

PROMOTION OF RURAL AREAS OF BRANIČEVO-DANUBE REGION THROUGH BRANDING OF AGRI-FOOD PRODUCTS

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities of promoting rural areas of the Braničevo Danube region, primarily through the branding of agri-food products. Accordingly, the aim of the paper is to perform a market analysis to select the products with the highest potential to represent the BP region. The purpose of this product selection is to connect them with territory and people in order to enhance the tourism potential of the Branicevo-Danube (BD) region. The methodology is based on the market research conducted in the period December 2018-January 2019, when 67 agricultural producers surveyed in the area of the BP region were engaged in the production and processing of agri-food products. Also, we used indicators of the BD region for the analysis of the situation and the selection of perspective agri-food products with added value. The results of the research showed that the three most promising sectors in the BP region in the field of agri-food production are: 1. Vegetable and fruit processing, 2. Beekeeping and 3. Milk processing.

Key Words: promotion, rural areas, branding, agri-food products, tourism, rural tourism

JEL classification: M31, L83, R51, Q13

Introduction

The agricultural sector is a significant part of the Serbian economy, so it is often viewed as an area of great potential (Atanasijević & Danon, 2014). At the same time, the development of rural areas is closely linked to the development of agriculture and processing of agricultural products, so

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agricultural production is traditionally the most important sector of the rural economy and the main source of income for the rural population. However, the biggest problems are the unfavorable demographic trends and small households with insufficient market-oriented production (Simonović et al., 2019).

Braničevo-Danube is the dominant predominantly rural region, characterized by rich natural resources, cultural and historical heritage, good geographical connection with key transport routes and international corridors, diversity of potentials for the development of various economic activities (Mihailović & Radić Jean, 2019). In addition to favorable natural conditions, there is a knowledge and tradition of farming in the BP region, but the competitiveness of the sector is weak.

This is due to various weaknesses in the value chain, a low level of producer organization, lack of processing for added value creation and insufficiently professional and well-designed marketing and promotion of regional products (Regional Development Agency Braničevo-Danube – RDA-BD, 2011). Developed agricultural production, according to which the BD region is among the leading regions in Serbia, has conditioned the existence of a developed food industry is a prerequisite for the development of the food industry.

According to the same source, the sector is characterized by remarkable diversity, so that there are dairies, slaughterhouses, confectionery industry, mills, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages production, etc. in the region. In the food industry, there is still untapped potential and a range of opportunities for new investments.

Agriculture in Serbia is not considered an ordinary economic branch, both because of the specificity of this production and the tradition associated with it, and because of high expectations (Mihailović et al., 2014). The Republic of Serbia has favorable natural conditions for the development of diversified agricultural production, as it is located in the most favorable northern latitude area characterized by four seasons and four climatic regions.

Accordingly, the development of various plant and livestock production is possible: cereals, industrial plants, fruits and vegetables, seeds and planting materials, medicinal plants, large and small livestock. The northern part of Serbia, Vojvodina, is mostly plain landscape, while the hilly and

mountainous regions are located in the central and southern parts of the Republic of Serbia. Plain regions are found in the Pannonian Plain and its peripheral parts - Mačva, Posavina, Pomoravlje, Stig and Negotin (Mihailović et al., 2009).

By converting authentic village values into tourist values, villages could be opened up to tourist movements, which in size and quality would be significantly different from previous tourist trends in the Republic of Serbia. It would bring dynamics into a homogeneous rural life, stabilize the further stratification of the countryside and open up wide opportunities for employment of the rural population and income generation (Štetić, 2004). Village culture is a factor in the attractiveness of rural tourism. It includes (Vujović et al., 2012):

- A culture of clothing, where folk costume represents a whole in which all the individual elements, in addition to the aesthetic, have instrumental content. In recent years, there has been a gradual dying out in the villages, the disappearance of traditional costumes and the acceptance of finished industrial products, which can lead to the recent complete disappearance of folk costumes. Reminders for the sake of the Serbian peasant brought out World War I dressed in a traditional gun.
- Housing culture, where a tourist lives on a farm property different from the fast-paced city life, together with a hospitable host in an authentically, functionally and aesthetically designed space. Everything has a cultural value in it and the farmhouse is a living museum. Just as it is important to preserve the folk costume, it is equally important to preserve the traditional, authentic Serbian house.
- Spiritual cultural values of the village: 1) Customs, mythological structure; 2) Folklore, traditional and contemporary creation in the countryside.

