







Internationalization of local products in today's world: A Focus on the Swiss cheese sector "La Tête de Moine AOP"

La internacionalización de los productos locales en el mundo actual: El caso del sector quesero suizo "La Tête de Moine AOP" en el punto de mira

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Abstract

In the context of economic crises, globalization, and intensifying competition, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)—particularly those in the agri-food sector—are increasingly encouraged to expand into international markets. This study fills a gap in the literature by exploring the internationalization of the exceptional Swiss cheese La Tête de Moine AOP from a supply-side perspective. Drawing on the resource-based view (RBV) and incorporating territorial factors, the research analyzes how internal resources, organizational capabilities, and regional identity contribute to the global success of this local product. Using semi-structured interviews and a focus group involving key stakeholders and experts in the sector, the study identifies the managerial strategies that have enabled La Tête de Moine AOP to establish an international presence. The findings underscore the importance of cooperative dynamics among local actors—including producers, refiners, institutions, and promotional groups—who jointly contribute to the creation and marketing of distinctive resources. This form of collective governance, rooted in the La Tête de Moine region, enhances strategic coherence and facilitates adaptation to international markets. The study extends the RBV by highlighting the territorial embeddedness of strategic resources, demonstrating that such resources are often co-produced within a localized ecosystem. It thus offers new insights into the relationship between territorial identity, local collaboration, and global competitiveness in the internationalization of high-end agri-food products.

Keywords: territorial dimension; terroir product; RBV theory; international management; SMEs

JEL Classification: F14; F18; M21; L66

Resumen

En un contexto de crisis económica, globalización e intensificación de la competencia, las pequeñas y medianas empresas (PYME) -en particular las del sector agroalimentario- se ven cada vez más impulsadas a expandirse a los mercados internacionales. Este estudio llena un vacío en la literatura al explorar la internacionalización del excepcional queso suizo La Tête de Moine AOP desde la perspectiva de la oferta. Partiendo de la visión basada en los recursos (RBV) e incorporando factores territoriales, la investigación analiza cómo los recursos internos, las capacidades organizativas y la identidad regional contribuyen al éxito mundial de este producto local. Mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y un grupo de discusión en el que participaron las principales partes interesadas y expertos del sector, el estudio identifica las estrategias de gestión que han permitido a la AOP La Tête de Moine establecer una presencia internacional. Los resultados subrayan la importancia de la dinámica cooperativa entre los agentes locales -productores, refinadores, instituciones y grupos de promoción-, que contribuyen conjuntamente a la creación y comercialización de recursos diferenciados. Esta forma de gobernanza colectiva, arraigada en la región de La Tête de Moine, refuerza la coherencia estratégica y facilita la adaptación a los mercados internacionales. El estudio amplía el concepto de RBV al poner de relieve el arraigo territorial de los recursos estratégicos, demostrando que dichos recursos suelen coproducirse dentro de un ecosistema localizado. De este modo, se muestran nuevas perspectivas sobre la relación entre la identidad territorial, la colaboración local y la competitividad global en la internacionalización de los productos agroalimentarios de gama alta.

Palabras clave: dimensión territorial; producto típico; enfoque basado en los recursos (RBV); gestión internacional; PYMEs

Clasificación JEL: F14; F18; M21; L66

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1. Introduction

Since the 2008 economic crisis, market globalization and increased competition have driven companies—particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)—to seek opportunities in international markets (Éltető, 2019; Ramon-Jeronimo et al., 2019). Exporting remains the most widely adopted approach for accessing these markets, given its relatively low risk and the structural and strategic flexibility it affords firms (Leonidou et al., 2007, 2011). Nonetheless, exporting presents significant challenges, especially for SMEs, which tend to face more obstacles than larger enterprises (Ramon-Jeronimo et al., 2019; Sternad et al., 2013). This is particularly true for companies exporting terroir agri-food products—goods that rely on local resources and cultural heritage to meet growing consumer demand for authenticity in the face of mass food production (Belletti et al., 2007).

Despite their reputation as high-quality and often premium products (Delfosse, 2013; Fort & Couderc, 2001), terroir goods do not automatically guarantee success in international markets. One key reason is that producers of such local specialties are typically SMEs operating in a context of globalization and the growing concentration of large-scale food distribution (Belletti et al., 2007).

