geography. The agritourism space thus becomes a destination in a marketised symbolic space  
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30 burdened with competing or complementary marketing actions from similar regions or  
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32 countries with related products; e.g., Tuscany in Italy, Rioja in Spain and Izmir in Turkey.  
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40 A crucial element of this study is a particular facet of how place and exports interact; i.e., the  
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42 pertinence of product categories perceived to be associated with particular places. COO  
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44 exerts its most palpable effect on consumer evaluation through this perception  
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46 (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2000; Josiassen et al., 2013; Andéhn and L'Espoir  
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48 Decosta, 2016) and arguably represents its clearest relevance for agritourism, just as a  
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50 specific product category can project characteristics onto a place. A place known to potential  
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52 visitors as the origin of wine is different from one known as the origin of electronics or  
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54 automobiles. The practice of explicitly attempting to leverage provenance associations  
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56 through themed resorts and events is common and constitutes an effective means for using  
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3 such associations to promote regional development (Jeannerat, 2013). A brand for the  
4 product-place pair (Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2001; 2003) can also increase a product's  
5 credibility through significant institutional and legislative backing (Tse, 1999).  
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12 The proliferation of legally “Protected Designations of Origin” (PDOs) has yielded  
13 “alternative geographies” (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997) of food, whereby various places  
14 have become part of a geography based on food product categories, their quality, and the  
15 legislative framework that governs their use or reference to them (Parrott et al., 2002). We  
16 know that a product can define or provide an identity to a place (Galani-Moutafi, 2004). In  
17 mainstream geography scholarship, the very definition of place is a phenomenological  
18 construct in which diffuse space has become place based on assigned meaning (Relph, 1976;  
19 Tuan, 1977), and this meaning could also be derived from an association with a product or  
20 product category. In the product-geography case under scrutiny, the *production*, as opposed  
21 to the consumption, of an agricultural product serves as the potential attraction to tourists and  
22 consumption. For instance, the consumption of coffee in various circumstances is heralded in  
23 consumer research (Karababa and Ger, 2011), as is the consumption of olive oil (Dekhili et  
24 al., 2011). The commercial relevance of *productionscapes* in the making of  
25 *consumptionscapes*, however, is scarcely explored except for significant literature on wine  
26 and wineries (Lee and Lockshin, 2012; Beverland, 2005). In fact, for products like coffee and  
27 olive oil it is possible that the product's mythology is integrated with consumers' (perceptual)  
28 placement of the product further down the value-chain. For instance, chocolate enjoys a  
29 premium connotation if it is perceived to originate from countries associated with the  
30 refinement and consumption of the product, such as Belgium or Switzerland, rather than the  
31 country in which the raw material, the cocoa-bean, is produced, like Venezuela (Deshpandé,  
32 2010). This illustrates the potential for complex interactions and unexpected outcomes that  
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3 can be traced back to the mythologies, practices and narratives that envelop the products.  
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5 Such is one objective of this study, applying as an empirical context Messinia in Greece.  
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### 10 *The empirical context: Messinia, Greece*

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14 Messinia, an agricultural region on the south-west coastline of Greece, is renowned for its  
15 olives and olive oil. The local agricultural industry is small-scale and suffers from a dearth of  
16 development in relevant infrastructure. The tourism industry in the country has a history of  
17 success but has seen a downturn in recent decades due to increasing competition (Briassoulis,  
18 1993) and a significant lack of coordination among governmental planning bodies (Galani-  
19 Moutafi, 2004). Agritourism, however, has growth potential based on the country's link to  
20 olive and olive-based products. The olive grove is an iconic agricultural setting, and olive oil  
21 is a product category that is demonstrably sensitive to origin effects (Dekhili and  
22 d'Hauteville, 2009). Kalamata, the capital city of Messinia, holds a PDO for the Kalamata  
23 variety of olives that is well-known and popular among consumers worldwide. Recently,  
24 Messinia became more accessible with a new highway to Athens and increased air traffic to  
25 the local airport, setting the stage for increased agritourism. Olives and olive oil represent a  
26 product category with characteristics that could project a particular image in the minds of  
27 potential tourists, but the question remains how local governance and stakeholders will react  
28 to these circumstances.  
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FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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## Methodology

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3 To examine the convergence of the commercial relevance of place between exporting  
4 agricultural products (PCI) and attracting visitors to an agritourism destination (TDI), this  
5 paper relies on a case study of places in Messinia, Greece that are, either by design or by  
6 circumstance, viewed as burgeoning product geography-based agritourism destinations.  
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14 We rely on qualitative case study and research methods in circumscribing the role of  
15 commercial geographies in agritourism. The rationale for this approach is the exploratory  
16 nature of the study, which probes the intricate and symbiotic relationships (Yin, 2014)  
17 between exports and agritourism development and their emphasis on deriving symbolic  
18 meanings and authentic experiences in the social imaginaries (see Appadurai, 1990) of the  
19 place. To that end, this study employs a multi-stage inductive approach (see Maxwell, 2005)  
20 with Messinia, Greece as the illustrative case of the place and olives and olive oil as its  
21 cardinal export product “brand.” The case approach is appropriate to develop knowledge  
22 about the inherent capacity and enhanced relevance of synergies between exports and  
23 agritourism development in Messinia, as understood by its stakeholders. The case approach  
24 allows linking conceptual ideas with the concrete specifics of the case being observed in  
25 detail (Yin, 2014). Online and archived secondary data were first collected for familiarity  
26 with the region’s business activities and to help determine (i) which places would be the most  
27 relevant to visit, and (ii) which category of business stakeholders presented the best potential  
28 for pertinent and insightful knowledge. Secondary data consisted of socio-economic  
29 information from trade, hospitality and tourism, farm industry publications and reports, and  
30 from tourism and product advertising and promotional materials (regional, national and  
31 international) collected online, in publication repositories and through direct contact with  
32 stakeholders in the region related to hotels, tourist destinations and commercial activities.  
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60 These data also served as part of the triangulation to validate the primary data for the study.