In recent decades, due to rapid urbanization and industrialization, the urban population has become increasingly exposed to air pollution, high noise, lack of quality drinking water, rapid pace of life leading to psychophysical exhaustion. As a result, there is an increasing need for tourist movements towards the environment of preserved natural and cultural values. In recent years, however, there has been a gradual loss of authenticity of well-known tourist centers. They are slowly losing their original qualities, both in character and in structure, approaching the settlements of urban physiognomies. Given the increased tourist needs and high prices of services in these centers, in recent years there has been a need for more intensive planning of tourist demand towards other parts of the Republic of

Serbia. Thanks to the geographic position of Serbia, landscapes suitable for different forms of recreation, natural beauties, but also rich natural heritage and folklore, there are favorable conditions for the development of the rural tourism (Cvijanović & Mihailović, 2016).

Modern tourism has many functions that are interconnected, making it an indivisible whole that has a great impact on both economic and overall social life (Mihailovic & Popović, 2018). Activating the great tourist potentials of these destinations through tourist valorisation can significantly contribute to overcoming the economic backwardness more quickly, and make the people of urban areas a holiday much cheaper and more attractive. In such circumstances, one of useful ways of promoting the rural areas of the BP region is the branding of agri-food products. Most agricultural products are homogeneous in their basic market and commercial-technological characteristics.

Namely, agriculture, as an economic activity, is specific in that most of the raw agricultural products, and also some food (e.g. raw meat) can be classified into a group of homogeneous products, with little or no differentiation. An exception is certainly the production of healthy, organic foods, where there are significant opportunities for brand development and product differentiation (Paraušić et al., 2007). The need for product differentiation originates in the concept of branding, which can help improve the competitiveness of agricultural production and increase the tourist attractiveness of rural areas.

Literature review

There are numerous concepts of unique brand qualities. They are usually distinguished by dimensions that can be objectively measured (such as taste, shape, reliability) and subjective values that can only be defined in the minds of consumers (such as brand impressions). In an earlier study, the 'functional' dimensions of a brand and its 'personality' were distinguished (Gardner & Levy, 1955). Similar attempts to distinguish brand dimensions have been reported in other works - utilitarianism or expression of value (Munson & Spivey, 1981), satisfaction of needs or impression control (Solomon, 1983), and functional or representational qualities (Chernatony & McWilliam, 1990).

Products vary in the degree to which they can be differentiated. Most agricultural products are homogeneous in their basic market and

commercial-technological characteristics. Namely, agriculture, as an economic activity, is specific in that most of the raw agricultural products and some food (raw meat) can be classified into a group of homogeneous products, with little or no differentiation. The exception is certainly the production of healthy, organic foods, where there are significant opportunities for brand development and product differentiation. A brand positioning strategy is an essential part of developing a sustainable competitive advantage for the brand (Mihailović & Popović, 2017).

Historically, most agricultural products have been sold as generic, non-branded products. Agricultural products have often been declared as easily replaceable with the same products from other locations or from other producers. This is essentially true. Until recently, most fruits and vegetables were brandless (for example, the same type of oranges from Sri Lanka and India are substitutes for each other). The exceptions were the marketing of fruit and vegetables by some multinational companies, such as Ghiquita and Geest branded United Fruits (Crawford, 1997).