Although some studies have addressed the internationalization of terroir food products, the factors that promote their success on a global scale remain underexplored. Much of the existing knowledge is anecdotal or focused on macro-level trends rather than firm-level strategies and behaviors. In recent decades, cheese has become increasingly associated with the concept of terroir, particularly in the context of artisanal production (Lucini et al., 2020). Each cheese variety has a unique and distinguishable flavor, shaped by the type of milk, production region, and manufacturing process (Vakrou et al., 1997). Rising global production and increasing international demand have contributed significantly to the growth in world cheese exports (Vlahovic et al., 2014).

In the Swiss context, *La Tête de Moine* AOP has emerged as a strong performer in international markets, with 60% of its 3,182-ton production sold abroad (RTS, 2022). Following the alpine cheese *L'Etivaz* and preceding the internationally known Gruyère, *La Tête de Moine* AOP became the second Swiss cheese to be officially registered as a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO; AOP in French) product with the Swiss Federal Office of Agriculture (FOAG) in 2001.

This premium cheese has gained worldwide recognition due to its rich history, exceptional quality, distinctive flavor, and unique mode of consumption.

Some studies have focused on the internationalization of cheese products with origin designations. Duvaleix et al. (2021), for example, examined French cheese export performance with Protected Designations of Origin (PDOs) from a demand perspective, analyzing foreign customers' perceptions of quality. Testa (2011) investigated the internationalization model of an Italian cheese factory through the stage-based Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 2015), assessing the firm's evolutionary pace toward international markets. However, more recent research in international business has called into question this traditional, incremental approach. Scholars now recognize that firms may pursue non-linear or accelerated internationalization processes, even from inception (Domínguez Romero et al., 2024).

The distinctive and authentic character of terroir products aligns well with the principles of the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991), particularly its VRIN framework, which emphasizes valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources as sources of sustained competitive advantage (Duarte Alonso, 2015). Nonetheless, empirical studies applying RBV to the export behavior of firms remain scarce (Delgado-Gómez et al., 2004; Olmos, 2011). When applied to terroir food products, the RBV has predominantly focused on the wine sector (Dana et al., 2016; Galati et al., 2014). Building on Barney et al. (2001), this study underscores the importance of both tangible and intangible resources and capabilities in shaping export strategies within local product sectors.

To address this gap, the present study proposes a conceptual framework better suited to the specific characteristics of terroir product value chains, with an emphasis on the role of territory in enhancing international development and competitive positioning. Furthermore, to date, no research has examined the international experience of the premium Swiss cheese *La Tête de Moine* AOP from a supply-side perspective. Against this backdrop, the present study provides an in-depth analysis of managerial strategies in the Swiss cheese sector, with a particular focus on *La Tête de Moine* AOP. It also explores the role of territorial identity in the international expansion of this terroir product.

The study is guided by the following research questions: What are the key managerial strategies within the Swiss cheese sector, particularly with regard to *La Tête de Moine* AOP? Specifically, (1) what dynamics have contributed to the global success of *La Tête de Moine* AOP? and (2) how does territorial identity influence its international expansion? Using a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews and focus

groups with key industry stakeholders, this research seeks to uncover the mechanisms driving the international success of *La Tête de Moine* AOP.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a novel application of the RBV in the context of agri-food SMEs, with a specific focus on territorial capital as a strategic resource. It aims to provide relevant insights into how agri-food SMEs can leverage territorial assets to gain competitive advantages in foreign markets.

This paper is structured as follows: First, the literature review outlines the resource-based view and highlights the importance of territorial factors in the internationalization of terroir products. Second, the methodology is presented. Third, the empirical analysis is discussed, including the history and evolution of *La Tête de Moine* AOP and the findings derived from semi-structured interviews and a focus group with sector stakeholders. Finally, the paper concludes with a series of practical and managerial recommendations aimed at supporting the sector in navigating international market challenges while preserving the authenticity and success of *La Tête de Moine* AOP.

2. Literature review

This section reviews the literature on the relevance of the Resource-Based View (RBV) in assessing the international development of terroir products, with a particular focus on the cheese sector. It also explores the role of territorial identity as a source of competitive advantage for these products.