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5 Primary data were collected through a two-pronged field study consisting of (i) a period of  
6 immersive non-participant observation as one of the authors interacted with stakeholders in  
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8 situ as a researcher (Vanderstoep & Jonston, 2009), and (ii) a series of semi-structured in-  
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10 depth interviews with the aid of a Greek/English translator. This observation did not facilitate  
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12 connection and rapport due to the language barrier, but it served an alternative purpose in  
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14 providing “the advantage of some degree of objective separation and distance” (Vanderstoep  
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16 & Jonston, 2009; 238) through the researcher’s contemporaneous notes. Furthermore, the  
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18 relationships built with locals through the liaison agents and translator facilitated negotiation  
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20 on the degree of participation that yielded the most meaningful data (Patton, 2002). The  
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22 month-long participatory field study was conducted in May 2014 as the researcher traversed  
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24 the region, visited various sites, held short discussions (in addition to semi-structured  
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26 interviews) about business in the region, and attended meetings on the region’s socio-  
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28 economic development. During that time, semi-structured in-depth interviews were  
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30 conducted with fifteen stakeholders from agricultural products- and services-related  
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32 businesses, local organisations, and public sector and private citizens (Table 1).  
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43 TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE  
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48 A purposive selection of informants was guided by the recommendation of two liaison agents  
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50 who were part of a national and local network of people and organisations, identified through  
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52 a list of industry experts from the Greek trade office in the home country of one of the  
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54 researchers. They were familiar with the region and had in-depth knowledge and access to  
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56 local businesses and people. The first four respondents were recruited through these contacts  
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58 and the remainder through snowballing, with respondents assisting in identifying,  
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3 recommending and recruiting the others who were engaged in commercial and/or political  
4 activities in the region. Theoretical sampling was necessary, as ongoing data analysis allowed  
5 identification of additional interview subjects (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The interviewees  
6 were deemed appropriate and knowledgeable based on their socio-economic, professional  
7 and political status and their involvement in local and regional business-related decisions.  
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17 In-depth interviewing enables researchers to “gain insights into opinions, experiences,  
18 motives and ideas that are not readily obtained through mere observation” (Gao et al., 2012;  
19 p.203). To generate rich discussions and relevant data, open-ended questions were used to  
20 provide respondents the opportunity to express unanticipated points of view, followed by  
21 probing questions to elicit further insights.<sup>3</sup> With permission, all interviews were audio-  
22 recorded and notes taken. Daily casual conversations with people like taxi drivers,  
23 salespeople at markets, and café and bar patrons provided additional useful insights. Taken  
24 together, these procedures rendered rich material that addressed a variety of issues pertinent  
25 to exploring the dynamics of the region.  
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40 The observations provided not only a means to collect empirical data, but also a means by  
41 which observed problems, issues and questions raised by participants could be explored and  
42 explicated in subsequent interviews, and vice-versa. This cyclical methodological process of  
43 persistent observation through the researcher’s own negotiated position, together with the  
44 procedural dependability provided by interview recordings and field notes, reflect a form of  
45 between-method triangulation (Denzin, 1989) and serve to corroborate the trustworthiness of  
46 the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The validity of the inquiry is assured through verbatim  
47 interview quotes in the findings section to support the results derived from the data analysis.  
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3 The interviews also featured attempts to ascertain the emic validity of the data (see Denzin,  
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5 1989).  
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10 Data analysis followed an inductive approach, consistent with the research purpose of  
11  
12 developing a conceptual framework to explain a process at the intersection of product  
13  
14 geographies and tourism. The analytical approach is borrowed partly from the hybrid method  
15  
16 of analysis in Zhang et al. (2015), relying on a coding system from Grounded Theory as  
17  
18 proposed by Charmaz (2006), and an integrated constant comparative method (Glaser &  
19  
20 Strauss, 1967). This hybrid analytical scheme helps to distill key issues pertaining to the  
21  
22 intersecting roles of exports and tourism development in the economic and cultural ecology  
23  
24 of the region. This approach was necessary to confirm that both the interview data and  
25  
26 observations collected would effectively inform and complement each other at the point of  
27  
28 analysis. The collected material was transcribed in situ to enable the remote researcher to  
29  
30 engage in ongoing analysis that facilitated theoretical sampling. The authors independently  
31  
32 performed an initial open-coding that relied on a phrase-by-phrase analysis to highlight the  
33  
34 respondents' perceptions about the processes involved in emerging agritourism development,  
35  
36 its linkage to product geographies and the broader question of regional development. This  
37  
38 revealed the theoretical sensitivity of each author in their identification of both similar and  
39  
40 different substantive codes (in-vivo and constructs) based on their individual appraisals and  
41  
42 identification of key data points, the meaning ascribed to them, and the constant comparisons  
43  
44 of theoretical arguments (Glaser, 1978). The subsequent rounds of interviewing and coding  
45  
46 permitted connecting higher level codes through theoretical coding to reveal possible  
47  
48 relationships among the original sets of codes. Table 2 shows an example of the coding  
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50 process, from selected basic open codes to the focused codes supporting the first analytical  
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52 theme, "the making of sustainable tourism." Ultimately, this iterative process and constant  
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3 comparative analyses allowed for the emergence of five analytical themes pertaining to the  
4  
5 unfolding of the commercial life of agritourism in the product geography:  
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8 (i) The making of sustainable tourism;  
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10 (ii) Safeguarding placehood through experiential authenticity;  
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12 (iii) Implacing mythology in commercial mythologies;  
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14 (iv) Staking a claim in the product geography; and  
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16 (v) Building the destination consumptionscape.  
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FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

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## Findings and Discussion

### ***The making of sustainable agritourism: a grassroots response to an economic conundrum***

Messinia did not escape unscathed from Greece's economic difficulties. The Eurozone crisis damaged relationships between the EU and Greece at both the popular and political levels (Clements et al., 2014). At the time of the research, memories of the Greek financial crisis, referred to as "*a thing of the past*" (R1, Agritourism hotel manager, and R2, Farmer), still echoed as a relevant issue that had changed the region's economic prospects. To some respondents, the Eurozone crisis presented a socio-political conundrum that ultimately ushered in a new era for agribusiness and required critical examination of existing attributes of the region: "*This [crisis] shook the agricultural world, at least some sectors of it*" (R16,

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3 Foundation director). Such questioning allowed the conscious emergence of an underlying  
4 grassroots entrepreneurial spirit and an assessment of the efforts required to propose new  
5 spins and narratives on business linkages to capture benefits from other sectors, previously  
6 considered separate and unconnected. To R16, *“Now we can see that people are becoming  
7 more aware of the work needed, more and more [like] entrepreneurs rather than farmers. We  
8 can see this happening in other industries in the area.”*