Finally, some exporting countries have broken this tradition. For example, the brand of one type of apple "Pink lady apple" was developed in Australia and introduced in 1993. Since the launch and registration of the new brand, price premiums have also been achieved in export markets (Crawford, 1997). Even if competitors eventually copy that kind, which often happens in the fruit and vegetable industry, they can only present it under a different name. Some companies base their growth on acquiring and building rich brand portfolios.

For example, Grand Metropolitan has built various Pillsbury brands: Green Giant Vegetables, Haagen-Dazs Ice Cream and Burger King (Kotler, 2001). Regarding the development of the agricultural brand from Serbia, it is important to emphasize that today Serbia mainly exports only unprocessed agricultural products and that there are no products in this sector with a name recognizable on the world or European market. We are here at the very beginning, and brand creation, especially in the category of healthy food, can only be developed in the direction of products of higher stages of processing, with respect to all internationally known and recognized certificates, quality standards, standards of health food safety, etc.

Development of farmers in rural areas implies their full integration into the system of Serbian agro-complex. Contemporary agricultural production is

characterized by a high dependence of all segments of the agro-complex, which is an important subsystem of the national economy and which includes: (1) the means of production in agriculture and the food industry; (2) primary agricultural production; (3) agriculture and food processing industry (into the ready-made industrial food and industrial non-food products); (4) agri-food products marketing, and (5) final consumption of food. The main characteristics of this great subsystem is the complexity of functional relationships and interdependence of all the individual segments (Milanović, 2002). On the other hand, highly competitive environment forces modern food retailers to be more efficient and to expand their presence into emerging countries that have experienced fast economic growth, structural changes and market liberalization (Popović et al., 2018).

Over the last two decades, the application of marketing and branding strategies for destinations has become increasingly popular. Places of origin are also used for adding-value, protecting and marketing local products. For food products this is often done via geographical indications (GIs) (Donner, 2016). In rural areas, agricultural and food products form an essential part of distinctive assets. Indeed, the communication of food product quality based on geographical origin has become an established value-adding strategy in the global trade, often framed by international policies and regulations (Donner, 2016). The origin-based product can become the pivot of a quality virtuous circle within a territorial approach, meaning that its promotion through a GI process can have positive effects which reinforce themselves over time, permitting to preserve agrifood and related social systems and enabling local stakeholders to pursue economic, sociocultural and environmental sustainability (Vandecandelaere et al., 2009):

- Economic sustainability should bring about improvements to the producers' incomes and quality of life, and boost the entire rural economy dynamic.
- Socio-cultural sustainability should lead local actors to empowerment, to take part in decisions and actions on GI products and to attain a fair distribution of the benefits between actors. Local actors should raise their consciousness and pride in their work, as well as cultural identity and local knowledge and traditions.
- Environmental sustainability should orient actions towards preserving and improving local natural resources such as biodiversity, landscape, soils and water, for future generations.

The first step of the activation process is the clear identification of the product and the local resources needed for production. This relies greatly on local producers' awareness of the "potentialities" linked to specific local resources, which is at the basis of the collective action to value their product (Vandecandelaere et al., 2009). According to the same source, the possibility to activate the quality virtuous circle based on a product of specific quality linked to geographical origin depends on the presence of three main pre-requisites:

- The product: it presents some specific characteristics linked to a geographical origin that gives it a special quality and reputation on the market, with a specific consumer demand;
- The place: the special quality characteristics are the result of the natural and human resources of the local area in which it is produced;
- The people: the local producers, having inherited traditions and know-how, together with other local stakeholders, must be motivated to engage in a value creation and preservation process.

Promotion is an important aspect of the marketing mix: it is crucial to keep constant communication with both current and potential consumers and provide information about the specific quality and characteristics of the GI product in order to increase consumers' willingness to purchase and pay (Vandecandelaere et al., 2009).

