

Chapter 4

The Future for Traditional Salinas

Renato Neves

The factors that determine the survival of traditional methods of producing consumer goods, foodstuffs or other products within a global economy are varied and are often linked to one of the two extremes of the development scale: on the one hand, depressed economies at the margins of global markets; and on the other, developed economies with demanding markets in which consumers look for authenticity and quality and are prepared to pay more for them.

Based on the experience gained during the ALAS Project, it can be concluded that traditionally produced salt is only just surviving in most of the countries that still maintain traditional production methods. The global economy is slowly extending over the whole planet and if differences are disappearing, why continue to produce a more expensive product if it can be bought more cheaply? This is the great dilemma facing traditional salinas and the problem cannot be solved by local producers alone. Since the threat to salinas stems from the globalisation of markets, the solution can only be found on a global basis, through cooperation.

Indeed one of the main objectives of the ALAS Project was to try and fully understand the situation and current trends, and to seek mechanisms designed to safeguard salinas as productive units and as ecosystems created and maintained by humans.

Salt, like many other products, travels a very circuitous route from the salinas where it originates to its different customers, which may be wholesalers, retailers, industry or simply individual con-

sumers. The large producing companies have adopted a strategy of concentration and dispersal, with successive sales between themselves and considerable investment in new producing regions. Against this background, what should the role of traditional salinas be? Given that they are responsible for only an extremely small proportion of the salt currently produced, that their production costs are constantly on the rise and that they need restoration work (always complex and costly), what should their strategy be?

We know from the example of Guérande that there is only one possible route to follow: to produce salt exclusively for culinary use, duly certificated as to its chemical composition and production processes. This objective can only be achieved through regulating and setting specific standards for traditional salt, preferably within the framework of European Community legislation and regulations. This will require close collaboration between the various producing



◀ Salt piles in Figueira

Photo: Hjalmar Dahm

◀ Most Portuguese traditional salinas have been abandoned in recent years

Photo: Renato Neves

regions, who will need to raise the issue with national and EC regulatory bodies.

The Guérande experience also demonstrates how important it is to raise the public's awareness, to show them that the product is linked to particular places, cultures and ecosystems, which are often unique but under threat due to years of abandonment and neglect.

The potential of salinas as natural and cultural spaces has been amply demonstrated throughout the ALAS Project. This potential can and should be used to several different ends, all directed at developing the sites and their product, traditional salt.

This form of concerted action was fundamental to the success of Guérande, although it should be noted that this success is delicately balanced, since it will always depend on traditionally produced salt being appreciated above the in-

dustrially produced kind for culinary purposes. Should this distinction ever be blurred, then the situation will change and, however aware consumers are, traditional salt will always tend to be crushed by competition from the industrial variety.

Thus, faced with both present and future threats, the only viable strategy appears to be to organise producers into a European federation that includes European Union member and candidate countries, together with efforts to publicise the sites and the product as widely as possible. In this respect, the ALAS Project has been an important initiative, and its various publications, the four salt museums and the many events organised locally, have helped to raise awareness of the product and the values associated with it. But this is merely the first step; there is still a long way to go to ensure the survival of traditional salinas.

The Guérande experience

Hjalmar Dahm

The traditional salinas of Guérande in Brittany face the Atlantic coast of France, close to the estuary of the Loire River. It is probably the best example of a salt-producing site that, although threatened 30 years ago, has managed not only to survive but to develop into one of Europe's best examples in the field of integrated local development.

In 1972, facing the risk of total abandonment, the 250 remaining salters (*paludiers*) decided to create a professional organisation. *Le Groupement des Producteurs de Sel de Guérande* was born. At the same time some young people arrived from outside the area and all of the craftsmen became more dynamic. In 1979, the first young salters were trained and this annual training course has since then led to a total renewal of the salters. More than 180 people have been trained. The training school is organised by the Chamber of Agriculture in close collaboration with the professionals.

The salters and their organisations have always been aware of the quality aspects of their salt. But it was not until 1989 that a major study, APROSEL, was carried out. The whole area contributed to the work: salters, nature conservationists, hunters, tourist offices, developers, politicians, civil servants... The final report showed that a clear strategy for the future of salt production was of vital importance. The essential keywords were:



◀ A young salter in Guérande
Photo: Hjalmar Dahm

- the *site* (the salinas),
- the *people*, and
- the *products* from the salinas.

This scheme might seem obvious, but in Guérande it did not remain mere words, but a full strategy that actually came into action.