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19 Several respondents evoked this Greek entrepreneurial awakening in various ways, including  
20 embracing sustainable development of Greece’s agriculture with the essential features of  
21 typicality and identity: agri-“cultural” heritage and modern reconstruction. To R16, *“Costa  
22 Navarino managed to promote good practices through examples of what sustainable  
23 development means, how to provide environmental protection with development, and give  
24 work to the local people...”* Besides *“creating a market for the local farm producers,”* these  
25 good practices precipitated certification, as *“farmers did not follow any certification system  
26 and now they had to – so to sell to Costa Navarino”* (R16). Though an *a priori* inventory  
27 framework with ongoing processes was already in place in the region’s agricultural sector,  
28 the revitalised traditional agricultural sector provided residents more than just economic  
29 benefits, as they express pride in the renaissance and *“...showcasing of local traditions and  
30 culture of production to visitors”* (R16). Consumers provided a further developmental  
31 impetus, as *“customers we have are very educated about excellent olive oil, proper  
32 production methods and the recent excellent olive oil has been associated with the production  
33 of good wines; there is a similarity”* (R3, Olive oil trader). These agriculture-based qualities  
34 become resources to protect in creating a unique sense of place, character and image of the  
35 region as a place- and experience-based agritourism. Petr (2002) considered the physical  
36 attributes of a place (a landscape of olive trees rolling down hills and valleys to the sea) as  
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3 part of the place's symbolic identity, where consumption by visitors occurs (Eroglu and  
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6 Machleit, 1993). Olive and olive oil production become cultural "icons" positioned within the  
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8 region's tourism promotion campaign. As R16 explained: "*Because of their potential value*  
9  
10 *as tourism products, Messinia's protected areas became less of a burden and more as an*  
11 *asset.*" The physical attributes are thus important, not only to the objective authenticity  
12  
13 conveyed by the place (Wang, 1999) but also to the genuine experience of consumption they  
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15 help visitors to construct.  
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22 The transformation of the place may be explained by the move from a bottom-up local  
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24 initiative of private agency to regional development under a coherent plan. In Messinia, the  
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26 search for identity and diversity in response to economic globalisation and its consequences  
27  
28 triggered expansion of agricultural economic activities, the production of tourism goods and  
29  
30 services, thence agritourism. Presently, through its traditions of olive production and with  
31  
32 agritourism as a catalyst, the region has acquired a place image with implications for its  
33  
34 tourism destination image (TDI) and for the country's PCI (Elliot et al., 2011). Thus, to the  
35  
36 visitor, an image symbolic and representative of the destination is deemed to be of  
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38 constructivist authenticity (Wang, 1999) as it is conceived as existing in their mind. In  
39  
40 Messinia, the major reason for PCI's contribution to the tourism-based country image lies in  
41  
42 the evocation (in the visitor's mind) and integration of traditional agricultural production as a  
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44 symbolic characteristic and particularity in the commercial relevance of the region (as exuded  
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46 by the place).  
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53 Indeed, promotional tourism materials demonstrate how specific products are referenced as  
54  
55 part of Messinia's appeal: "*Their dishes are delicious, cooked with natural products like the*  
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57 *Messinian olive oil and their renowned Kalamon table olives.*" Visit Greece<sup>4</sup> exemplifies this  
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3 reference to a particular product acting as a synecdoche for the entire regional cuisine. This  
4  
5 combined approach can be effective only if it genuinely represents a grassroots response to  
6  
7 crises (Holt, 2004) by implacing the agricultural tradition and product category “olive” in the  
8  
9 symbolic construction of the commercial relevance of Messinia as a tourism destination.  
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11 Respondents emphasised that “*visitors should experience the combination of traditional*  
12  
13 *culture of our olives and olive oil in a landscape that goes all down to our beautiful seas*”  
14  
15 (R3). In Casey’s (1993) application of implacement, a mutual effect is exerted through  
16  
17 association between “implaced” agritourism as cultural icon and Messinia as destination. The  
18  
19 region’s grassroots recognise the need for regional development that avoids the concurrent  
20  
21 negative effects of over-exploitation and under-development. Agritourism is seen as  
22  
23 economically viable, with the potential of sustainably preserving the region's socio-cultural  
24  
25 ecosystem and heritage. The impetus provided by the grassroots thus becomes a contributing  
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27 element to “hot” authentication (Cohen and Cohen, 2012) of the place within the framework  
28  
29 of “true” experiences that olive groves and farms can provide to tourists (Petr, 2002).  
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### ***Safeguarding the place through experiential authenticity***

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42 One illustration of how agriculture sustained its commercial ecology in Messinia is the  
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44 establishment of the Costa Navarino hotel near the village of Pylos, which, according to  
45  
46 several respondents, represented a component of sustainable regional development. While  
47  
48 constituting a premium tourism facility, the hotel also promotes local agricultural business  
49  
50 and culture as core attractions in its augmented offerings. In fact, one function of evolving  
51  
52 resort tourism in Messinia’s coastal regions is serving as a base for exploration of the rural  
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54 hinterland and its communities (Williams and Lew, 2015). The challenge is integrating the  
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56 appropriate form of tourism into the existing agricultural economy so it becomes a tourism  
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3 destination providing an authentic experience. The region employed a holistic approach to  
4 destination planning and development and enjoyed other improvements, including flights to  
5 Kalamata and a highway from Kalamata to Athens, pivotal to a customer-oriented place-  
6 based approach that ensures an authentic farm experience. Several farmers with tourism  
7 experience believe there is a desirable and prospective form of tourism development that  
8 relies on sustainability and quality as “[quality] *authentic tourism has much more to offer*  
9 *than [other forms] of tourism*” (R3). This sentiment rejoins Trilling’s (1974) explanation for  
10 the increasing appeal of authenticity in contemporary society because it reflects what modern  
11 life lacks. Several respondents for whom “...*quality and authentic tourism are a necessary*  
12 *next step in healing Messinia's economy*” (R1, R4, Restaurateur & R5, Olive oil producer)  
13 expressed similar sentiments.  
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30 While insisting on authentic tourism, most respondents also feared tourism would lead to  
31 overexploitation like in Lagana, where “*the local environment has been completely*  
32 *destroyed, and the village does not exist anymore – Lagana is dead, a ghost town!*” (R1). To  
33 avoid repeating Lagana’s destruction of the environment and heritage, Messinia’s  
34 development plan is intentional and requires awareness of the consequences of change: “*We*  
35 *don’t want negative consequences in Messinia...or anywhere in Greece really*” (R1).  
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47 The solution may be a mix of development types whereby Messina can combine agritourism  
48 with “*a few all-inclusive hotels, larger family-run hotels, and self-catering accommodation*”  
49 (R1). This suggests the potential of sustainable tourism for Messinia: a hybrid development  
50 geared towards authentic experiences relying on a combination of the physical landscape of  
51 the place, the image it projects and the atmosphere it creates in the minds of tourists.  
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58 According to Pike (2008), the image of the place as perceived by tourists and its identity as  
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Messinia as perceived by locals form a positioning interface. R1 reveals why “quality tourism” lacking authenticity is unsustainable: “*it does not provide a true experience or feeling of being in the company of Greeks [the others] and Greece [the place] and enjoying great natural produce of its soil [products].*” The “Messinia tourism experience” can therefore be positioned as a “double” place-product authenticity in that it enjoys a credible association at:

- (i) a micro level, with the specific product category of olives, as agritourism businesses contribute to its TDI by means of the right narratives through branding or image association with the product to influence consumers’ intention to visit (Beerli & Martin, 2004) and satisfaction with the experience of the place; and
- (ii) a macro level, phenomenologically through the country-product associations of Greece to tourism and agriculture, whereby olives and olive groves, as part of the country’s identity, are a necessary condition for and intertwined with quality tourism experiences.

Although these associations signify a “cool” authentication process, a desirable situation of compromise where destinations host accommodations on different scales to safeguard the original nature of the place evokes “hot” authentication. Authenticity constitutes the epistemological linkage among agritourism practices, the region, its products and its identity. This suggests, as did Cohen and Cohen (2012), that both authentication types are interlinked rather than dichotomous. Messinia represents a finite geographical space within Greece, with inherent affective values through which “[you] *feel you are in Greece and identify and keep the Greekness of the area*” (R1). The feeling of belonging, national identity and an “atmosphere” of Greekness are strongly subjective (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and part of hot authentication. The totality of these spatial consequences of practice (agritourism,