Research methodology

Market research was used in the realization of the research assignment. Namely, the methodology is based on the market research conducted in the period December 2018-January 2019, when 67 agricultural producers surveyed in the area of the BP region were engaged in the production and processing of agri-food products.

The conducted research is the result of work on the study: Research and analysis of agro-food products with added value and market potential in the Branicevo-Danube region; within the project: The Taste of Region – Promoting agri-food products with added value to improve economic capacities of family households, Regional Development Agency Branicevo-Danube (RDA-BD), Požarevac, 2018 November – 2019 February. Also, the paper used existing available data on agri-food products in the BP region and research by domestic and foreign authors in the thematic area.

The following Indicators of the BP region were used for the analysis of the situation and the selection of perspective agri-food products with added value:

- the production technology used, available technical resources, the origin of raw materials, production volume and annual income from product sales;
- marketing activities, use of modern IT technology for marketing and promotion of products; market marketing of existing agricultural products, sales channels structure;
- the expected volume of production of agri-food products (in units of products), expected income from sale of agri-food products (in rsd);
- voluntary quality standards, quality control and food safety;
- business improvement (ways of improving the quality of products), critical factors for a higher level of product processing;
- the existence of associations, public private partnerships and high potential cooperatives of importance for the promotion of agri-food products with added value;
- the territory on which the product is produced, the specific taste of agri-food products.

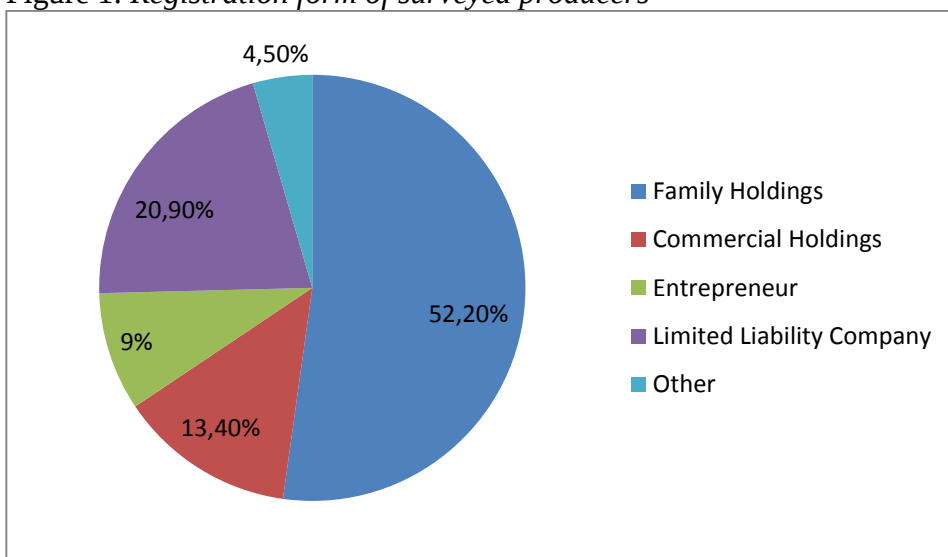
Results and discussion

Product mix includes relevant activities referring to: planning and development of new products, modification or elimination of the existing ones, determining branding, packaging and quality strategy, customer service, etc. A product is a very important instrument in agricultural marketing program. It is important to distinguish between products intended for direct consumption, which underwent no further processing, except for cleaning, sorting and packaging (e.g. vegetables) and the other group, consisting of products intended for industrial processing like raw materials (e.g. grains, cattle, etc.). A good number of products falls into both categories, because they are used both for direct consumption of households and large consumers, and as raw materials for industrial processing. In short, the specificity of agri-food products in the marketing mix is derived from the very specifics of agricultural production, which is the result of its biological nature. The production program of the surveyed producers is based on the following product categories:³ 1) vegetables,

³ In a survey research conducted by Slow Food Velika Plana researchers in December 2018, when 67 agricultural producers surveyed in the area of the BP region were engaged in the production and processing of agri-food products.

