

*WP T2 – IDENTIFICATION OF BEST PRACTICES  
IN THE COLLECTIVE COMMERCIAL VALORISATION  
OF ALPINE FOOD INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE*

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**Field Study of Relevant Cases of  
Success: Route des Fromages de Savoie**

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## Abstract

The *Route des Fromages de Savoie* (Route of Savoyard Cheeses) is a tourist attraction created by AFTALP, the Association of Traditional Savoyard Cheeses. The initiative covers the Departments of Savoie and Haute-Savoie, and today comprises 74 member sites (farms, high-mountains pastures, dairy cooperatives, maturing cellars, etc.), all small businesses that voluntarily adhere to the Route and engage themselves to offer a high-quality experience to visitors. AFTALP coordinates the Route, promote it to residents and tourists, and train member sites' staff. This in turn drives more visitors-clients at these businesses' sites. For AFTALP, the Route is way to promote experientially Savoyard cheeses and their cultural heritage, in a more immersive and persuasive manner than through advertising on traditional and social media.

La *Route des Fromages de Savoie* est une attraction touristique créée par AFTALP, l'Association des Fromages Traditionnels des Alpes Savoyardes. L'initiative concerne les Départements de Savoie et Haute-Savoie, et comprend 74 sites membres (fermes, alpages, laiteries coopératives, caves d'affinage), qui sont tous des entreprises de petite taille qui volontairement adhèrent à la Route et s'engagent à offrir des expériences de qualité à leur visiteurs. AFTALP coordonne la Route, la publicise auprès des résidents et des touristes, et forme le personnel des sites membres. Cela par conséquent apporte plus de visiteurs-clients à leur sites. Pour AFTALP, la Route est un moyen de promouvoir en manière expérientielle les fromages de Savoie et le patrimoine culturel qu'ils représentent, de façon plus immersive et persuasive qu'avec la publicité sur les media traditionnels ou sur les réseaux sociaux.

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## 1. Introduction

The *Route des Fromages de Savoie* is a tourist attraction running through the Savoyard mountains that comprises 74 member sites (farms, high-mountains pastures, cooperatives dairies, maturing cellars). The initiative originated thanks to a 3-year EU INTERREG Project started in 2004 with the aim to promote mountain routes in neighbouring areas in France (Savoie and Haute-Savoie), Italy (Aosta Valley), and Switzerland (Canton of Valais). At the time, 27 Savoyard sites adhered to the initiative and were promoted under the umbrella name of *Parcours Autour du Mont Blanc* (Route around the Mont Blanc). At the end of the project, only the Savoyard Departments decided to continue with the initiative. Since then, the Route focused on the Savoyards cheese-making traditions and became the Route of Savoyard Cheeses.

The Route is coordinated by AFTALP, a second-level promotional association that regroups the trade organizations (*interprofessions*) responsible for the promotion of the eight Savoyard cheeses protected by geographical indications (PDOs and PGIs): Abondance PDO, Beaufort PDO, Chevrotin PDO, Emmental de Savoie PGI, Raclette de Savoie PGI, Reblochon PDO, Tome des Bauges PDO, and Tomme de Savoie PGI. AFTALP promotes these traditional Savoyard cheeses by valorising the common elements at the base of their quality: the links to the natural and cultural landscape, the indigenous cow and goat breeds, and the traditional cheese-making practices. The Route constitutes one of AFTALP's most important promotional activities, as it allows tourists and residents to learn about the rich Savoyard cheese-making heritage by visiting key sites that constitute important elements of the PDO and PGI cheeses' supply chains, of which most consumers have little knowledge. By linking production sites, people and animals to the natural and cultural landscape in consumers' perception in an experiential manner, through the Route AFTALP promote Savoyard cheeses as a whole by highlighting the common elements behind their quality: the biodiversity of the environment, the natural pastures and the protected areas, the autochthonous cow and goat breeds, the traditional cheese-making practices, the raw milk used in the production. These same elements, encapsulated by the AFTALP's payoff *une histoire vraie* (a true story), are also communicated through advertising on traditional and digital media, but tourists and visitors can directly experience them by visiting sites along the Route.

While managed by a cheese-promotion organization, the Route contributes to the attractiveness of the two Savoyard Departments as a tourist destination by providing tourists with interesting activities during their Alpine trails, particularly during the summer season. This benefits the small-sized businesses that manage the sites on the Route, which are more easily found by visitors to whom they can sell their products. Additionally, thanks to the AFTALP coordination, the business adhering to the Route interact among themselves thanks to training and other networking initiatives. This facilitates the establishment of personal relationships and a common identity. By fostering the engagement of different local actors and communities, the association encourages a collective and collaborative marketing approach that helps to preserve and safeguard the traditional Savoyard cheese heritage.