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2  
3 authentication, authentic accommodation and authentic experience) forms the product  
4  
5 geography of Messinia's tourism (Andéhn & L'Espoir Decosta, 2018). Ultimately, the  
6  
7 region's TDI should enjoy a reinforced association with the product category of Kalamata  
8  
9 olives to then engage with the greater geography of olives and olive-oil production. It is clear  
10  
11 from R1's and R3's responses that a balance between economic growth and sustainability  
12  
13 requires appropriate narratives based on the region's authentic identity and values, and by  
14  
15 association, with the product and (associated) image, including the country's renowned  
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17 physical landscapes.  
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24 The foundation managed by R11 (Foundation executive) performs activities relevant to  
25  
26 agritourism development in the Mediterranean region: it oversees cultivating the area's  
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28 UNESCO world heritage for the Mediterranean diet. R11 envisions Messinia's future visitors  
29  
30 as it moves to a more mature state as "*cultural tourists*," visitors interested in Greece and  
31  
32 Messinia for its weather, olive grove landscape and coastline, but specifically its cultural  
33  
34 offerings, including the regional gastronomy. However, adjustments are needed:  
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37 "*Stakeholders will need to display greater engagement with the region beyond 'sun and sand'*  
38  
39 *tourism.*" The movement is from the intangible characteristics of culture and heritage to  
40  
41 physical aspects of objective authenticity (Petr, 2002), and such cultural tourism has the  
42  
43 potential of extending the season and boosting local culture (Richards, 1996). Attempts to  
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45 market heritage sites often fail to attract visitors and attain commercial viability, as was the  
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47 case in uKhahlamba/Drakensberg rock art (see Duval and Smith, 2012), because heritage  
48  
49 destinations require "accumulated symbolic and aesthetic value" (Richards, 1996; 262) or  
50  
51 credible engagement with the pre-existing authentic cultural fabric of the place being taken  
52  
53 seriously by visitors (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Messinia has several potential heritage  
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55 attractions, including the temple of Apollo Epicurius and Methoni castle. Place authentication  
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3 is achieved by building trust between hosts and visitors and through product-origin narratives  
4 and consumption (olive and olive oil) that herald the constitutive role of product geography  
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6 and consumption (olive and olive oil) that herald the constitutive role of product geography  
7  
8 as mythomoteur, which establishes a narrative to provide the destination a claim to  
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10 authenticity. In Messinia, this occurs through implacement of its embodied, and situated,  
11  
12 mythology from intangible olive-related agricultural production imagery and practices. Olive  
13  
14 groves with a small-scale organic oil pressing operation and an attached restaurant using  
15  
16 olives and olive oil from nearby groves in its recipes and Eliopit (olive bread) are part of such  
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18 a “postcard image.”  
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### 24 ***Implacing cultural and commercial mythologies***

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28 To become symbolically sustainable, a destination’s tourism sector must turn its intangible  
29  
30 resources into authentic experiences as a key selling point. Respondents emphasised the  
31  
32 importance of leveraging the region's cultural heritage, mostly around its food and lifestyle,  
33  
34 commercial activities and inherent challenges. To R11, November 1, “*the symbolic*  
35  
36 *inscription of the Mediterranean diet in UNESCO’s List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*  
37  
38 *of Humanity,*” presents opportunities for “*Greece and Messinia in particular to organise, in*  
39  
40 *cooperation with our embassies of the seven countries, an event promoting agricultural*  
41  
42 *products, culture and everything...that constitute the Mediterranean diet.*” This highlights a  
43  
44 noteworthy process. The Mediterranean diet is a regional reality, part of a populist fabric, and  
45  
46 by extension a “cultural brand” (Holt, 2004). In R11’s words, we see how this brand has been  
47  
48 cemented through institutionalisation via UNESCO,<sup>5</sup> which formalises the diet’s narratives  
49  
50 while directly designating associated places; in effect, “implacing” (see Casey, 1993) the  
51  
52 Mediterranean diet brand. By highlighting the international recognition of the Mediterranean  
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54 diet’s cultural brand “implaced” in Greece, while simultaneously developing its destination  
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3 infrastructure, Messinia could effectively unleash the potential for olive oil and other  
4  
5 agricultural products to be perceived in terms of its *terroir*; the quintessential expression of a  
6  
7 region's relationship with its commodities, including the special nature of its products due to  
8  
9 unique physical and cultural conditions (Nilsson and Blom, 2018; Barham, 2003). Thus, by  
10  
11 evoking its product geography, olive oil will exert a powerful influence on Messinia (the  
12  
13 place), in which it is symbolically situated.  
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19 Respondents reported difficulty in turning what they perceived as a valuable regional  
20  
21 cultural, symbolic or implicit resource into practical commercial relevance for visitors to  
22  
23 experience in a direct and tangible manner. The problem dates back to the country's  
24  
25 European Union membership, which means that although "*Greece has excellent extra virgin*  
26  
27 *olive oil with a rich history...[we] don't have a national strategy for exporting agricultural*  
28  
29 *products. ...With UNESCO we are trying to make producers understand that if they produce*  
30  
31 *good products, they must export them outside of the EU*" (R11). The Eurozone crisis  
32  
33 highlighted Greece's EU conundrum of initially focusing on Europe's lack of action and not  
34  
35 enough on what Greece could do for itself (Surowiecki, 2015). To R11, the crisis had positive  
36  
37 ramifications, as "*many people came back home...well-trained to become new producers of*  
38  
39 *agricultural produce*" and triggered government assistance for training and research "*in new*  
40  
41 *cultivation methods of produce without using harmful...chemicals.*" The stage for  
42  
43 rejuvenation of the region on a foundation of sustainable development is set, with the tangible  
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45 environmental aspects (such as the pristine coastline, groves and traditional farms) and  
46  
47 atmosphere (entrepreneurial initiatives - producers - and tourists - consumers of experiences)  
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54 for objective and constructive authenticity (Wang, 1999).  
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3 R11 laments the lack of national strategy to connect with potential consumer export markets  
4 for Messinia's specialties, particularly at the "*level of branding, leading to much of the olive*  
5 *oil Messinia produced to be sold in bulk and bottled in Italy.*" This illustrates how a  
6 subordinate role in the symbolic economy of the olive oil product geography (Messinia being  
7 subsumed to Greece and Greece being overtaken by Italy) leads to dire consequences in  
8 everyday agricultural operations. Therefore, branding of their product will always be part of a  
9 greater sign system evoking different meanings (Andéhn & Zenker, 2015). Apart from its  
10 impressive number of olive groves and traditional olive pressing facilities, Messinia also  
11 hosts one of the most recognisable EU-sponsored PDOs for olive oil, the "Kalamata olive"  
12 brand. To those in agriculture, however, much remains to be done in the olive and olive oil  
13 industry, as "*now the level and competition are so high and strictly regulated that it is not*  
14 *possible anymore to just have olive oil and sell it. You can't!*" (R5). One issue is the gap  
15 between the quality of olive oil produced for export and that for local consumption. To  
16 premium olive oil producer and reseller R3, the care taken in production, packaging and  
17 storage is more than production for local consumption, as "[*a*] *lot of farmers produce only for*  
18 *themselves; it is a big difference in quality control when you sell abroad... you have to take*  
19 *care of more things.*" Inferior quality control in batches for local consumption has  
20 implications for on-site experience of the product, which, based on evidence provided by R3,  
21 would be consumption of sub-par olive oil likely to generate negative word-of-mouth from  
22 visitors to the region, "*because you can't believe how well-educated customers and visitors*  
23 *are*" (R5). To R5, increasing awareness of regulations and quality control for olive oil as a  
24 product category and as a market have sensitised the region to issues of Internet reputation  
25 and word-of-mouth. One negative experience of an influential consumer or quality watchdog  
26 can damage the entire region.  
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3 Some respondents highlighted the distinction between reputational factors and issues  
4  
5 pertaining to the “objective” quality of olive-based products, including geology, the amount  
6  
7 of sunlight, rain and soil properties: “*It is like a good wine, you need to know the type of*  
8  
9 *grapes, where they grew, in which type of casks the wine matured and for how long... it is*  
10  
11 *difficult to sell wine if the consumer does not have an idea of quality*” (R3). The wine  
12  
13 analogy essentialises geographical identity through selected ideological product narratives  
14  
15 (e.g., labelling on bottles) that turn the industry, in all its renditions and linkages, into the  
16  
17 *moteur* for myth-making (Hollinshead, 2009) and contagion (Newman and Dhar, 2014).  
18  
19 Overall, respondents confirmed the literature; specifically, that product evaluations are  
20  
21 influenced by the image of the region with which they are associated (van Ittersum et al.,  
22  
23 2003), exemplified by wine and wine regions (Lockshin et al., 2006). Respondents  
24  
25 underscored two central determinants of quality in both the “raw material” (Caporale et al.,  
26  
27 2006), and “human conditions;” i.e., the traditions and competencies surrounding production  
28  
29 of olives and olive oil in a procedural sense (Dekhili and d’Hauteville, 2009). Sustainable  
30  
31 tourism, within its agricultural trope (farm tourism, food tourism, slow tourism), becomes a  
32  
33 commercial narration of the place such that the plethora of commercial and marketable  
34  
35 cultural events, artifacts, brands, services and products it generates constitute the  
36  
37 mythomoteur of the place, Messinia. Consequently, the symbolism, traditions and culture of a  
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39 place are intangible bases of authenticity. These assets must embody the symbolical  
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41 resilience of the place for it to survive.  
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### ***Situating agritourism in product geography***