fruits and legumes (41.8%); 2) cheese and dairy products (17.9%); 3) bakery products, dough (3.0%); 4) other (37.3%). The largest share of the producers (Figure 1) registered as family holdings (52.2%), followed by limited liability companies - LLC (20.9%), commercial holdings (13.4%), entrepreneurs (9%) and other forms (4.5%). The time interval showing the duration of production of the surveyed producers includes the period from 1958 to 2018. However, the largest share of surveyed producers that started production in 2016 (16.4%), then 2010 (10.4%) and 2018 (9%) (RDA-BD, 2018).

Figure 1: *Registration form of surveyed producers*



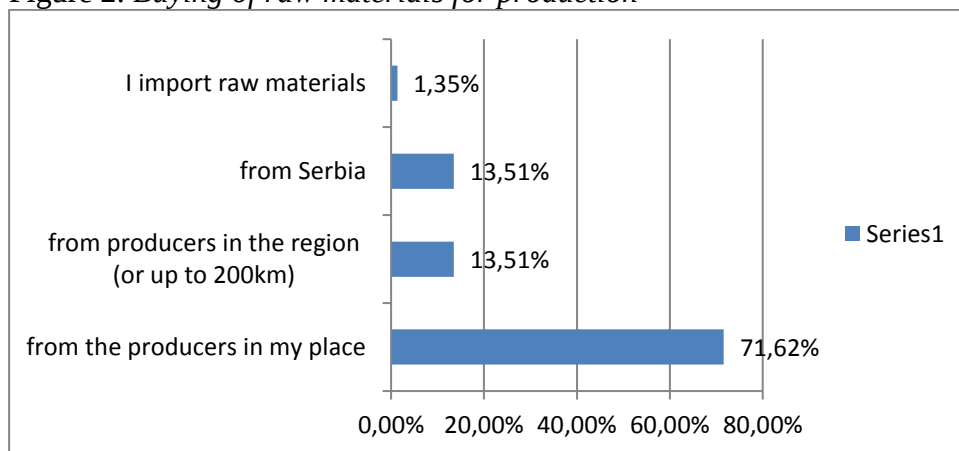
Source: *Regional Development Agency Braničevo-Danube (RDA-BD). (2018). Research and analysis of agro-food products with added value and market potential in the Braničevo-Danube region, within the project – The Taste of Region – Promoting agri-food products with added value to improve economic capacities of family households, Požarevac.*

The producers who use traditional technology and machines dominate (68.7%). A partly modern process with modern machines is present in 16.4% of surveyed manufacturers, technologies and machines of 10 and more years are recorded in 7.5% of manufacturers, and the same number of manufacturers possess a completely modern process with modern machines. Family members are the most engaged in production (45.24%). On the other hand, seasonal workers are engaged in 24.6% of surveyed producers. For some aspects of production for which producers lack sufficient production knowledge and experience, 18.25% of manufacturers

occasionally engage experts (technologists, agronomists and others). At the same time, 10.32% of the producers have permanent employees. Other categories engaged in production include 1.59%. The structure of the technical resources that the producers have at disposal is the following: equipment 32.60%, production plant 17.68%, storage area 25.97%, vehicles 17.13% and exhibition space 6.63% (Regional Development Agency Braničevo-Danube – RDA-BD, 2018).

Farmers mainly procure raw materials for production from producers from their place (71.62%). Of the producers in the region (or up to 200 km away), the raw materials for production are supplied by them 13.51%. Also, Serbia as a purchasing market was estimated by 13.51% of respondents. Only 1.35% of the surveyed producers imported raw materials for production (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Buying of raw materials for production*



Source: *Regional Development Agency Braničevo-Danube (RDA-BD). (2018). Research and analysis of agro-food products with added value and market potential in the Braničevo-Danube region, within the project – The Taste of Region – Promoting agri-food products with added value to improve economic capacities of family households, Požarevac.*

The average annual income of the surveyed producers in the BP region (family holdings, commercial holdings, entrepreneurs, LLC, etc.) in 2018 amounted to 17,607,873 dinars. However, the average income of the surveyed agricultural holdings (family and commercial) is far below this level and in 2018 it amounted to 1,376,068 dinars. Still, there are positive

business expectations since most manufacturers expect income growth in 2019.