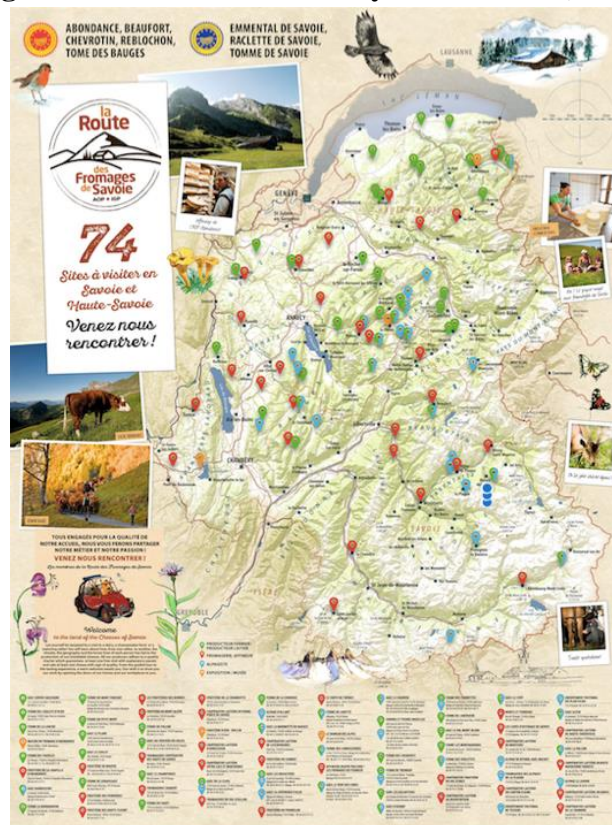
## 2. Methodological Procedures

The Route of Savoyard Cheeses field case is based on various data sources collected in various rounds in 2017, 2018, and 2019. These include a long interview (2h 25') with the AFTALP's communication manager; 9 internal documents provided by the informant (84 pages in total); twelve articles from the news and trade press. Additionally, the association's Facebook page and website were monitored and analysed. Further data was obtained from the consumer reviews websites *TripAdvisor* and *Petite Futé* (see section 6 for methodological details).

## 3. Main actors involved

In 2018, the Route covers seven provinces in the Departments of Savoie and Haute-Savoie. Member sites are scattered among the following provinces: Chablais-Faucigny; Genevois-Albanais-Avant Pays Savoyard; Bauges; Bornes Avis; Mont Blanc Val d'ly; Beaufortain Tarentaise; and Maurienne (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 – The Route of Savoyard Cheeses (2018)**



Source: <https://www.fromagesdesavoie.fr>

The key actors in the initiative are the 74 member sites. Only sites involved in the Savoyard Cheeses' PDO-PGI supply chains can be part of the Route. In 2018, the initiative included 28 dairies and maturing cellars, 7 high-mountains pastures breeders, 3 museums and exhibition centres, and 36 farms and milk-producers, of which 17 also offer high-mountain pastures visits. Depending on where it is localised, sites specialise on one or more of the PDO-PGI Savoyard cheeses: Abondance (21 sites), Beaufort (19), Chevrotin (7), Emmental de Savoie (5), Raclette de Savoie (15), Reblochon

(23), Tome des Bauges (23), Tomme de Savoie (20). Most of the member sites' activities are free of charge, but some require an entry fee. Some farmers/breeders also organize paid outdoor activities, such as hiking and trekking to high-mountain pastures and milk and cheese tastings.

In the context of the Route, AFTALP also collaborates with organisations providing complementary tourist services such *Accompagnateurs en Montagne* (association of mountain guides) and *Les Gîtes de France* (an organization of bed-and-breakfast offerings), as well as the Savoyard tourist destination promotion organizations (*Savoie Mont Blanc Tourisme* and the Savoyard *Offices de Tourisme*) and the *Chambre d'Agriculture Savoie Mont-Blanc* (Chamber of Agriculture Savoie Mont Blanc).

#### 4. Internal processes

Businesses or organisations that are part of the eight PDO-PGI Savoyard cheeses' supply chains can adhere to the Route network, provided that respect the *Charte d'Adhesion* (membership charter), which lays down the objective of the Route, membership rules, and quality standards for the visitor experiences. Membership is reserved to sites linked to the cheesemaking supply chains, provided that the production of Savoyard PDO-PGI cheeses represents at least 50% of the site's total cheese production. By adhering to the Route network, these sites engage to adequately welcome visitors and allow them to better know the underlying professions, know-how, and products thanks to a direct encounter between visitors and their operations. Membership fees are €80 or €200, depending on the size of the organisation that manages the site (i.e., it is lower for famers and higher for dairy cooperatives).

The *Charte* begins with a reminder of the Route's objectives, and as such serves as a goal alignment device. These goals include: highlighting the link between the Savoyard cheeses and their territory of origin, whose characteristics have a direct impact on their taste and sensorial characteristics; let the visitors discover all stages of the Savoyard cheesemaking process, from milk production to cheese aging; highlighting the fact that these cheeses are high-quality products, whose quality is recognised at the national and European level; creating synergies between agricultural supply chains, rural development, and tourism; allowing an exchange between visitors and cheesemaking professionals.