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3 Data on the development of Messinia’s agritourism reveals the importance of interrelations  
4 between places in Greece and other Mediterranean countries as a nexus of meaning  
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6 constituted in product geography. In fact, the sequential aggregate of the three previous  
7  
8 themes leads to product geography. As R5 hinted, Messinia is part of “*a greater olive and*  
9  
10 *olive oil production region and market that span the entire Mediterranean.*” For R5, the  
11  
12 circumstances surrounding olive oil production as far away as Spain create a strategy “*based*  
13  
14 *on price competition alone unviable.*” The Eurozone crisis forced consideration of a holistic  
15  
16 approach encompassing the cultivation and promotion of product quality and experiences  
17  
18 associated with each category of an integrated place-based “agri-” and “cultural-” tourism.  
19  
20 Respondents, however, felt there are ways places act as reference points within the system of  
21  
22 places. One common example is Tuscany. To R1, Messinia has a “*leader to follow in*  
23  
24 *Tuscany, which is well known around the world as a high-end destination...developed in a*  
25  
26 *beautiful agricultural area steeped in history...that has not made any concessions to [mass]*  
27  
28 *tourism.*” In other words, Tuscany has successfully embedded its localised identity, the  
29  
30 heritage of its signature products (grapes, olives and wheat - wine, oil and pasta) projecting  
31  
32 the local identity and ecology in its destination image and narratives, despite mass tourism:  
33  
34 Tuscany conforms to its social category (see Davies, 2001). The region’s proper  
35  
36 classification, idealised representation (Grazian, 2004) and conventions reflect its “type  
37  
38 authenticity” (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; p.257), defined by audiences of producers and  
39  
40 consumers. Historical and cultural texts connect products to places that enable tourists to  
41  
42 reenact product mythologies in situ and attribute authenticity to the place. To R1, Messinia  
43  
44 possesses all those characteristics, with “*the added advantage of Mediterranean climate and*  
45  
46 *nearby beaches,*” which should place the region “*in what it has to offer, ahead of Tuscany.*”  
47  
48 This sentiment is echoed in promotions of associations linked to compound images, such as  
49  
50 Tuscany’s rolling countryside or peppery extra-virgin olive oil.<sup>6</sup> Of relevance is the  
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3 opportunity, beyond unified constructs at the core of COO research, to view the meaning of  
4 place as contingent on the context in which it is evoked. To realise its own potential as a  
5 tourist destination, Messinia may face challenges in exploiting its regional ecology; i.e.,  
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7  
8 “olives, good food, olive groves, olive oil, farms, small beautiful mountain villages, quality  
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11  
12 *places and accommodations, sunny beaches, old buildings and churches*” (R4) to provide  
13  
14 different and authentic experiences to tourists. R4 references the area of Mani to exemplify  
15  
16 the potential to become something akin to Tuscany. The missing ingredient has been category  
17  
18 membership as determined by [consumer] audiences (McKendrick & Hannan, 2013).  
19  
20  
21 Tuscany possesses a positive connotation of place and is one of several reference points in a  
22  
23 broader geography that respondents use to understand Messinia and other regions and places.  
24  
25  
26 Messinia and Tuscany are thus comparable nodes in a commercial geography of olive oil and  
27  
28 tourism. When asked, “*In your mind, with which country do consumers primarily associate*  
29  
30 *premium olive oil?*” R3 replied that “*it is unfortunately not Greece, it is mostly Italy, then*  
31  
32 *Spain and Greece together*” and explained Italy’s association (and connection) with quality  
33  
34 olive oil based on market proximity and road connections to Italy after WWII, “*when many*  
35  
36 *Germans took their car...to travel in five hours to Italy.*” The associations effectively linked  
37  
38 to the compound image (PCI) of Italy-olive oil was anchored in, and facilitated by, travel and  
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By definition, “product geography” helps capture the alternative geographical understanding stemming from implacing product categories (L’Espoir Decosta & Andéhn, 2018). R3 projects his customers’ understanding of the “place system” of olive oil and provides a

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3 tentative place hierarchy in that product geography. Various audiences perceive the  
4  
5 interrelationships among places as referential sense-making devices (Andéhn & Zenker,  
6  
7 2015), but their overall comparison does not facilitate a hierarchy without some additional  
8  
9 evaluation regime, such as olive oil quality in situ. Both R1 and R4 engaged in the same  
10  
11 referential sense making of Messinia through parallels with Tuscany. However, the  
12  
13 evaluation regime in their references relates to the success and sustainability of the tourism  
14  
15 sector in the two regions. This system of place provides fresh evidence that characterises the  
16  
17 link between spatiality and place, particularly in commercial use. The compound-based  
18  
19 means of understanding place-commodity interrelations in Messinia could just as easily  
20  
21 evoke COOs as a basis for agri-tourism development. This addresses the call by Ryu et al.  
22  
23 (2016) for further research on how discrepancies in consumers' perceptions of different  
24  
25 products from the same country "pertain[s] to the development of a country's image" (p.305)  
26  
27 by demonstrating that a single place does not only draw meaning directly from an associated  
28  
29 product, but that the product can also contribute to ordering the place in a product-based  
30  
31 system of interrelations; i.e. a product geography from which it draws meaning by reference  
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33 to other places.  
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### 42 ***Building the destination consumptionscape***