The study also resulted in the creation of APROSELA, an important link between producers and traders for all issues linked to quality policy, management of resources and promotion. APROSELA also managed to obtain a French quality distinction, the prestigious *Label Rouge*. (Many salters have also obtained organic approval of their salt under the *Nature et Progrès* label.)

Very rapidly the former organisation of salt producers was consolidated and changed into a co-operative, thus giving the salters full control over their product, all the way from salinas to consumers.

The salters have also managed to integrate both ecological management of the area and handling of visitors in a region that is particularly popular with tourists. The salinas are also a member of the *Remarkable Gastronomical Sites* network. Finally, they are now protected by stringent French legislation (*Site Classé*), by Natura 2000 and by the International Convention on Wetlands, the Ramsar Convention.

Today, the main work of the Co-operative is based on the quality aspects of the salt and the management of stocks and sales. Apart from the labels mentioned above, it has also obtained ISO 9002 for transport, stocking, processing, packaging, loading and sale of the salt and its by-products. The salters

have individually signed specific contracts – *Agri-confiance* – for the production and transport of their salt. Both these warranties are handled by the French Association for Quality Insurance (AFAQ). The French Association for Health and Security of Foodstuffs (AFSSA) has given a positive response to a request to classify Atlantic salt as a product from agriculture (and not from mines as was previously the case for all salts, even from salinas) and also to lower minimum NaCl levels from 97% to 94%. This will open the way for the famous *Sel de Guérande* to obtain more labels, including elsewhere in the European Union.

Thalassotherapy in Pomorie and Piran

Antoaneta Grozeva & Robert Turk

Pomorie

Thalassotherapy (sea therapy) is a medication and prophylaxis that uses the natural resources of the seashore – climate, sun, seawater, curative mud, rape, sea lye, seaweed, sand, etc.

From antiquity Pomorie has been famous as a healing place because of its 'sacred lake', on the bottom of which lies the precious curative mud formed through the millennia and used by the Romans and the Thracians for medication in the remote past. The mud field in Pomorie lake was studied at the beginning of the 20th century and as a result the first medical institution using curative mud was built in 1925. Nowadays the largest modern rehabilitation centre in the Balkan Peninsula is situated on the mud lake shore in Pomorie. It offers 1000 curative mud medical procedures daily. Scientific research has indisputably proved the uniqueness of Pomorie firth mud.

The climate – An essential component of thalassotherapy in Pomorie is its favourable temperate continental climate. The average annual air temperature is 12 °C, with an average January temperature of 2.6 °C and 26.3 °C in July. The winter is mild, with spring arriving after 15th March, and the warm and sunny autumn lasts until 15th December. Average annual sunshine is 2360 hours. In the morning, before sunrise, the air is rich in ozone and negative ions, ultraviolet rays, and iodine evolved as a gas by the seaweed.

The sea-water is clean with no industrial waste. With summer temperatures of 24-25 °C, the water is suitable for bathing and for children and sick people. The waterside is shallow, with a slightly sloping lakebed.

The sand is used for therapy (psammotherapy). There are beaches with fine yellow silica sand and others with black sand due to specific iron compounds. As a result the sand is warmed very quickly by the sun and is highly suitable for sun and sand therapy.

Curative mud – many experiments have proved its anti-inflammatory and analgesic activity as well as its stimulating effect on metabolic processes, due to its varied composition: sulphates, magnesium, bromine, iodine, amino acids, and hormone-like substances.

Medical treatments with mud:

- application – full and partial, temperature 39-42 °C, 15-20 minutes duration
- bath-tub – 10% solution of lake rape and mud, temperature 37-38 °C, 15-20 minutes duration
- cavity – vaginal and rectum wads
- Egyptian – open air, during the warm months

- electrophoresis with mud
- mud compresses

Lake rape – this is the water over the mud layer in the lake. Its chemical composition is identical to the liquid phase of the mud and the sea-water, but differs in the concentration of the dissolved salts. During the summer months the salt concentration in the rape is higher than in the liquid phase of the mud. This makes it an effective therapeutic remedy for various disorders. The lake rape is used in bath-tubs with 8-10% concentration of mud, as well as in showers and vaginal lavages.

Mother lye is a yellow oil-like fluid with a unique taste, obtained as a secondary product during salt production. After 25 °Bé lake water concentration, sodium chloride begins to crystallize. After it separates, a concentrated salt solution is obtained. This contains a series of physiologically important microelements such as magnesium, bromine, iodine, etc. Analysis shows that the lye has good anti-inflammatory activity.

Medical treatment methods with mother lye:

- lye compress
- inhalation with 2-5% lye solution
- electrophoresis with lye

Seaweed therapy – The Black Sea is rich in 122 kinds of algae in the three groups – green, brown and red. They all have high concentrations of seawater compounds, as well as potassium, iodine and sulphur. They are applied externally in baths and dressings.