The main activity of the site, be it cheese production, cheese refining, or pastures, must be exhibited and visible to visitors, and members are required to provide written or oral descriptions in order to allow visitors to understand what they see and, ultimately, to learn about the Savoyard cheese-making tradition. Indeed, one of the intended main purpose of the visit is to showcase the local cheese-making know-how by highlighting the connections between the products and their *terroir* and the resulting variety of unique textures and flavours. Thus, guidelines require members to emphasise the cultural aspects of cheese-making by telling the story of products, by describing the *terroir* and the environment linked to the cheese's production, and by informing visitors about the quality certification of which the cheese is granted, be it PDO or IGP. Furthermore, members are required to describe their own role by highlighting their traditional *savoir-faire* used in the production and the personal engagement in the local activities.



Detailed guidelines are required also for the visitors' reception and the tasting experiences offered. Specifically, all the information regarding the possible price, the time, and the days of visit must be clearly communicated to consumers. Members have to welcome visitors politely, and the site has to follow all applicable safety and hygiene rules. In addition, the official Route signage and communication materials have to be exhibited. On site, members are allowed to offer tasting experiences and to sell their products: tasting is mandatory in the case of a paid visit and has to include at least one of the eight Savoyards' cheeses, while sales can be organised directly on site or in a nearby place. While some visits are free of charge, others charge an individual admission fee mostly in the €3-8 range. Guidelines require a transparent price policy and all the members who offer paid visits have to communicate the exact price both at the entrance of the site and on the promotional material. As already mentioned, some members offer also outdoor activities such as hiking and trekking in collaboration with local mountain guides. The prices of these kind of activities vary based on the package offered and go from 15 up to 35 euros per person including farms' visits and products tasting.



In order to ensure high-quality visitor experiences, AFTALP sets up periodic controls and monitoring activities of member sites with the help of *mystery visitors* who pretend to be normal customers. Mystery visitors use a verification grid (see Figure 2) thanks to which the possible minor, major and severe quality gaps are highlighted. The goal of these controls is not to penalize member sites, but rather to put in place corrective actions to ensure that visitors are satisfied and that they actually learn about the Savoyard cheese-making culture. For example, if no visit is proposed (a severe violation), the proposed corrective action requires that a circuit of visit is established; if the visit can take place, but no explanations are provided (a major violation), the proposed correction is that information boards are installed; if visit staff are not sufficiently polite and welcoming, it is suggested to establish precise visit time to avoid being constantly interrupted by visitors. If member sites do not readily put in place corrective actions, they risk being excluded from the Route.

The Route's promotional activities fall under the responsibility of the AFTALP's communication team. The Route is promoted inside the AFTALP's website (<https://www.fromagesdesavoie.fr/fr/sites-a-visiter/route-des-fromages-de-savoie.html>), which also contains a search engine (<https://www.fromagesdesavoie.fr/fr/sites-a-visiter.html>) that helps visitors locate sites based on the season (winter/summer), cheese (e.g., Chevrotin, Tome de Bauges, etc.), type of site (i.e., farmer, pasture, dairy, etc.), and desired mountain trekking experience (with/without guide). AFTALP also takes care of the graphic design and printing/production of communication materials such as as billboards, signage, in-store displays, brochures, flyers, and posters (e.g., see again Figure 1). Each member site is provided this material and required to showcase it (failure to do so is considered a breach of the *Charte d'Adhesion*). The material contains information about all member sites and traditional Savoyard cheeses, and therefore promotes the AFTALP network as a whole.

AFTALP also carries out training and social activities that facilitate collaboration, knowledge transfer, and interactions among the members. Specifically, the association organises an annual meeting in October, and several thematic workshops and activities during the year. Moreover, every

year a visit to another similar cheese or food route is organised with the goal of learning and taking inspiration from another similar experience. The visit is organised by AFTALP which also covers a part of the participation costs (member sites need to contribute to it). Among others, visits have been organised in the Auvergne Region, in the Alsace Region, and in the Northern Basque Country. Member sites are geographically scattered across the two Savoyard departments and these occasions contribute to create a sense of community between producers who might otherwise had little opportunity to interact.

**Figure 2 - Evaluation Grid (2018/2019)**

**GRILLE DE CLASSIFICATION DES ECARTS**

Nature de l'écart	Classification	Réponse à l'écart
Absence de visite.	Grave	Mettre en place un circuit de visite ou des panneaux expliquant la fabrication des Fromages
Possibilité de visiter, mais absence ou manque d'explications	Majeur	Mettre en place des panneaux d'information
Absence de signalétique pour indiquer le site	Majeur	Mettre en place des panneaux de signalétique, afin d'aider les visiteurs à se rendre sur le site
Les informations sur le dépliant-carte sont incomplètes ou fausses	Majeur	Vérifier les informations au moment de la validation des textes pour le nouveau dépliant-carte. Être le plus précis et clair possible.
Le réseau de La Route des fromages n'est mentionné ni sur les signalétiques indiquant le site, ni en enseigne	Majeur	Installer le logo en bois sur la façade d'un bâtiment, bien en évidence pour les visiteurs. Mettre le logo sur les panneaux de signalétique.
Erreur de dénomination pour les fromages en vente	Majeur	Mettre un étiquetage précis pour identifier chaque fromage et un affichage visible des prix (à la pièce ou au kilo).
Signalétique partielle, manque d'indication pour trouver facilement le site	Mineur	Mettre plus de panneaux de signalétique
Manque d'information lors de la visite, thèmes non abordés	Mineur	Mettre davantage de panneaux pour informer les visiteurs, pour les visites guidées être plus complet dans les explications
Absence de local de vente	Mineur	Prévoir un local spécifique à la vente des fromages et afficher les prix
Les personnes chargées de l'accueil et de la visite n'ont pas fait preuve d'amabilité et de disponibilité avec les visiteurs	Mineur	Mettre en place un système d'horaire pour les visites, afin de ne pas être dérangé à n'importe quel moment.
Absence du présentoir en bois et manque de documentation sur la Route des Fromages de Savoie et sur les autres Fromages de Savoie	Mineur	Mettre en place le présentoir en bois ainsi que des dépliants sur la Route des Fromages de Savoie et sur les autres Fromages de Savoie

