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The Missouri Regional Cuisines Project: Geographical Indications as a Rural Development Opportunity

Introduction

Rural development specialists who have worked with food, agriculture, and agritourism in their local region as a route to promoting economic development are frequently exhorted to “brand their effort” or focus on creating a “destination region.” It is perhaps not surprising that this approach often comes as something of an afterthought to community groups that have banded together to keep their small towns alive. Often, local groups form and become active in agritourism promotion, for example, with goals such as preserving their local culture and heritage, keeping their farmers on the land, and helping their towns remain attractive enough to retain a critical mass of young people as more and more leave for urban jobs. Looking for help to achieve these goals, they find that whatever meager resources were previously available through local, county, or state governments to support rural development are severely strained under the pressures of the current economic downturn. And so their focus naturally shifts to a more market-oriented outlook and the increased local revenue that tourists from outside their region might bring in. How can they get “city folk” to come to their area if they don’t even know it exists, much less what there is to do there? The logical conclusion is that they need a regional brand to make their area a target for travelers.

This report presents an alternative to regional branding as simply a marketing exercise, an alternative that, I will argue, comes closer to capturing what community members are truly after: a geographical indication (or GI). Europe produces scores of products whose names, or *appellations*, are taken from their regions of origin. American audiences are familiar with many of them such as Champagne (a region in France), Roquefort cheese (also a French region), and Parma ham (from Italy). What is not familiar or known to Americans is the organizational structure that is typically found behind a European GI, a structure that brings together local producers, government agencies, and research universities to sustain and improve on key regional products. In return, the products bring fame to the regions where they are located, and often much of their wealth. They attract tourists who consume the product in its local setting, and they create jobs in the production of the product for export out of the region to the rest of the country or to other countries. While not every GI is successful in this respect, European countries have found that successful GIs often make the difference towards maintaining the viability of rural areas that would otherwise be economically marginalized.

In what follows, some of the history of an attempt to create a structure that resembles that of a European GI is traced, but in an American context: the Mississippi River Hills (see “References” for the MRHA Web link). The story of this region’s emergence, what it has accomplished, and the obstacles it has faced has already been helpful to three other regions forming in Missouri through the assistance of the Missouri Regional Cuisines Project (see “References” for Web link, which includes maps of these regions). Some of that history is shared, along with a consideration of lessons learned.

Applying European Approaches to an American Context: The Mississippi River Hills

The Missouri Regional Cuisines Project was launched on the basis of several case studies of successful geographical indications, or labels of origin, in other countries (e.g., France, Spain, Portugal, and Quebec, Canada). Claims made by the European Union that GI production was a sustainable approach to agriculture, blending economic, social, and ecological concerns to maintain a traditional product and, oftentimes along with it, a traditional way of life or set of practices (e.g., herding cattle in the high Alps in summer to make specialty cheese from the milk) were investigated. Some of this research has been captured in academic publications (Barham 2002, 2003a, 2006; Barham, Lind, and Jett 2005). The economic impacts of the labels studied were sometimes evident. At other times, the effort to create or reinforce the label's reputation was relatively new and so economic returns were not yet visible.

Social impacts, however, from the point of view of a rural sociologist, seemed quite clear: the process invoked by efforts to develop a label brought actors together from across a number of sectors (e.g., production, retail, hospitality, government, and education) to focus on the well-being of a region. Whether or not the actual label succeeded in the marketplace, these community members and business owners were afforded the opportunity to network among themselves as well as to make connections with resource persons and offices outside of their region. Their efforts to work towards a better future for their region often drew support and assistance that would not have been forthcoming had they not organized themselves and worked at collective goal setting. And perhaps most importantly, they developed a shared sense of pride about their region, and a stronger sense of hope about its future.