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47 In Messinia, production mythology is promoted as a critical cultural constituent of  
48  
49 consumption through the agritourism it enables (Rabbiosi, 2016). This practice of (tourists)  
50  
51 consuming the production site as a (tourism) destination can be understood as the  
52  
53 transformation of a productionscape (a site for agricultural production) into a  
54  
55 *consumptionscape* (a site for *experiencing* agricultural production). The concept of  
56  
57 consumptionscape evokes an understanding of the site as housing a tourism product or as a  
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3 servicescape (Bitner, 1992), in that the place must be transformed into one in which  
4  
5 consumption practices can be performed [and services provided] but is also itself  
6  
7 “consumable” as an authentic place to visit. For example, an olive grove, principally a site for  
8  
9 olive production, can be extended into a consumptionscape by allowing tourists to engage in  
10  
11 olive picking, thus experiencing what is essentially agricultural labour re-packaged as a  
12  
13 tourism product. For this to happen, “[p]eople [who] run tourist accommodations as a second  
14  
15 income need training and help to improve their service level...without sacrificing authentic  
16  
17 Greek hospitality” (R1).  
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24 Servicescape, however, entails spatial configuration of the site and does not account for the  
25  
26 symbolic and cultural integrity at the core of its appeal to purposeful cultural tourists  
27  
28 (McKercher & Du Cros, 2003). Thus, a focus on managing the destination as a servicescape  
29  
30 to generate revenue runs the risk of depleting authenticity derived from its cultural appeal and  
31  
32 replacing it with a commodified experience easily understood and consumed by visitors.  
33  
34 Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005) provide a typology revealing the duality of the symbolic and  
35  
36 material existence of consumable places. They view purposeful manipulation of spatial  
37  
38 configurations and properties as “place marketing” and the cultivation of symbolic content  
39  
40 and meaning as “place branding.” R5 articulates this distinction when discussing agritourism  
41  
42 strategies for the region: “Of course Kalamata has to focus on its brand name to make it  
43  
44 famous and Messinia has to focus on its brand name to become famous and known for  
45  
46 quality.” In the tourism context, however, this typology reveals a conflict. A destination with  
47  
48 little to offer beyond streamlined service delivery becomes the quintessential example of an  
49  
50 overexploited mass tourism destination stripped of its unique meanings (Wall-Reinius et al.,  
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56 2017).  
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3 In Messinia, agritourism operators and farmers like R1 understand the potential attraction of  
4 cultural heritage artefacts and local produce as compared with sun and sea visitors to the  
5 region: *“The sun and sea families that come in summer want to go to Nestor-Pylos, one of our*  
6 *ancient sites. [But] now they will even go with their children to Koroni and Methoni castles.*  
7 *They’re very interested in culture and they want to eat the local produce and olives in local*  
8 *tavernas with local people. They want to be with Greek people!”* (R1). The perception of  
9 place authenticity is expressed through an experience of the region as the “real” life of the  
10 place for visitors to see and share (MacCannell, 1973). Linkages among the various  
11 categories of cultural heritage assets,<sup>7</sup> such as the natural environment’s influence on the  
12 crops and animals that are basic signature ingredients of local cuisine, serve as catalysts to  
13 experiences central to the region’s tourism products (Smith, 1994). The end result is a  
14 geographical understanding of the place as space with assigned meaning through experience  
15 (see Tuan, 1977).

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35 For Messinia to become accessible to broader international audiences, efforts must be made  
36 to safeguard the mythology of olive oil as embodied in the region’s traditions, rituals,  
37 practices and meanings surrounding the product. R14 (Public sector funding official) believes  
38 that *“olive oil should have a set of standards”* to benefit consumers and visitors; they *“should*  
39 *know what [they] buy, and we should know what we sell”* with the support of *“policy [that]*  
40 *must come from the government.”* However, this collaboration is not easy to achieve because  
41 *“here in Greece it is difficult to do things like they have historically done for wine in regions*  
42 *of France and Italy, where a certifying body forms when a few farmers come together”* (R14).  
43 The collaboration required for transformed consumption practices has been missing because  
44 *“the government has never supported businesses so they can be combined and achieve higher*  
45 *levels to provide authentic produce and experience”* (R14). The sentiment expressed by R14  
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3 parallels a general trend in reports and other sources examined. One report notes, “The  
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5 National Statistics Service of Greece (NSSG) does not have data on the number of farmers  
6  
7 who have a tourism activity” (Auterbach, 2012; 15).  
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12 Similarly, preserving the mythology of the place while fostering economic opportunities to  
13  
14 make agritourism viable requires a balancing act. The symbolic capital of the region, linked  
15  
16 to its agriculture, history and culture and their overlaps, must be preserved to convey an  
17  
18 experiential authenticity while still catering to visitors. R4 encourages visitors to go to the  
19  
20 next village, as “[it] *enriches the whole experience...as the place [I] know is a nice traditional*  
21  
22 *village that has not changed, and I say, ‘try the smoked ham in that taverna,’ it should be*  
23  
24 *high quality.*” Operators must therefore engage with the category and its boundaries to create  
25  
26 within the commercial relevance of the place a consumptionscape perspective whereby the  
27  
28 mythology of the product’s place association is anchored in its consumption (Karababa and  
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30 Ger, 2011).  
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38 To R16, Messinia, as the prime Greek olive and olive oil production region, needs a more  
39  
40 holistic approach to create an [agri-]tourism destination image drawn directly from its  
41  
42 product category. One such initiative is “*a virtual Messinian diet museum to gather all data,*  
43  
44 *information about the Messinian diet and its nutritional value, its products etc.*” (R16). The  
45  
46 repository of knowledge and practices within a service-consumptionscape as part of the  
47  
48 place’s cultural identity and heritage needs an educational conduit to “*teach the new*  
49  
50 *generation of the value of olive oil tasting so this knowledge flows in the production line to*  
51  
52 *upgrade the quality of olive oil*” (R16). This is consistent with Knudsen, Rickly, and Greer’s  
53  
54 (2014) application of Barthes’ (1972) theory of mythologies and its idea of “bourgeois”  
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56 society’s self-perpetuation, implying that the perceived constituents of a country are reliant  
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3 on the product-country myth association and the narratives necessary to construct an  
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5 “authentic” place image for tourist consumption.  
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10 Authenticity relies on authoritative information (Richards, 1996), exemplified in Messinia’s  
11 development as an agritourism destination through word-of-mouth. To be perceived as  
12 authentic, Messinia should convey both its narratives and sense of being a piece of the “real”  
13 life of the place for visitors to see and share (MacCannell, 1973). Our data show that this  
14 approach constitutes “*the primary means of marketing products and services, whether they*  
15 *are agritourism resorts, olive oil or other agricultural produce*” (R16). Returning visitors and  
16 their acquaintances can be reached through word-of-mouth marketing. They are generally  
17 educated and have prior experience with Greek culture but feel a sense of learning through  
18 the service consumption experience (Gupta and Vajic, 2000). Various actors in Messinia  
19 strive to meet this tourist desire and offer products catering to it: “*we want to bring the*  
20 *experience firsthand. ...We’re doing a Messinian cooking class...in a local household, with*  
21 *our guests and we cook together with [a] local woman, traditional Messinian recipes.*  
22 *...Either we take the guests out or bring the local people in, like an interactive thing. ...We*  
23 *have a local association coming in and we make traditional Messinian bread, or Kalamata*  
24 *olives. ...This is, more or less, how the hotel interacts [with the surrounding environment].”*  
25 (R18, Hotel customer relationship manager).  
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49 The imagery of olive groves and their associated gastronomy are a rich source of historical  
50 and symbolic inferences towards the consumption and image of the place. The  
51 productionscape renders a consumptionscape without disturbing the mythology of the  
52 production itself. In this study, that occurred as an extension of a region (Messinia, Greece),  
53 where agritourism development exploits its product image (quality Kalamata olive oil) to  
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3 create a greater destination product (agritourism) through its symbolic conveyance and  
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5 relevance (TDI), made sustainable through the development of a system of “tourism  
6  
7 products” to convey experiential authenticity.  
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12 At this point of potential multiple evocations (e.g., Messinia as a site of olive and olive oil  
13  
14 production and as a cultural tourism destination), we encounter a place’s polysemic capacity  
15  
16 (Malpas, 2018) to house or render emplacement (Casey, 1993) of multiple associated  
17  
18 mythologies that influence its commercial potential (Andéhn and L’Espoir Decosta, 2018).  
19  
20 These circumstances require theoretical coherence and coordination of mythological  
21  
22 symbolism and histories to support the conveyance of experiential authenticity, often  
23  
24 threatened by managerial intervention through a *design of place* divorced from its cultural  
25  
26 essence (Hornskov, 2010), thereby posing a significant risk of robbing the place of its ability  
27  
28 to convey authentic experiences. Ergo, the present study adopts an approach focusing on the  
29  
30 integration of TDIs with a diverse set of commercial objectives, narratives and mythologies  
31  
32 linked to the destination.  
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## Conclusions