Classification de l'écart	Sanction
Grave	Sans mise en place d'une action corrective immédiate, refus de l'adhésion du site pour la prochaine campagne.
Majeur	Avertissement, action corrective dans les 6 mois et contrôle dans la campagne suivante.
Mineur	Avertissement, action corrective dans les 6 mois.

*Si aucune action corrective n'est mise en place, l'écart sera classé un grade au dessus, lors du prochain contrôle.*

Source: AFTALP

## 5. Budget and sources of revenue

In 2018, the total budget allocated to the Route was about €100,000. Only a limited part of this investment is funded by Route members' participation fees (€80-200, depending on member site typology). The rest comes from the AFTALP's general promotional budget (for more details, see the AFTALP case study, <https://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/alpfoodway/en/activities-and->



[results/goals-and-activities/commercial-valorisation](#)). Put differently, the Route is not an activity carried out with the goal of breaking even. On the contrary, it is a promotional investment that absorbs a significant share of AFTALP’s promotional budget (€430,000 in 2018) and is intended as a valuable experiential marketing tool that reinforces the overall positioning of the traditional Savoyard cheeses, supporting at the same time the member organizations’ promotional goals.

## 6. Consumer online reviews of Route sites

Consumer review sites can offer insights on visitor perceptions of tourist attractions. In this section, we report findings from reviews of Route member sites on Tripadvisor (an international website, but reviews are with very few exceptions in French) and Petit Futé (a French website). Reviewers are both locals and tourists. The Route is not featured on its own on these websites, whose search logic favours tourist sites localised in specific municipalities. Moreover, only a minority of member are featured in consumer reviews in the websites we monitored. Of the 74 Route member sites, only 25 are the object of consumer reviews. Additionally, reviewers never mention that the site is part of the Route des Fromages de Savoie, as if they had limited awareness of the fact that the sites they write about are part of a network or considered it not worth mentioning. As a whole, then, the Route is present on these websites only indirectly and in a limited manner, through some of its member sites.

Cooperative dairies and maturing cellar benefit from a greater online visibility than individual farmers on these websites (see Table 1). Specifically, 50% of member dairies and maturing cellars are reviewed online, whereas less than one every five farms are visible on the monitored websites. This might be due to the larger size and visitor traffic of the former, and possibly to their greater capacity to stimulate consumer reviews. Museum and cheese heritage interpretation centres on the Route are all present online, coherently with their more typical status as tourist attractions.

**Table 1 – Route Member Site with Tripadvisor (TA) or Petit Futé (PF) reviews**

<i>Member Site Typology</i>	<i>N. of Route Members</i>	<i>Members with reviews</i>
Dairies/Maturing Cellars	28	14 (50%)
Farms (including high-mountain pasture breeders)	43	8 (18.6%)
Museums/Cheese heritage interpretation centres	3	3 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	74	25 (33.8%)

During our first round of data gathering in January 2019, we collected 687 reviews (see Table 2). With some exceptions, cooperative dairies and maturing cellars attract more reviews than farms. Museums and interpretation centres also have a limited number of reviews. These a priori categories however hide a variety of situations that, to some extent, explain the heterogeneity in the volume of reviews received. Two of the top sites (Fruitière des Perriers, 120 reviews; and Ferme de Lorette, 104) are also popular restaurants. Accordingly, their reviews focus on menus, waiter courtesy and rapidity of service. While the quality of cheese-based dishes and the possibility to buy cheese produced almost on the premises is often mentioned, these restaurant reviews do not emphasize Route elements (i.e., the possibility to visit the farm or assist to the cheese-making process). Another of the top sites (Ferme du Petit Mont, 44 reviews) is a pedagogical farm that also offers sleeping

arrangements and experiential visits. As a result, reviews focus on the former or the latter of these two elements, depending on the services the reviewer purchased. The other sites in our sample receive instead reviews that are more directly linked to the Route’s goal to experientially promote PDO-PGI Savoyard cheeses and their cultural heritage. To further examine consumer perceptions, in September 2019 a qualitative analysis on the Tripadvisor reviews of a sample of 6 dairies and maturing cellars (for a total of 335 reviews), 2 museums (58 reviews in total), and 5 farms (164 reviews in total) was carried out<sup>1</sup>.