Piran

The curative effects of brine and mud from the Sečovelje saltworks were enjoyed as far back as the 13th century by those being treated for tuberculosis at the Benedictine Monastery of St. Lawrence. The reputation of Portorož grew, attracting ever greater numbers of visitors in need of therapy. In 1830, a spa hotel was built for the needs of the Austrian army, and in 1890, a public spa with swimming pools was added. With the establishment of the electric tram service linking Portoroz with Piran and the train station in Lucija, the connection with Vienna, capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was complete; and, via Trieste, guests arrived from all across Central Europe. Dressed in somewhat incongruous swimsuits, which looked like hybrids of vests and long johns, they gingerly exposed themselves to the beneficial influences of the Mediterranean. The construction in 1911 of the Palace, the most prestigious hotel in the Adriatic, was symbolic of the heyday of this most imperial of resorts, an era which came to an abrupt and melancholic end with the outbreak of the First World War. Thalassotherapy treatments became popular once again after World War II and are nowadays one of the most important tourist products in Portoroz. They still rely on brine and mud from the traditional Sečovelje saltworks and constitute an important opportunity for the Sečovelje Saltworks Landscape Park.



▲ Salt baths at Kitros salinas (Greece)

Photo: Hjalmar Dahm

Training of salters

Flavio Bonin & Hjalmar Dahm

Salt-making requires knowledge, dexterity, patience and muscle. The skills were traditionally passed on from father to son (or often from grandfather to grandson). Today things have changed and the salter is either a specialised worker in an industrial salina or a “free” salt farmer in an artisanal salina. With technological changes and with the introduction of machinery in salinas, different technological skills are therefore required from the salters.

Very few specific schools for salters exist. In former Yugoslavia, salters from Piran initially attended school classes in Ulcinj, Montenegro. The courses had both theoretical and practical parts. When the mining school in Velenje (NE Slovenia) was established, a special programme for salters was introduced. This school programme overlapped with the one for miners, although there were some specific differences concerning machinery, mining and practical training. Schoolteachers used to come to the Secovlje salinas where they organized complementary courses for their students. Here the salters also passed their practical examinations. As the salinas were largely abandoned, interest in training of salters diminished and the practical examinations were no longer given.

However, the formal education of Slovene salters is still covered by the Mining School, and it is planned to reopen courses in the Sečovlje salinas, if interest in this old tradition revives. The Director has proposed the implementation of two school programmes: an ordinary (regular technical secondary school) programme and a specific programme for adults. The latter is meant for already employed salters or newcomers who wish to work in salinas. The programme will be organized as a two-year course, from April to September, with an emphasis on practical work (1,920 hours). The theoretical part will last 240 hours (society, the natural environment and technology).

In Guérande a training centre specifically for salters was set up in 1980. Since then between 8 and 15 young people annually have gone through the year-long course. Today the training is organised by the prefectural Chamber of Agriculture in collaboration with the professionals. The programme is divided into 1,200 hours of theory (economics, ecology, and technology) and 1,014 hours of practical work in the salinas. The trainee is paid during the course and can later obtain financial aid when starting up his or her activity. The success of this course has led to total regeneration of salinas in most French Atlantic salina sites: Guérande, Ile de Noirmoutier, Ile de Ré and some minor sites. The average age of salters in Guérande is now around 30 years.

The Guérande cooperative also regularly organizes specific training sessions for experienced salters on different themes related to the production of salt.

What training has been done within the ALAS sites?

Pomorje

In Pomorje the only traditional salina still in operation is managed by one man who is over 70 years old. The salter has instructed both his son and his two grandsons in the art of salt-making. His son is now assisting him in the regular work around both the salina and the new salt museum. The ambition of the ALAS team is for a training course to start in 2003 because the reestablishment of salinas will require qualified people.

Figueira

A training school was to be set up at the technical school in Figueira da Foz under the ALAS project. The plans were well advanced and the programme was ready, but due to the unfavourable economic situation in the salinas no students were interested and the course did not go ahead.

This unfortunate example shows that all actions within salinas are inter-linked. If the salt is not sold, if the site is not sufficiently protected and managed, it is not the time to train new salters. A general strategy or local concept must be worked out by all partners and implemented before starting initiatives such as training.