Ecologically, the argument that GI production is more sustainable than more conventional production methods often rests on the fact that the products in question had been produced in the same way, on the same land, for multiple generations. There is not a large body of research documenting the sustainability of the practices, but more of this kind of research is currently underway. What is perhaps more important to watch with these systems is how they adapt to changes in the environment over time as development continues to encroach on farmland in the EU just as it does in the U.S. In two case studies in Europe, rather misguided plans for extension of roadways through valuable farmland had been arrested and detoured to better locations by groups defending GI production in the area. So it could be said that communities organized around a GI and connected to its production have a better way of expressing their views to higher levels of authority when it comes to land use decisions than do individual producers scattered across a region.

Armed with these basic understandings, along with generous details on the specifics of how GI governance was organized in other countries, a pilot region was selected in Missouri to test out the notion that similar advantages could be obtained in our own country by putting the right players together and sharing the GI concept. The Mississippi River Hills, a six-county region south of St. Louis along the Mississippi River, was selected with the idea that regional wine production would be the lead GI. Earlier research on the state's wine industry (Barham 2003b) revealed that local wineries in the region had already formed

Figure 1. The Mississippi River Hills Region



an association and were collaborating on marketing regionally, laying the groundwork for a more scaled-up regional collaboration. The actual delineation of regional boundaries was done on an ecological basis, consistent with EU GI delineations. It was based on detailed mapping of the state into ecoregions by

the Missouri Department of Conservation and the Department of Geography at the University of Missouri (Nigh and Schroeder 2002). Figure 1 presents a map of the region, reflecting both the ecological and county boundaries as well as the portion of the ecoregion (shaded) that extends into Illinois.

Creating an Organizing Structure

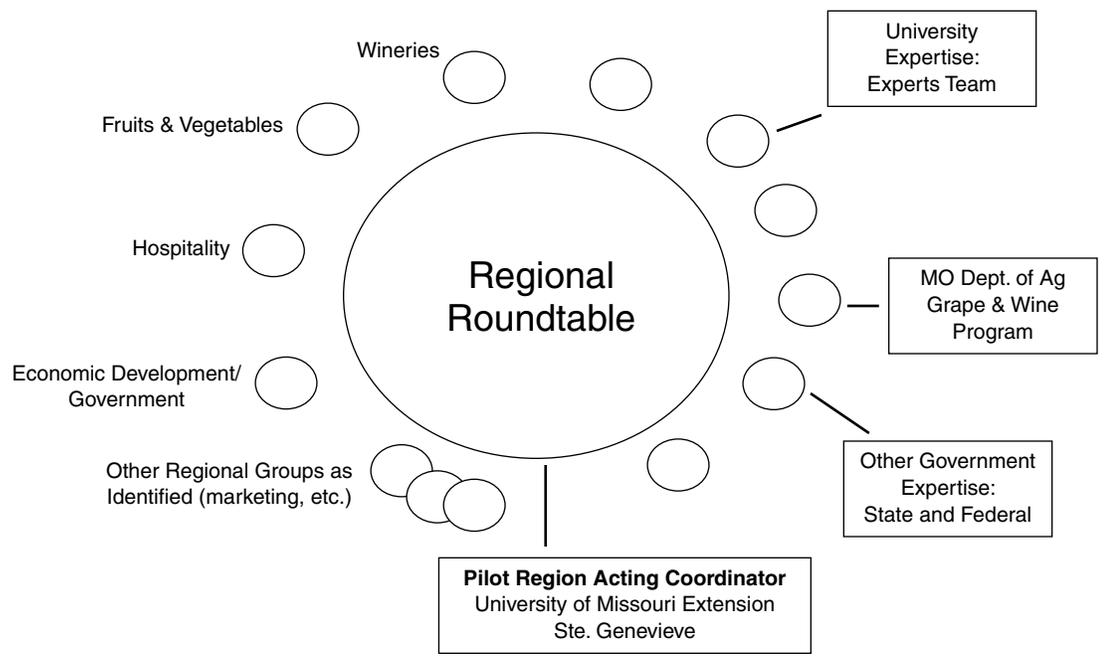
In 2002, funding was received through a Federal-State Market Improvement Program grant (see “References” for Web link to this USDA program) to help develop the new regional project. The University of Missouri’s Rural Sociology Department collaborated with the Missouri Department of Agriculture’s Wine and Grape Program to lay the groundwork for the project, targeting regional collaboration towards a new label for regionally distinctive wines. Many origin labeling systems in Europe began with wine, and so it was a logical first choice, reflecting as well that the tie of wine to the land that it comes from is rarely questioned. But the project’s ambition was not limited to wine. In European countries, visits to wine regions usually reveal a robust local food culture with a variety of specialty dishes that match to the local wines. The project title of Missouri Regional Cuisines Project (MRCP) was meant to capture this conjunction of products and the intention of working with producers of a variety of local products—fruits, vegetables, meats, cheeses, etc.—to begin to shape a more specific regional offering for tourism as well as local consumption.