**Table 2 - Route des Fromages de Savoies: Member sites’ online reviews**

	NAME	TYPE	REGION	# Review	# of Stars	Website
	Fruitiere du Semnoz	DAIRIES	Bauges	3	4,3	Petitfute
	Cooperative Laitiere de Lescheraines	DAIRIES	Bauges	12	4,5	Trip
	GAEC Les Noisetiers	FARMS/ALPAGE	Bauges	1	3	Petitfute
	Cooperative Laitiere du Beaufortain	DAIRIES	Beaufortain Tarentaise	120	4	Trip
	Les Caves d’Affinage de Savoie	DAIRIES	Beaufortain Tarentaise	3	4,5	Trip
	Fromagerie des alpages de la plagne	DAIRIES	Beaufortain Tarentaise	2	4	Petitfute
	Cooperative Laitiere de Moutiers	DAIRIES	Beaufortain Tarentaise	3	4,5	Trip
	Le Farto- Cooperative des producteurs de Reblochon Fermier	DAIRIES	Bornes Gravis	59	4,6	Petitfute
	La Ferme de Lorette	FARMS/ALPAGE	Bornes Gravis	104	4	Trip
	Le Hameau des Alpes	MUSEUM	Bornes Gravis	28	5	Trip
	La Ferme de Seraussaix	FARMS	Chablais Faucigny	4	4,8	Trip
	La Fruitiere des Perrieres	DAIRIES	Chablais Faucigny	134	4,5	Trip
	Maison du Fromage Abondance	MUSEUM	Chablais Faucigny	8	4	Trip
	Les Chalets D’Oche	FARMS	Chablais Faucigny	24	4,5	Trip
	Fruitiere de La Chapelle d’Abondance	DAIRIES	Chablais Faucigny	1	5	Petitfute
	GAEC Barbossine	FARMS/ALPAGE	Chablais Faucigny	1	5	Petitfute
	Ferme du Petit Mont	FARMS	Chablais Faucigny	44	4,5	Trip
	Coopérative laitière Yenne	DAIRIES	Genevois- Albanais avant pays savoyard	23	5	Trip
	Fruitière d’ayn-dullin	MUSEUM	Genevois- Albanais avant pays savoyard	3	4,7	Petitfute
	Fruitiere de la Chambotte	DAIRIES	Genevois- Albanais avant pays savoyard	1	5	Petitfute
	Coopérative laitière de la chambre	DAIRIES	Maurienne	2	4	Petitfute
	Ferme de l’Aberieux	FARMS	Mont Blanc, Val d’Arly	31	5	Trip
	La Ferme Les Montagnards	FARMS	Mont Blanc, Val d’Arly	8	4,5	Trip
	Cooperative Fruitiere en Val d’Arly Savoie Mont-Blanc	DAIRIES	Mont Blanc, Val d’Arly	61	3,5	Trip
	Fruitière de Bogeve	DAIRIES	Chablais Faucigny	7	3	Trip
<b>TOT</b>				<b>687</b>		

Source: Our elaborations (January 2019)

**Dairies** receive reviews that highlight their role as ‘shopping heavens’ for cheese and other dairy products, such as milk and yogurts. This fact alone often justifies their TripAdvisor listing as ‘things to do’ in the areas where they are located. Tourists often claim that by shopping at dairies they can bring back home a part of Savoy and good memories of their holidays. As shopping sites, the recurring element in dairy reviews is the high quality of the cheeses on sales. These do not only include PDO-PGI Savoyard cheeses, but also other local specialities that are not protected by geographical indications. Tourists appreciate the assortment and the possibility to learn about and taste little-known local cheese varieties. Reviewers often remark that they are “spoilt for choice” and enthusiast of the cheese quality: specifically, their exceptional taste and perfume, as well as to (but less frequently) the link between these products and the Savoyard cheese-making tradition. Cheeses are considered good, authentic, rooted in local tradition and savoir faire, and locally produced from local milk. The notion of terroir is also often evoked (“an authentic perfume of terroir”; “a visit for terroir lovers”, “at the heart of terroir”, “the taste of terroir”). Dairy cheeses are often contrasted with those of supermarkets

<sup>1</sup> This second round of analysis was carried out by Prof. Diego Rinallo. For the dairies/farms which are also restaurants (N=2), only those (few) reviews related to stores, farm visits, or other cheese-related experiential elements were considered. At the time of this second round of qualitative analysis (September 2019), all sampled Route sites had increased their Tripadvisor reviews respect to the data reported in Table 2 (referred to January 2019).

and other large retailers, compared to which quality is better and prices are very affordable (“very reasonable prices”, “excellent value for money”, “attractive prices”, “good prices”, “best prices”, etc.). Some reviewers explain this affordability to the direct producer-consumer relationships. In contrast, the cooperative nature of some of these dairies, owned by milk producers, is only very rarely mentioned or contrasted to that of profit-maximizing industrial cheese producers. The affordability of directly produced cheeses does not extend however to other products for which dairies are just commercial intermediaries: while these products are mostly considered of good quality and linked to the local terroir, their prices are often deemed relatively high. In some cases, reviewers recommend not to buy them, and suggest instead other outlets.