Piran

Piran has begun to train high school and graduate students who assist in the museum's presentation of the salinas. The Maritime Museum has selected three main directions for appropriate training:

As a first priority the museum trained a salter who manages the museum's presentations. This programme started in 2001, by getting an employee through the ALAS project. The apprentice is a graduate student from the Transport faculty of Ljubljana University. Besides having a good knowledge of salt production, he will be required to study the history connected to traditional salt production, related geography, sciences and coastal area characteristics. It is his duty to educate schoolchildren, students and visitors to the salt museum. He also supervises the work of the salters who work in the museum's salinas.

Since 1999 a 14-day international work camp has been organised, together with the voluntary work organisation, *Service Civil International*. Participants are students from different European countries. The camps include both practical work in the salinas and learning more about the historical, cultural and scientific interests of the coastal area. This experience has emerged as a very successful way of working.

Lately there have been frequent requests by schools to enable their students to participate in practical training in the salinas. With the aim of providing them with a wide field of knowledge, the Maritime Museum worked out a common programme with several institutions: the Pedagogical Faculty, the Regional Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, the Regional Institute for the Protection of Nature and the Marine Biological Institute of Piran. In 2001 we had a group of 7 students from the Faculty of Ethnology.



◀ Training of new salters in Pomorje within the ALAS framework

Photo: Hjalmar Dahm

Artisanal salt in the frame of EC rules

Hjalmar Dahm

European systems for developing and protecting foodstuffs

The European Commission has to deal with a wide range of different foods in Europe. If a product earns fame that goes beyond national borders it can find itself in a market where similar products pass themselves off as the genuine article and take the same name. *Ouzo* and *feta* are two Greek examples of this, Guérande's *fleur de sel* another. This unfair competition discourages producers and misleads consumers. Since 1992 the European Union has therefore developed some specific systems to encourage diverse agricultural production, to protect product names from misuse and imitation and to help consumers by giving them information about the specific character of products. The names of about 500 cheese, meat, fruit and vegetable products are currently registered under EU legislation. But as yet this does not include salt.

Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) covers foodstuffs that are produced, processed and prepared in a specific geographical area using recognised know-how.

Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) shows the geographical link which must occur in at least one of the stages of production, processing or preparation. Furthermore, the product can benefit from a good reputation. This is considered to be a more flexible system than PDO. A French product can obtain it only if it previously has a *Label Rouge*.

A third system is *Traditional Speciality Guaranteed* (TSG), which does not consider geographical origin, but emphasises the product's traditional character, either in its composition or in its means of production.

The European Union now also has a logo for organic food. This was introduced in March 2000 and is used on a voluntary basis by farmers whose systems and products satisfy EU regulations (EEC no. 2092/91). If you find this logo on a product, you can be assured that:

- at least 95% of the product's ingredients have been organically produced;
- the product complies with the rules of the official inspection scheme;
- the product has come directly from the producer or preparer in a sealed package;
- the product bears the name of the producer, the preparer or vendor and the name or code of the inspection body.

How to register a product name on the European level

There are of course some steps to follow:

- A group of producers join together and define the product according to precise specifications.
- The application, including the specifications, must be sent to the relevant national authority (often the Ministry of Agriculture or its regional section).
- The application is examined at the national level before the dossier is sent to the European Commission.
- Control procedures are carried out.
- If the product meets the requirements, a first publication in the Official Journal of the European Communities will inform those in the Union that are interested.
- If there are no objections, the European Commission publishes the protected product name in the Official Journal.

More information can be obtained from the European Commission's web-site:

www.europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/qual

What is ISO?

The ISO (International Organization for Standardization) was created in 1946 with the aim of setting international norms in many domains. ISO 9002 – which many salt-producing companies have – is a guarantee of quality in production, transformation and related activities. The Guérande salt co-operative obtained it in 2000 when the new buildings and machinery came into operation.

ISO 14000 is a model for the environmental management of a company.

What is an alimentary salt?

The World Health Organization – under the influence of the multinational salt companies – specifies that food grade salt must contain at least 97% sodium chloride (*Codex Alimentarius CX STAN 150-1985*). Traditional salts – due to their mode of harvest and richer variety of minor salts – rarely reach this level. Many countries – and the European Union – have adopted this biased rule, which – in both theory and practice – prevents traditional salts from being sold. Still many traditional salts are available on the market, but it is more difficult to obtain an official label or to enter the European system. After several years of studies, writing and lobbying, French Atlantic salt is about to be officially recognised as "alimentary". The French Agency for Health and Security of Foodstuffs (AFSSA) has given a positive response both to classify salt as a product from agriculture (and not mines) and to lower NaCl levels to 94%. This should make all traditional salt producers happy, because it opens the way for hopefully prompt European recognition and the possibility of applying for European labelling.