By producing competitive agri-food products, agriculture in the BP region would ensure sufficient income for agricultural holdings, focusing its activities on meeting the needs and preferences of consumers and working closely with the food processing industry. In order to achieve this, certain economic, social and environmental goals must be fulfilled:

1. agriculture must efficiently use natural resources,
2. it must be integrated into the rest of the rural economy and society
3. it must significantly contribute to environmental protection.

Since there is a certain correlation between financial and marketing performance (PIMS model), it is useful to determine which marketing activities are undertaken by the surveyed producers in the BP region. The survey showed that the most common marketing activities are: mouth-to-mouth promotion (28%) and participation in fairs (25.71%). At the same time, the construction and protection of the brand is present in 13.71% of the surveyed producers. It is positively surprising that only 1.71% of the surveyed producers do not deal with marketing, which indicates that in the BP region there is a certain affirmative awareness of the importance of marketing activities.

Information and communications technologies are playing an increasingly important role in keeping farmers and rural entrepreneurs informed about agricultural innovations, weather conditions, input availability, financial services and market prices, and connecting them with buyers (Food and Agriculture Organization – FAO, 2017). When asked: Are you using modern IT technologies for marketing and promotion of your product, the following answers have been received (RDA-BD, 2018):

- I have a website for an agricultural holding or a product: 27.78%;
- I have a facebook page for an agricultural holding or a product: 41.11%;
- I have an Instagram site for an agricultural holding or product: 13.33%;
- I do not use modern IT technologies for marketing and promotion: 17.78%.

The majority are those producers (47.11%) who have a facebook page for an agricultural holding or product, which is understandable as it is a free advertising medium. Also, the participation (27.78%) of producers who have an open website for the agricultural household or product is significant. At the same time, almost 18% of surveyed producers do not use

modern IT technologies for marketing and promotion, which increases the need for training and education of manufacturers in this field (RDA-BD, 2018).

On the other hand, existing products are dominantly oriented to the domestic market (73.1%), and the remaining 26.9% of the producers are selling products on both domestic and foreign markets (RDA-BD, 2018). It is interesting that no surveyed producer places products exclusively on foreign markets. Analysis of the sales channel structure indicates that agricultural products in the BP region are mainly sold directly to consumers: a) consumers come to the manufacturer (37.21%); b) products are sent to the address (19.77%). Sales to tourists as a sales channel are used in 18.02% of producers and have a certain significance for the development of the BP region due to linking tourism and agri-food products of this region. It can also be an effective strategy for branding products in this area. The sale of products to restaurants is recorded at 9.88%, while supermarkets account for 5.81% of producers. There is relatively little sales channel participation through specialized stores, social networks and online stores.

The improvement of the quality of agri-food products in the BD region is achieved in the following ways: quality control (32.79%), new recipes (15.57%), packaging (16.39%), specificity of raw materials (21.31%), label design (11.48 %) and others (2.46%) (RDA-BD, 2018). It is noticeable that the surveyed producers pay the highest attention to quality control and specificity of raw materials for production.