their input. This was generally positive, and so a process began of collecting contact information for individuals from the key sectors that needed to be involved beyond the wineries: producers; locally owned restaurants and lodgings; leaders of local NGOs; offices concerned with tourism or economic development at the town, county, or state levels; and a variety of departments at the University of Missouri that might have expertise and interest to lend to the project. The goal was to bring individuals together from across the region and along the food chain from producer to consumer to discuss how specific local products could help them build a more vibrant local economy. We sought as much community input as possible, particularly from the sectors that would be most affected. Everyone with an interest in the project was encouraged to attend the meetings to learn more.

To get the project off the ground, initial meetings were held with local wineries to inform them of the concept and get

At the first full regional meeting of the Mississippi River Hills Association held in 2004, a general concept for organizing based on a Regional Roundtable was presented to the group (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Regional Roundtable Concept



The diagram represents a coming together of private, public, and educational entities that has become more prevalent in recent years in the EU countries around their labels of origin. The usual path to a GI in Europe begins with action by the producers themselves. In many cases, the overall promotional effort has remained with the producers without extending very far to other sectors of the local economy (e.g., hospitality and tourism industries and local retail). However, in recent years, local community members, other businesses, and government agencies working in particular label of origin regions have begun to recognize their shared interest in promoting the label and the product because of the increased tourism it can bring.

The Regional Roundtable concept was, therefore, an attempt to put various sectors together to identify their particular interests and goals and to begin to form supporting pillars for the overall regional project. Groups were encouraged to set goals for their own sector or interest group, then to work together to blend these goals and prioritize them to give the project an overall direction for the entire region. Over a series of meetings, this resulted in development of a statement of group vision, purpose, values, and goals as follows (see “References” for Web link to the MRHA, where Association information is posted):

Vision

The **Mississippi River Hills Association** (MRHA) strives to enhance the economic, cultural, historical, and educational value of the region.

Purpose

The **MRHA** works to promote, protect, enhance, and market the agricultural products, foods, wines, arts, crafts, sites, and services within the region.

Core Values

- Preserving and protecting our unique regional identity
- Honoring regional customs, culture, and traditions
- Strengthening the regional economy by supporting entrepreneurship and agriculture, and by developing rural and specialty tourism markets
- Promoting conservation of the environment
- Preserving and sharing the beauty and history of the region’s natural and agricultural landscapes
- Sharing information and resources locally and with other regions

Long-Term Goals

- Increase regional cooperation and communication
- Change the views of economic development to one that encourages and supports entrepreneurship
- Increase viable career opportunities for youth
- Increase the number of successful entrepreneurs
- Increase the amount of visitors and tourists, and of repeat visitors
- Encourage research that will benefit the region
- Increase the number and quality of economic relationships among producers, retailers, and consumers

The MRCP encouraged the local group to take charge of their region from the beginning, recognizing that if the local participants did not take the project up and make it their own, it would not last over time. Although it took a few years of incubation, the end result was the formation of a nonprofit entity in the region with a 12-member elected Board of Directors. The Board includes representation from each of the six counties and from the six stakeholder groups: (1) artisans, (2) hospitality and tourism, (3) local governments, (4) food producers, (5) retailers of locally produced goods, and (6) wineries and vineyards. The resulting structure is not very far from the Regional Roundtable concept presented at the first meeting, but it has been transformed into a more formally structured group that can raise funds, make decisions, and put the actions in motion that are needed to reach their goals.