The relatively slow service during high season moments is another element often discussed: some reviewers suggest the best times to avoid waiting in line; others complain that local clients often “skip the queue” and obtain a better service from the store staff. More in general, the staff is an important driver of satisfaction: their courtesy and willingness to help clients (or lack thereof) is often mentioned in reviews. The staff is also an important source of information about the local production and consumption cheese-making heritage. Failure to answer clients’ questions or offer explanations (e.g., on differences between available cheeses or how to use them for specific recipes), sometimes motivated by the need to reduce service time in peak moments, triggers negative reviewer comments and evaluations. Another common source of dissatisfaction is the impossibility to taste cheeses (and other products) before buying them. The large assortment often makes it difficult to choose among different cheeses. The possibility to taste them facilitates decision making and contributes to good reviewer evaluations.

Dairies often offer visual or direct access to backstage areas such as cheese-making sites and maturing cellars, or to exhibit areas intended to educate about the local cheese-making heritage. Reviewers very often highlight the family-oriented nature of these activities and the fact that they are particularly appreciated by children (“perfect for kids and their parents”, “ludic and instructive”, “a game keeps the kids interested”, “for children of all ages”). Some of these experiences can be accessed free of charge, whereas others with an admission fee. Free experiences certainly contribute to perceptions of cheese authenticity and roots in the local heritage and terroir but find limited space in the online reviews we analysed. Only in the case of paid experiences, reviewers dedicate significant space to describe them, evaluate whether and to what extent they are worth the admission prices, and offer suggestions on how to make the most of them. Some experiences are available only at specific times and days or by appointment. For example, at one site, visitors can assist to cheese-making in the morning; at another, they can visit caves in the afternoon only; moreover, visit times and frequency can vary depending on the moment of the year (peak vs. low season). Reviewers often voice their disappointment or frustration when missing them for lack of information, temporary service interruptions, or not having reserved in time. Maturing cellars are often described as “impressive” and are particularly appreciated, but they are cold (“bring a sweater”) and the cheese perfume can be overwhelming for some (“very olfactory experience”, “not for sensitive noses”).

Exhibits mix education with entertainment, particularly when targeting children. Those which are free, smaller and take a limited time to visit are appreciated by parents who can shop while their

children visit them. In other cases, the exhibits are the key attraction and shopping is the concluding experience, as it happens in the case of museum stores. In our sample, the dairy with the most discussed experiential part is the *Cooperative Laitière du Beaufortain*, with 120 reviews in January 2019 (and 135 in September 2019). This cooperative dairy is the largest producer of Beaufort PDO cheese and hosts in its main site a free exhibition as well as a paid-for experiences (screening of the film *Au Pays du Beaufort* and guided tour of the maturing cellars). By combining in the same site cheese making and aging, cultural promotion, shopping and sometimes consumption (e.g., cheese tastings), dairies that invested in richer exhibits and experiences are uniquely positioned to deal with some of the challenges in the commercial valorisation of food heritage: turning the usually invisible supply chains and know-how behinds product into a visible reality and, as a result, differentiate their products from their more industrial counterparts.

Dairies are also a key site where innovation in cheese-making can clash with consumers' romantic ideas of an age-old cheese-making heritage untouched by technological developments. According to a Tripadvisor reviewer, dairies' cheese-making workshops are places where a "meeting between terroir and technology" takes place" and "technology is side to side with the savoir faire of master cheese makers". According to another, "the presence of robots in the [aging] cellars breaks a little the myth, but hey, one must keep up with the times". Reviewers also notice changes in retail services. Some are welcomed for their practical value. For example, vending machines for cheese or milk are appreciated as they permit to buy products outside of opening hours; the possibility to buy online and withdraw at the stores permits to skip the long queues during peak demand moments; and the possibility to vacuum-package cheese upon purchase makes it more convenient to transport it back home. Despite their functionality, other reviewers question and resist instead modernising changes. For example, ticket dispensers to manage queuing and pre-vacuum packaged cheese portions blur the distinction between supermarkets and dairy stores. Larger dairies who adopt these solutions are in a few cases subjected to accusations of excessive commercialisation, particularly when reviewers notice increases in prices and a fast staff service that reduce the time available to guide consumer in the choice of cheese. These factors lead a few of the most dissatisfied consumers to complain that some dairies lost their spirit of cooperatives to turn into veritable tourist traps (*attrappe touristes, pièges à touristes*).

Our sample include reviews about two *museums*. The *Hameau des Alpes* (Hamlet of the Alps, 39 reviews), managed by the *Société de Gestion des Activités Touristiques de la Clusaz* (Tourist Activities Management Company) and hosted in a traditional Savoyard farmhouse, promotes the area's mountain heritage with various activities, which include an *Espace Reblochon*, a ski museum, a communal oven and other outdoors sites of interest. The Reblochon Space is dedicated to children. Through a series of edutainment activities (e.g., objects to manipulate, sensorial elements, digital devices), it informs about the traditional Reblochon making process. Admission fees are of €4-7 depending on visitor age. The *Maison du Fromage Abondance* (House of the Abondance Cheese, 19 reviews) is an experiential showcase managed by the PDO Abondance cheese consortium. Also targeting children, the *Maison* hosts a sensorial experience in 9 steps that raises awareness on the Abondance cheese heritage. Admission fees are of €4-5 depending on age. These two attractions, both family- and children-oriented, are considered "interesting things to do" particularly in days of