2.1 The Resource-Based View (RBV) and international development

The Resource-Based View (RBV) analyzes and clarifies the internal resources of organizations to understand how they achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Madhani, 2010). According to Barney (1991), "firm resources include all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc., controlled by a firm that enable the firm to conceive of and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness" (p. 101). Also referred to as the resource selection mechanism, RBV regards a firm as a bundle of valuable tangible and intangible resources. These controllable resources and capabilities are central to a firm's performance and competitive advantage in export markets (Barney et al., 2001).

Resources are defined as "assets controlled by the firm that are used as inputs in organizational processes," while capabilities refer to "the firm's ability to combine, develop, and use its resources to create competitive advantage" (Kaleka, 2002, p. 275). RBV is recognized as one of the most robust theoretical frameworks for explaining firms' international behavior. It clarifies how firms access international markets and the conditions that foster successful internationalization (Raymond et al., 2014).

Rialp et al. (2005) similarly emphasized that RBV is a leading framework for understanding international firm behavior. They argued that the resource-based theory describes how some SMEs build "the resource base to circumvent, compress, or leapfrog stages," as outlined in stage-based internationalization models. Other studies have applied RBV to identify success factors or behaviors among internationalizing SMEs (D'Angelo et al., 2013; Raymond et al., 2014). In the context of clustered firms, Zen et al. (2014) contended that RBV is useful for explaining internationalization among businesses located within geographic agglomerations.

Some research has applied the RBV framework to the internationalization of wine products. Galati et al. (2014) identified key factors influencing export intensity among Italian vineyards, including the degree of innovation, investment in advertising and promotion, international experience, foreign language proficiency, and the education level of managers. Dana et al. (2016) found that innovation capacity, risk-taking, proactivity, and international experience were the main drivers of international development and export performance among Italian wine SMEs in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. More recently, Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2023) analyzed olive oil producers in southern Spain (Jaén province), highlighting international market orientation, networking, and human, relational, and technological capital as critical factors. However, these studies do not emphasize the importance of the territorial connection between terroir products and their geographic origin in the internationalization process.

İpek's (2018) meta-analysis of 129 empirical studies reveals a complex landscape, identifying 230 resources and 211 capabilities—often conceptualized inconsistently. This conceptual diversity led to the development of resource-capability (R-C) pairings, commonly referred to as "advantages" (see Table 1: Categorizing the Benefits (R-C Pairs) of RBV Theory). These advantages are grouped into three overarching categories: (1) organization, production, and R&D; (2) management, knowledge, experience, and finance; and (3) human capital, networking, and marketing. This classification system provides greater clarity on how diverse resources and capabilities contribute to competitive advantage within organizational contexts.

Table 1. Categorization of the benefits (R-C pairs) of RBV theory

Group	Advantage	Components and definitions
Organization, Production, and R&D	Organization	Involves the specific characteristics of the company and its strategic orientation, as reflected in its ability to identify and pursue opportunities in foreign markets. It includes international market orientation (IMO), defined as actions directed toward customers and export markets, as well as export commitment, understood as the general willingness to allocate the necessary resources to support export development.
	Production and R&D	Involves physical resources, technological orientation, technological intensity, and R&D resources.
Management, Knowledge and Experience, and Finance	Management	The managerial characteristics of the decision-maker: know-how, commitment, vision, education, etc.
	Knowledge and Experience	Includes export knowledge related to intermediaries, foreign markets, and the acquisition and use of information—both internal and external to the organization. It also encompasses the company's accumulated export experience, assessed through various indicators such as years of export activity, number of markets served, previous export performance, and duration of international engagement. In addition, it refers to specific knowledge of foreign markets and actors, including intermediaries.
	Finances	Financial capital and working capital mobilized to support export operations.
Human Capital, Networking and Marketing	Human Capital	Refers to the education, knowledge, experience, and skills of staff.
	Networking	Business, governmental, institutional, research, and global networks; quality of relationships with the company's various partners.
	Marketing	The ability to manage the export marketing mix—product, distribution, communication, and pricing.