In order to move to a higher level of product processing, the largest number of surveyed producers emphasize the need for additional investments (23.39%), technology and work improvement (20.47%) and market links improvement, sales strategies (18.71%) (RDA-BD, 2018). Improving production, logistics and distribution, as well as marketing and promotion, gives somewhat less attention. The negligible number of those manufacturers who consider procurement is an area that will facilitate the transition to a higher degree of product processing. Most producers surveyed (55.2%) estimated that the product is produced only in the territory of their place. At the same time, 13.4% of those surveyed binds the product only for the BP region. On the other hand, the Republic of Serbia, as the territory where a certain product is produced, is indicated in 16.4%, and the Balkans region in 14.9% of the surveyed producers. Significant is the participation of producers (55.2%) who consider the taste

of their product specific and different from the same type of product from other locations (RDA-BD, 2018).

The most important reasons for the specific and different flavor of agro-food products are as follows: 1) raw materials come from the place of production of agricultural products (26.99%); 2) use of traditional recapture (20.86%) and 3) special variety of plants or animal breeds serves as a raw material for production (19.63%). Something less of importance for the specific and different taste of agricultural food products is land (15.34%) and climatic conditions (14.72%). Only 2.45% of the surveyed producers estimated that their product was not specific (RDA-BD, 2018).

In order to best represent the BP region, we have prepared a selection of products that, with their authenticity and specificity, could be included in the presentation of "Tastes of the Region"(RDA-BD, 2018). These products could be considered as a "basket of products" from the BP region (Table 1).

Table 1: *"Basket of products" from the BP region*

Product	Note
Prokupac wine	Indigenous grape varieties
Morava wine	
Homolje Beer	-
Plum brandy with added herbs (Homolje toast)	Indigenous meadow biodiversity
Moravian Ajvar	7 small farmers
Homolje honey	Geographical Indication
Djerdap honey	Geographical Indication
Mlava honey	In the process of discussing to obtain a geographical indication
Veverko - honey cream - honey and hazelnut	-
Honey brandy	Significant visibility in the national market
Homolje Natural Homemade Syrup (Wild Blackberries, Wild Cherries, Drain)	-
Style stewed fruit with white cherry	-
Style stewed fruit of rendered quince nuts	-
Homolje-style stewed fruit from the drain with wild hazelnut	-
Homolje mulberry-style stewed fruit	-

Product	Note
Homolje-style stewed fruit of forest strawberries	-
Homolje-style stewed fruit from the drain with wild hazelnut	-
Lemongrass jam (indigenous plum variety)	-
Osmotic dried fruit	-
Homolje pasteurized sremus	-
Homolje cow's cheese	Geographical indication (no animal race indicated). Pasteurization of milk.
Homolje goat cheese	
Homolje sheep cheese	
Full fat goat cheese	-
Full fat soft sheep cheese	-
Full fat semi-hard goat cheese in olive oil	-
Full fat semi-hard goat cheese	-
Full fat goat cheese	-
A melted spread of full fat cheese	-
Colored cow's cheese	In the process of discussion for the protection of the geographical indication

Source: *Regional Development Agency Braničevo-Danube (RDA-BD). (2018). Research and analysis of agro-food products with added value and market potential in the Braničevo-Danube region, within the project – The Taste of Region – Promoting agri-food products with added value to improve economic capacities of family households, Požarevac.*

Conclusion

The three most promising sectors in the BP region in the field of agri-food production are: 1) Vegetable and fruit processing; 2) Beekeeping, with a particular focus on value-added honey products; 3) Milk processing: with a particular focus on the breeds of animals from which milk is obtained, as well as cheeses made from unpasteurized milk (for the sake of accentuating the biodiversity of the microflora).

It is necessary to engage small producers in the modern market chain, because they are not competitive enough, they trade in informal channels, and their cost of introducing standards is large. Also, it is necessary to improve competitiveness at the level of processing capacities, which would thus find new markets and increase consumption. In the area of primary production, there is a great deal of competition, while there is little competition at the level of processing, which is the result of an unattractive

area for investment due to underdeveloped institutions, failure to meet EU export standards for a large product group, and lack of real competitiveness due to high customs protection. Changes in customer requirements, their demand or habits also cause changes in the functioning of market chains.

Acknowledgements

The paper is financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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