bad weather. Both have shops where cheese can be bought, but some reviewers complain about the relatively high prices compared to local dairies and stores. Depending on their expectations, visitors are more or less satisfied with the experience as a whole (i.e., “great exhibition” vs. “small exhibition”) or by specific elements of it (staff courtesy and competence, cheese tastings, etc.). From a cultural heritage promotion perspective, the sharpest criticism towards these sites is that they are separate from the actual animal breeding and cheese production sites. On the positive, some reviewers remark that sites like these are “complementary to a farm visits”; on the negative, that “visiting a farm would be 100 times better” as one learns more by watching and interacting with actual cheesemakers making cheese “rather than watching videos”.

Farm reviews are to some extent similar to those of dairies. Reviewers highlight that farm-produced cheeses are of high quality, taste very good, and are sold at very affordable prices; the assortment is large and includes cheeses that are difficult to find elsewhere; products that are not produced at the farm can be expensive. Compared to dairies, however, *farms* allow visitors to experience not only cheese-making, but also the most upstream stages of the supply chain: animal breeding and milk production. The presence of animals, and the possibility to interact with them in various forms, is a frequently occurring element in farm reviews. At farms, visitors can “see animals”, touch/pet them, “visit stables”, “see calves roam freely as they graze grass”, “assist to the suckling of calves”, “assist to the milking” of cows/goats, and “taste fresh milk”. All these activities are appreciated by adults and children alike and result in memorable experiences and opportunity for pictures. Also in this context, reviewers warn of the right time to benefit the most from the visits: there are those who are disappointed for having missed the cows when they were “already out in the fields” and those who recommend to “arrive in the evening to see the milking of cows” or “ask the times of animal feeding because it’s a super activity”. Proximity with animals means however livestock odour, which reviewers sometimes highlight: “strong and inimitable cheese odour”, “careful: stable odour – but you get soon used to it”.

Reviewers notice technology also in this context, as well as its absence (“no credit card payment: bring cash”). For example, they observe that “cows let two milking robots milk them when they want” or that “the milking is guided through internet”. These developments are not seen in negative terms, since they are not seen as forms of cruelty to animals. The latter’s living conditions are often more or less implicitly contrasted to those of intensive animal breeding in factory farms: cows and goats “graze grass” and “roam freely” in the fields or inside the stables. More important, they are kept by people who care about their well-being: “Cows are loved, respected and well taken care of in a pleasant and healthy environment”; “you can see that they are happy”.

The other striking difference respect to dairies’ reviews is the quality of the human encounters. Dairies are larger organisations with a clearer division of labour. There, visitors mostly interact with store staff. Farms are instead small (mostly family businesses) and visitors get to interact with people who often live there and take care of multiple activities beyond sales (e.g., “The farmer let us taste the cheese he produces himself”). As a result, farmers and their families offer opportunities for much more meaningful interactions. Being a farmer is a lifestyle, not a job, after all. Farm reviews include descriptions of memorable people that differ remarkably from those of dairies and cultural



institutions, which mostly focus on the courtesy/competence (or lack thereof) of the sales staff. Farmers are often referred to as ‘passionate and fascinating’ (*passionnés et passionnants*) and able to transmit not only knowledge about the cheese-making heritage and other aspects of farm life, but also their enthusiasm for it: “Luc<sup>2</sup> and his mother are of a kindness rare to find and will be happy to share their love for their cows and work with you”, “I feel a lot of respect for this family that promotes the hard work of mountain agriculture”, “Marie can transmit her passion for her job”, “we learned a lot about the real values of cheese making from a passionate family”; “Chantal and her entourage are very dynamic and explain things well, and are able to transmit their love for their job/region”; “everything comes from the heart”, “kindness and knowledge sharing still exists”, “Jeanne et Pierre show us that with a lot of willpower and perseverance it is possible to fulfil a life’s dream: living of one’s passion”, “you can only wish success to these farmers once you know their story”, “the farmers have been able to communicate with us and transmit their passion, even after our silly questions of Paris dwellers”.

By showing the way they breed animals and make cheese, farmers sometimes highlight differences between their artisanal methods and those of industrial firms. “I appreciated the possibility of discussing with the cheese maker, who provide visitors with the possibility to open their eyes on the reality of the products distributed at supermarkets”, writes one reviewer. Another highlights that she learned “disgusting anecdotes about industrial cheeses”. Passionate discussions of this kind can however lead to ideologically laden debates that not everybody appreciates: “we had come simply to learn about cheese making and it ended with anti-capitalism fights and brainwashing against the industrialisation of dairy products”. Still, these are exceptions. Reviewers show high levels of appreciation for farmers and their know-how, and a desire to connect to them at a human level. For city dwellers, it is easy to romantically idealise farmers for their lifestyle characterised by ancestral know-how, local roots, and country life.

## 7. Impacts for AFTALP and Route member sites

The impacts of the *Route des Fromages de Savoie* can be evaluated from different points of view. While the data available do not permit to cover exhaustively all relevant aspects, some elements for reflection are here proposed.