The Mississippi River Hills is developing a new regional website that already contains a number of documents useful to tracing the evolution of the project in more detail, including a documents section with archives of meeting minutes, and the first issue of a very informative regional newsletter, photos, and the interactive regional map. The section “About MRHA” mentions the University of Missouri Extension Office located in Ste. Genevieve as “incubating” the project. In fact, the role of Extension specialist Letitia Johnson and, more recently, MRHA coordinator Lisa Palmer, cannot be overestimated in terms of their importance to the success the project has realized. While the main Regional Cuisines office provided guidance, information, early funding, structuring of meetings, and ongoing support, without the hands-on involvement day to day of these Extension leaders based in the region it seems doubtful the project would have succeeded. This points to the crucial need for local leadership for any such undertaking, whether it is found within Extension or from among community members.

Some Accomplishments and Outcomes

One early goal for the project was to develop an inventory of cultural heritage assets of the region that could be incorporated into regional promotional activities. A folklore specialist was contracted to carry out a study of historical and current foodways (Rahn 2004). The study identified particular products that had been grown in the region, some even very recently, that are no longer in production. Several were singled out by participants in regionwide meetings held in the pilot region as products they would like to see in production once again. Work is underway to evaluate market potential for these products. The ultimate goal for the project would be to have a number of regionally specific products of high quality that are featured prominently in regional venues such as restaurants, B&Bs, regional winery tasting rooms, and at regional festivals.

Part of the motivation for the foodways study was the desire to map key locations in the region that tourists would want to visit. Funds were raised from a number of sources to produce a regional agritourism map, featuring local wineries, restaurants, and stores featuring specialty food from the region, along with local lodging and retail establishments marketing local arts and crafts. Nearly 50,000 copies of this map have been distributed, boosting the visibility and reputation of the region. Tourism increased over 10% in the region after the map's release in 2005. The region is currently investigating funding sources for reprinting the map in a new version, possibly to be self-supported by the businesses featured. In the meantime, the locations have been mapped and entered into an online version of the regional map available on the region's new website (see "References" for Web link to MRH mapping).

Due to their focus on bringing structure and organization to their regional efforts, community members were well-poised to take advantage of a grant opportunity offered by the ExCEED program, operated by University of Missouri Extension (see "References" for Web link). The program works towards community economic development with a stress on entrepreneurship. Through the program funded in the Mississippi River Hills (MRH), a number of useful training opportunities were brought to the region, and Extension staff were funded to continue working with community members. The ExCEED program no longer provides direct grant funding, and so efforts are underway to secure funding in the region through other sources.

A major goal of the project has been to strengthen and enhance the sense of regional identity shared by community

members in the region and to improve communication, cooperation, and mutual support in the region, including more local buying. They also wanted to find a way to translate their collective sense of their region's identity, and their pride in it, to the broader public. The group followed an intensive process of brainstorming to settle on core values as well as on the main positive associations they have with the region. Much of this was focused around work towards a regional logo, which was designed for them by an advertising agency retained in St. Louis (see "References" for Web link to the MRHA to view the logo).

From the beginning of the project, participants had been encouraged to consider product quality as a key goal, which would eventually involve standards of some sort. In the EU, producer groups typically develop their product standards internally, with assistance from the appropriate government agency (usually the equivalent of our USDA or a state department of agriculture agent) for documenting and recording the standards that are adopted. Controls are also implemented to prevent "free riders," producers who would take advantage of the value-added benefits of the regional label but not follow the rules for quality production.

In the case of the MRH, the concept for the project was brought to the region from the outside and not put forward by the local wineries themselves. Further, no formal process was in place, as in the EU, that would have required that standards be established before applying for recognition of a regional label. However, the process of "building" the logo eventually resulted in the same dynamic as it engendered discussions among the group as to what the standards would be for businesses wanting to use the logo. These discussions were eventually codified into a Logo Standards Policy, which was only recently adopted and will soon be available on the website. From the point of view of the MRCP, this development is very promising as it helps to put in place a process of self-examination and improvement in the region that is controlled by the people themselves and emerges from their own views of the standards they want to uphold. Over time, if the project continues to develop and grow, it can be expected that the standards will follow an upward path of slowly moving the quality of the region's offerings higher and higher, which will, in turn, benefit the region both in tourism attractiveness and in sales of their products outside of the region.