To explore how tourism operation stakeholders in the commercial ecology of Messinia, Greece, can leverage alternative forms of export promotion of the product category of olives and olive oil, this study reveals the bridging capacity of experiential authenticity to integrate TDIs with mythologies and narratives derived from the symbolic geography of agri-product exports linked to the destination (see Ryu et al., 2016). Indeed, a product and its exports can help promote a destination. In fact, the commodity itself effectively becomes an artifact of promotion for the destination, not just as a means of attracting attention but also as a constituent element of place meaning to serve as a central destination brand element. This study provides the empirical material to illustrate how various stakeholders understand the risks and promises of tourism development in the agricultural region of Messinia. By making the qualities of the place that are most vulnerable to exploitation the very means to development, the region's commercial potential can be sustainably expanded, echoing previous works on agritourism by Koutsouris et al., (2014) and Tew and Barberi (2012), and on place by Rickly-Boyd (2013). However, we extend these works by revealing that the convergence between capital and culture and their commercial relevance present potential for the place to convey experiential authenticity. This relationship we uncover is a novel element that highlights how culture can be preserved and safeguarded (heritage) by the very process that threatens it (business). For this process of convergence to occur, however, a coherent narrative of the place's story must be constructed, one that underscores the value of authenticity and institutionalises safeguards against threats. The study shows that this endeavour in turn requires the intersection of powerful commercial mythologies to

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3 complement one another. The case of Messinia illustrates how a housed mythology, the  
4 product geography of olive oil and other olive products needs to be reckoned with as a  
5 mythomoteur for a place. The ability to implace product mythologies is coupled with the  
6 potential of evoking specific contingent meaning through association with meaning-laden  
7 mythologies, such as those related to commodities and practices associated with their  
8 production and consumption. Thus, the creation of an agritourism destination turns on its  
9 ability to effectively enact and embody a product mythology, to consequently be construed  
10 around an extant meaning derived from such mythologies. Furthermore, this situation shows  
11 that the phenomenon captured by Newman and Dhar (2014) as place “contagion” to product  
12 and brands also applies in the inverse, and places, due to their polysemic nature, can more  
13 readily house a multitude of “contagious” mythologies.  
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30 This study amplifies McKay’s (1994) theory of political cultural selection through  
31 stakeholders’ perception of the world making of “Messinia – the destination” as contingent  
32 on its symbolic and mythological components working in harmony (Ryu et al., 2016; Nadeau  
33 et al. 2008). This synthesis is necessarily grassroots-driven to support construction of a  
34 narrative about what the region Messinia is and means as a place (L’Espoir Decosta &  
35 Andéhn, 2018), first and foremost to the locals. The study adds an additional layer to  
36 Hollinshead’s (2009) explanation of the power of tourism as the “moteur” of myth-making,  
37 positing that the world-building narration of Messinia “the destination” must be related to  
38 places against which it is evoked in economic, cultural or spatial terms. This is how product  
39 geography assists in agritourism worldmaking. Thus, the meanings attached to a place are  
40 fundamentally referential (Andéhn & Zenker, 2015) or require an anchoring or “implacing”  
41 component (Casey, 1993). As such, the place is always dispositional and exists by virtue of  
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3 its differences and similarities vis-à-vis the places to which it relates, as well as the  
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5 mythologies of “objects,” such as products and brands, for which it provides implacement.  
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10 This study furthers understanding of the challenges faced in reconfiguring the region from  
11 focusing strictly on agricultural production into one that can synchronously serve as a tourism  
12 service delivery system. The reforms center on cultivating the ability of stakeholders and  
13 visitors to elevate performances of cultural narratives linked to an experience of the place that  
14 visitors will deem authentic. Such enactment, which occurs for example during service  
15 encounters, constitutes a reference to mythological narratives. However, some level of  
16 agreement among stakeholders of what Messinia represents must guide such collective  
17 action. Implementing any institutionally supported program requires delimiting the spatial  
18 correlates of “Messinia – the place,” which in turn requires allocating resources and  
19 containing mythologies to a spatial and organisational frame.  
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35 The mythology of Messinia is interwoven with that of agricultural products and practices,  
36 placing it at the nexus of product geographies. Messinia is thus imbued with a wealth of  
37 “mythological capital” that facilitates sense-making of the place, reinforces its image (PCI)  
38 through agri-tourism activities such as tasting, farm stays and local food experiences (TDI),  
39 and places it in a relational sign-system, the product geography.  
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49 Two principal questions to be addressed in future research emerge:  
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- 51 • When is place mythology threatened by influences of incommensurable narratives  
52 derived from tourism activities?  
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- 54 • What circumstances are conducive to deriving gainful synergies from co-supporting  
55 narratives of otherwise distinct commercial ventures?  
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3 Both questions have the potential to further understanding of opportunities for developing  
4 successful destinations, as well as place and world-making. Furthermore, a comparative study  
5 with other agritourism destinations with similar product geography is needed to transcend the  
6 contextual limitation that this study presents. This research topic raises additional concerns.  
7  
8 In addition to economic and social sustainability (see Andéhn et al., 2019), environmental  
9 sustainability (see Hall, 2019) is increasingly intertwined with commercial objectives. This  
10 study is limited by its methodology, given it is contingent on the destination and is therefore  
11 construed as generative and explorative. Further confirmatory approaches are required to  
12 frame the scope and interrelations of the factors uncovered in the present study.  
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35 the interviews. A great thanks is also warranted to all the respondents for their time and  
36 insights over the course of this project.  
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## 47 Endnotes

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50 <sup>1</sup> [www.farmstayuk.co.uk](http://www.farmstayuk.co.uk), retrieved 05.04.2020

51 <sup>2</sup> [www.bienvenue-a-la-ferme.com](http://www.bienvenue-a-la-ferme.com), retrieved 05.04.2020

52 <sup>3</sup> Questions and statements included:

- 53 • What is your assessment of the economic future of this region?
- 54 • Do you think tourism represents the future for your agricultural products?
- 55 • Describe the customers for your products. Where do they come from?
- 56 • What is the nature of your business activities in this region?
- 57 • Elaborate on your view of the future of tourism and olive production in your region.