From the perspective of member sites, the Route is a collective marketing initiative. When the Route started in 2004, only 24 sites adhered to it. Today, 74 sites are part of the network. While there is still room for expansion, this increase in participation implies that member sites find it useful to be part of this promotional network. For a modest fee of €80-200, they benefit from an annual promotional investment of €100,000 (on average, approximately €1,351 per member site). This helps them to be found by consumers and tourists and, as a result, increase their visitor traffic and sales. While data on the impact of the Route on these ultimate performance indicators are not available, thanks to the AFTALP’s organisational effort and overall investments, member sites receive a visibility that they would otherwise not be able to afford. Promotional benefits for member sites include:

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<sup>2</sup> Here and below, pseudonyms are used.

- Presentation of each site on the promotional brochure “*L’Essetiel des Fromages de Savoie*” (distributed in 230,000 copies in 2017);
- Online promotion: Listing on the *Fromage de Savoie* (<https://www.fromagesdesavoie.fr/en/sites-a-visiter-2.html>) and *Producteurs de Savoie* (<https://www.producteurs-savoie-mont-blanc.com/itineraires-des-fromages.html>) websites and on the AFTALP’s Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Les.Fromages.de.Savoie/>);
- Advertising on the consumer magazine *Alpes Magazine*;
- Promotional activities during the summer;
- Media relations, journalist visits, etc.

From the perspective of AFTALP, a first level of indicators regards participation and audiences. As indicated above, the number of member sites has increased over the years. According to the Association, more work needs to be done to involve new member sites. Member sites show different levels of engagement in the Route, so AFTALP’s ambition is to animate the network and increase member sites’ levels of information about the Route, competence about the staging of experiences, interaction and collaboration with other sites, involvement and motivation, and dynamism. Given the nature, visitor data is not available and it would be more in general difficult to separate Route visitors from “normal” shoppers. Data on visitor satisfaction is however good. A market research study commissioned by AFTALP in 2017 showed however high level of global satisfaction with 79,3% of visitors very satisfied and 18,7% satisfied. These results are broadly speaking coherent with those emerging from the analysis of online reviews previously reported: while elements of dissatisfaction are sometimes mentioned (welcoming, etc.), member sites receive predominantly good ratings. Market research also showed an increase in the awareness of the initiative compared to previous years (42,5% in 2017 compared to 34% in 2016). The majority of respondents discovered the initiative by chance, thanks to the flyers or the poster campaigns, while other visitors found information through the Savoyard tourist offices, internet, and friends and family’s recommendations. Still, more work remains to be done to improve the awareness of the Route. Significantly, TripAdvisor reviewers never mention that member sites are part of a Route (whether for lack of awareness or because they do not deem this fact worth mentioning).

From a different point of view, the content of TripAdvisor reviews, despite covering just a minority of member sites, is consistent with some of AFTALP’s goals for the Route (those stated in its *Charte d’Adhesion*). Reviewers do write about the different stages of the cheesemaking process, from milk production to aging depending on the site they visit, and they do highlight the high quality of the products and, to some extent, their link to their terroirs. Their positive evaluations are not however limited to PDO-PGI cheeses, but also to those that are not protected by geographical indications. At dairies and farms, reviewers also learn about, taste, buy and recommend little known cheeses. In this sense, the promotional activities that AFTALP carries out generate positive externalities that benefit other sectors of the Savoyard Departments’ cheesemaking supply chain.

## 8. Concluding remarks

The Routes links production sites, landscapes, people who are cultural heritage bearers and animals in consumers' perception in an experiential manner. It represents a good practice of bottom-up involvement strategy where local communities are directly involved in the initiatives realised; moreover, it represents a balanced commercial valorisation practice.

From a tourism promotion perspective, the Route is a tourist attraction created by a network of commercial organisations in the dairy industry under the coordination of AFTALP. As shown by visitor satisfaction levels and consumer online reviews, tourists do appreciate Route sites, particularly in the case of families with children. While not an attraction likely to motivate tourists to visit the two Savoyard Departments on its own, the Route contributes to the 'things to do' in these areas (particularly in days of bad weather) and, more in general, to their tourist image. Not only the Association invest to promote the Route, but it also trains member sites (mostly, small organisations) to appropriately welcome visitors and stage high quality consumer experiences – in coordination with, but with no cost for tourism destination management organisations and authorities.

From a cultural policy perspective, the Route promotes the living cultural heritage of Savoyard cheesemaking by putting at the centre not cultural institutions, but the individuals, families, and organisations that are the bearers of such heritage. By visiting farms, dairies, high-mountain pastures and maturing cellars, visitors interact with active production sites managed by business organisations. Cultural heritage-awareness raising can thus go hand in hand with commercial promotion in mutually supporting manner. Businesses continuously adapt their cultural heritage to market conditions and technology developments and, with exhibits and experiential activities, are able to showcase and transfer it to both tourists and locals. Their roots in the local terroir and cultural heritage serves as a differentiating factor able to motivate consumer preference and willingness to buy heritage-consistent products. Cultural institutions can collaborate with these commercial organisations to ensure the scientific quality of exhibits and experiential spaces.

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