Some Lessons Learned

This report opened with a brief discussion of geographical indications for particular regional products, a way of structuring regional collaboration that might be thought of as a strong version of regional branding. Comparing the MRH experience to those of regions with GIs in Europe helps explain, to some extent, both its successes and its shortcomings.

Ecological Basis for Regionalization: In some respects, taking ecology as a basis for regional delineation has proven to be quite rational from the participants' point of view. Inhabitants of the region, and particularly local producers, are very aware of "where they are" ecologically speaking. While they may never have seen a map of their ecoregion, if they have traveled in and out of it frequently, they are often able to tell you with remarkable accuracy where the boundaries of their region begin and end. Grouping producer efforts on this basis allows for similar approaches to production problems and might eventually provide a good platform for addressing challenges such as climate change. Ecological delineation sidesteps problems that can come with establishing regions simply on political boundaries (such as a group of counties banding together to pursue a grant opportunity) because the "boundary" is there on the land and does not have to be justified on a political basis, or fought over in the same way by sometimes contending political factions. For these same reasons, it might prove to be more enduring than other regionalization efforts that quickly fall apart when the funding dries up for the effort that brought the partners together in the first place.

However, from the point of view of interfacing with pre-existing institutional arrangements, the ecoregional approach can prove difficult. State agencies all have their own ways of carving up the state, ways that fit their programming structure. Typically, none of these agency groups are aligned with one another (i.e., Department of Agriculture with Department of Tourism or Economic Development). University Extension programs use yet another breakdown. As staffing, support, resources, and grant opportunities often flow along the institutional lines of a given agency, the result is that none of them can easily recognize the "new" ecoregion in their programming without asking employees and programs to cross programming boundaries. This can result in turf issues, both within and between agencies, and confusion among agency staff as to who should be in charge of their representation and participation in the region.

Cross-Sectoral Approach: Crossing political and sectoral boundaries (sectors in business as well as in public, private, and nonprofit divisions) has become widely accepted in theory as fundamental to successful regional planning, development, and governance (Brookings Institution 2002;

Stark 2007). Another way to put this is networking, or building regional clusters of businesses with strong government and education support. In fact, a significant number of projects have emerged across the U.S. that bear resemblances to the Missouri Regional Cuisines Project in that they bring producers together with other actors on a regional basis. Sometimes, food systems are the lead target in the cluster, and other times, it may be crafts or local arts and crafts. Handmade in America, located in North Carolina, is a good example of a project that began with crafts and incorporated food systems as it went forward and recognized their importance to regional tourism (see "References" for Web link to this organization).

Since 2001, the Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO) has been supported by grants from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to lead groups of Rural Learning Clusters, including one named Regional Flavor that explores how six regions built their regional brand based on local foods (see "References" for Web link to AEO where information on the Regional Flavor project can be viewed). June Holly, executive director of the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks for 20 years (see "References" for Web link) and now a principal in the consulting firm Network Weavers (see "References" for Web link), developed several useful documents in the context of the Regional Flavor initiative that provide step-by-step instructions on how to develop a regional flavor plan and regional entrepreneurial network (Holly 2005, 2007). She also stresses the importance of cross-sectoral networking and the involvement of policy-makers and economic development professionals in building regional projects.