58 <sup>4</sup> [www.visitgreece.gr/en/mainland/messinia](http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/mainland/messinia), retrieved 15.05.2020

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3 <sup>5</sup> The seven countries of Cyprus, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Italy, Morocco and Portugal have been designated by  
4 UNESCO to constitute the territories that embody the in situ preservation of the Mediterranean diet heritage  
5 (<https://ich.unesco.org>)

6 <sup>6</sup> [www.discoveruscany.com](http://www.discoveruscany.com), retrieved 15.04.2020

7 <sup>7</sup> Thorne (2009) evokes the five categories of human (social) heritage, industrial and agricultural heritage, the  
8 arts, cuisine and natural history.  
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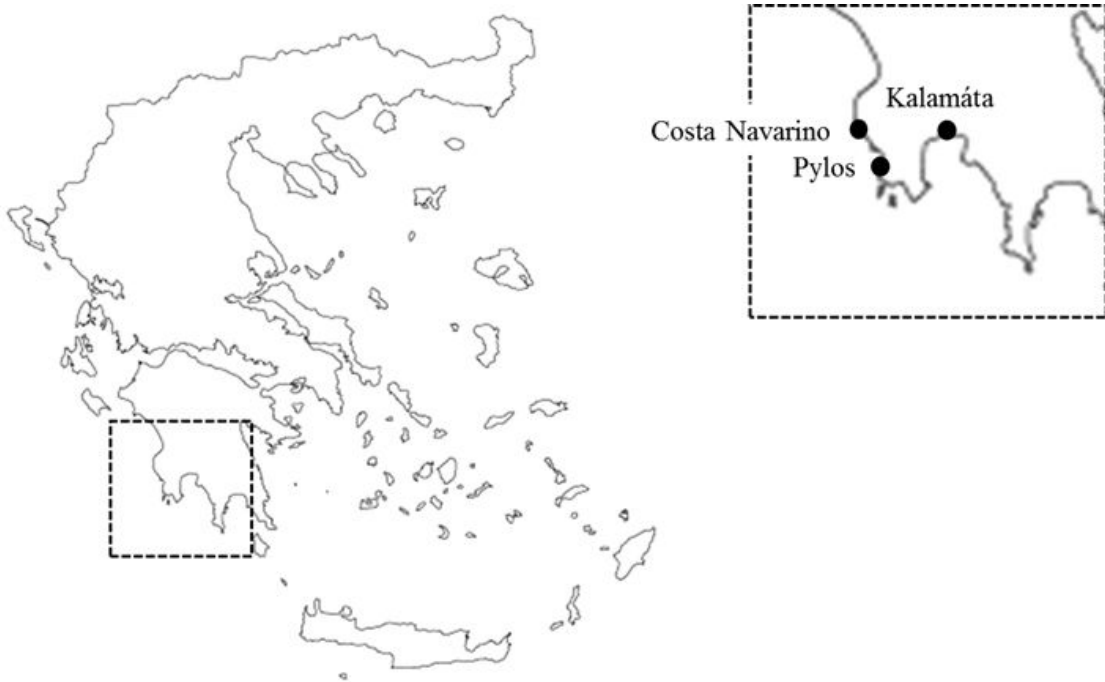
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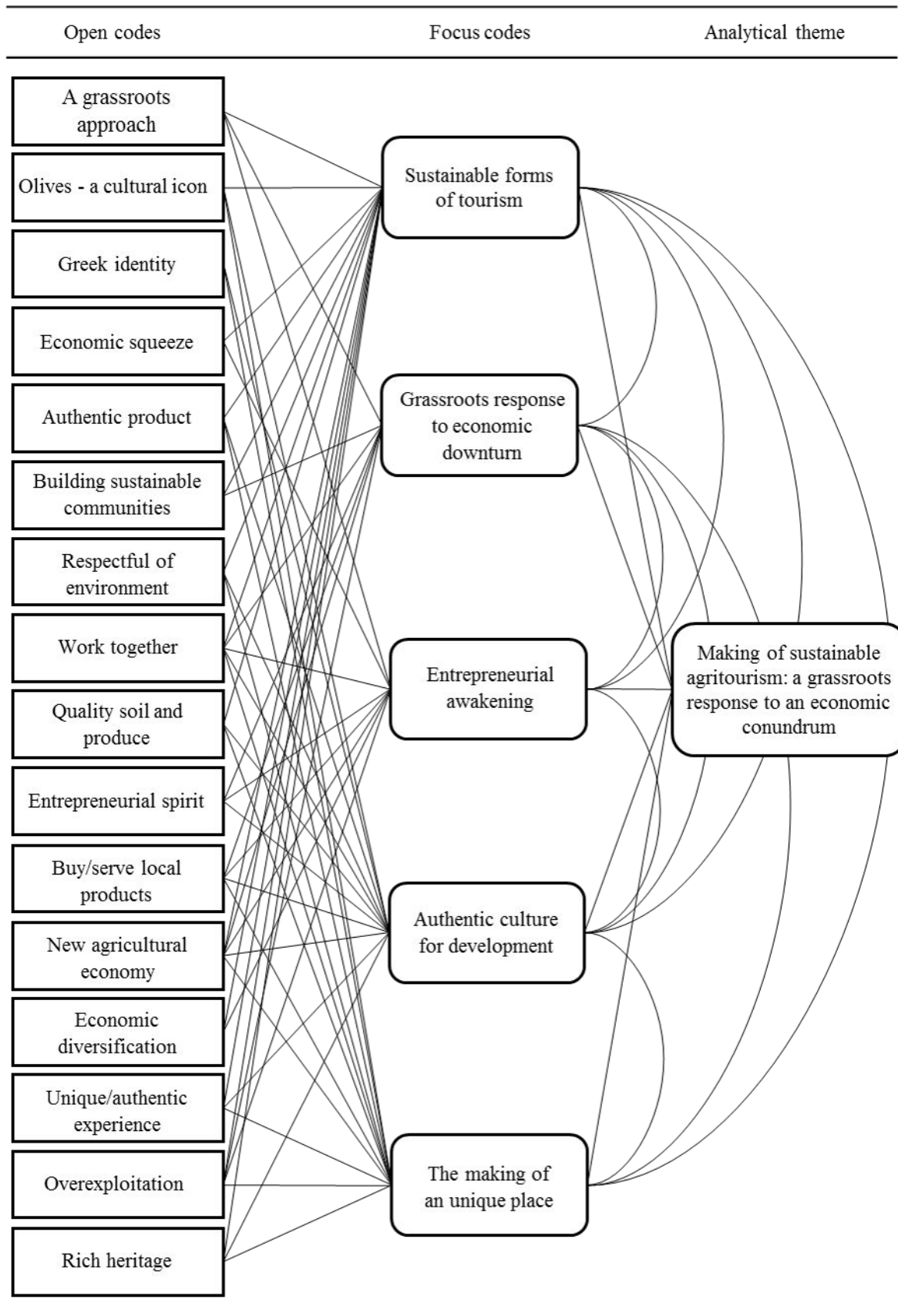
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31  
32 **Figure 1.** Map of Greece; cutout of the area surrounding Messinia with noteworthy  
33 places indicated.  
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**Figure 2.** Messinian Olive Grove; image taken from Costa Navarino promotional material.



**Figure 3.** Excerpt of coding scheme, processing from ‘Open codes’ (left) to the analytical theme “Making of sustainable agritourism: a grassroots response to an economic conundrum” (right).

**Table 1.** Respondents. Due to the occasionally sensitive content of interviews, real names have been replaced with aliases.

#	Alias	Role
1	R1 & R2	Agritourism operators, Farmer
2	R3 <sup>T</sup>	Olive oil trader and producer
3	R4 <sup>T</sup>	Restaurateur
4	R5 & R6	Olive product producer/CEO, Operations Manager
5	R7 & R8	Press liaison and Head of Development, agriculture and tourism
6	R9	Olive oil soap producer and reseller
7	R10	Agritourism operator
8	R11	Foundation executive
9	R12	Owner and operator of a shop selling regional specialties
10	R13	Exporter/Producer of agricultural products
11	R14 & R15	Public sector funding officials
12	R16	Director of a foundation with interests in the region
13	R17	Owner of a company producing and exporting agricultural products
14	R18	Customer relationship manager at large luxury hotel operation
15	R19	Restaurateur and Farmer

<sup>T</sup> Interviews performed partially, or fully, with the aid of a translator.