The MRCP shares the lessons these other projects have learned regarding the challenges of working effectively across sectors. Key among them are the following:

- *The need for strong support at the top:* Agency heads, university administrators, regional planning directors, elected officials, NGO leaders all have a role to play when it comes to the ongoing success of a regional project like Mississippi River Hills. But, as in the discussion of the challenges of using ecological boundaries for regionalization, they do not always align with one another in terms of goals and preferences, and their support can wax and wane with circumstances and changes in leadership as individuals retire or are promoted, or new elections take place.
- *The importance of support structures, or enabling "social infrastructure," at the regional level:* When targeting help towards businesses, whether they are town or farm-based,

it is easy for individual business owners to feel that it is not their responsibility to carry the organizational burden of a regional network. They are right, of course, and so some kind of organization must be built that can back them up with logistical support (e.g., calling meetings; taking minutes; keeping the database of participants up-to-date; mapping the businesses if this is desired; creating websites, blogs, and marketing plans; and so forth). At this time, there is no existing go-to entity with sustainable funding and a mandate to fill this role. Each regional effort takes a somewhat different shape depending on how they solve that problem.

- *The tendency for economic development professionals and offices to discount or undervalue cross-sectoral regional development that doesn't fit traditional economic development models:* These professionals, along with

leaders from government and education, are constantly pressured to provide handy return on investment (ROI) figures to justify expenditures up-front (“If we invest \$1 in this, how many dollars of impact will the economy get? How many jobs will be created and at what wages? Where are the figures to show the impact of the project?”). Part of the problem with answering these questions is that the data needed to conduct a study to provide the answers are typically not available on the county level, and when they are available, they are not usually segmented by locally owned and nonlocally owned businesses. The data available through the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), for example, are not organized to easily bring together agriculture, restaurants, lodging, retail, and recreation, nor are they broken out by whether the businesses are locally owned.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I return to parallels with European experience to tell us something about how they have solved the problems above through the structure of geographical indications. While these systems evolved over many decades and vary somewhat country to country, their administration always includes top-level support through designated offices at the state (country) level, usually located in the Ministry of Agriculture of a given country. Furthermore, there are established offices at the EU Commission level that help bring regional GI needs and perspectives to the top levels of European government.

Government funding is allocated through these offices to help underwrite the supporting offices that help producer groups develop standards. But producer groups are also accustomed to imposing taxes on their products to help support these offices financially. In the United States, we have many examples of producer organizations that self-tax to support their trade association, for example; these are typically not as interwoven structurally with regional development as are similar producer groups in the EU.

In terms of data collection to report on regional economic impacts, several large studies on GI have been commissioned in recent years by the EU, in particular through the DOLPHINS and SENER-GI research programs (see “References” for Web link). Comparable, but much smaller, studies in the U.S. have

mostly been funded by nonprofits and are typically not comparative across regional projects in different states.

It could be that the social movement for “local food” that has emerged in the U.S. will find a strong connection with the concept of regional food that a GI reflects. If so, consumers may drive the institutional changes needed by shifting market demand. In the meantime, regional organizations will continue to weave their way through the changes brought by politics and the economic downturn, drawing their strength primarily from the relationships they build by working together and sharing a common dream.

The Mississippi River Hills has a firm foundation and excellent leadership, but its leaders know clearly that in many respects they are on their own as a nonprofit. If regional “branding,” in the GI form, is to take root in the U.S., it will probably require an opening to the concept at the level of the U.S. government and at least minimal ongoing support to provide the continuity that it takes to build world-famous regional names like Champagne and Parma. The country is facing many changes that demand innovation, however, and so this may be the moment for regional collaborative efforts to emerge as a clear path forward for rural America, deserving of federal recognition and support.

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Web Links

- Appalachian Center for Economic Networks website: www.acenetworks.org.
- Association of Enterprise Opportunity (AEO) website: www.microenterpriseworks.org/index.asp?bid=2189.
- European Union commissioned studies on geographical indications under the DOLPHINS and SINER-GI research programs: www.origin-food.org.
- Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program (USDA-Agricultural Marketing Service) website: www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/FSMIP.
- Handmade in America website: www.handmadeinamerica.org.
- Mississippi River Hills Association (MRHA) website: www.showme.net/MRH.
- MRH GIS mapping website: www.showme.net/MRH/index.htm.
- Missouri Regional Cuisines Project website: <http://extension.missouri.edu/cuisines>.
- Network Weavers website: www.networkweaving.com.
- University of Missouri Extension ExCEED Program website: <http://extension.missouri.edu/ceed>.

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