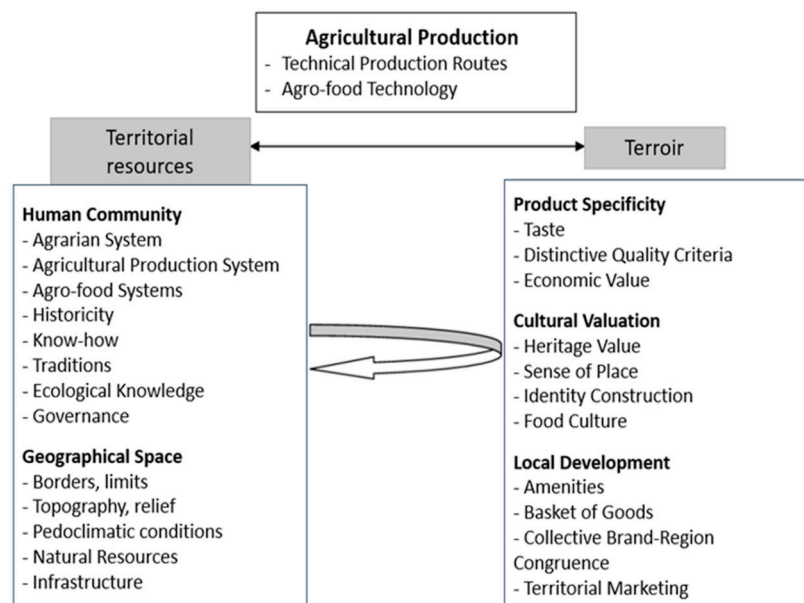
Source: Adapted by the authors from İpek (2018)

2.2 Territory as a competitive advantage

According to the resource-based view (RBV), it is possible to distinguish between resources and capabilities that are specific to the firm and those that are more generic and thus easily accessible to competitors. Key resources—such as immobile assets linked to the land or tacit knowledge like artisanal know-how—are unique to the firm and play a critical role in generating competitive advantage.

The concepts of terroir and territory, often used interchangeably, have been conceptually differentiated by Prévost (2011). Territory refers to a set of natural and cultural resources that serve as the foundation for the emergence of a terroir (see Figure 1). In this sense, local agricultural production leverages territorial resources to generate specific technical, economic, and socio-cultural effects, which collectively define a terroir. This dynamic process, in turn, also influences and reshapes the characteristics of the territory itself (Prévost, 2011, p. 51).

As Prévost et al. (2014, p. 3) explain, “a territory can exist without a product (a community, for example), whereas a terroir can be seen as the territory of a product (or several products, in the sense of a good or service).” A terroir is also shaped by its unique history, cultural identity, and accumulated knowledge and skills, all of which are supported by a web of relationships among local actors (Pietrzyk, 2004, as cited in Łuczyszyn, 2021).

Figure 1. The terroir and territorial concept

Source: Prévost (2011, p. 52)

The literature recognizes territory as both a tangible strategic resource—defined by elements such as morphology, natural resources, infrastructure, and climatology—and an intangible resource, shaped by shared values, quality of life, reputation, and local identity (Festa et al., 2020). Several studies emphasize the role of territory in enhancing the international competitiveness of terroir-based firms (Festa et al., 2020; Fort & Couderc, 2001). For example, Fort & Couderc (2001), in their study of agri-food SMEs in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of France, found that terroir SMEs outperformed non-terroir SMEs in foreign markets. This superior performance was attributed to product differentiation and the territorial dynamics supported by regional institutions.

Festa et al. (2020) also examined the success of Italian SMEs in international markets, highlighting the distinctive “Made in Italy” effect. They argue that the international positioning of these products relies on both tangible capital (e.g., raw materials, production techniques) and intangible capital (e.g., cultural practices, reputation, territory of origin). Their findings show that Italian industrial districts built around “Made in Italy” goods have achieved faster international growth than other exporters, largely due to the model of territorial capitalism that underpins their operations. These local entrepreneurial networks sustain the organizational dynamics of the territory and preserve essential aspects of territorial capital, including history, style, and talent.

In this regard, Polge (2003, p. 182) states, “the terroir does not exist as such, but only through the members who bring it to life and help it evolve.” This form of territorial governance emerges from networks of producers who share market information, collaborate to enhance their offerings, and engage in joint commercial initiatives. These producer networks are often coordinated by regional institutions that provide financial and administrative support (Fort & Couderc, 2001). Territory thus operates not only through generic capacities (such as competence, experience, and proximity) but also through the development of pragmatic and reciprocal relationships among actors—characterized by affinity, trust, and cooperation (Pizzorno, 1999, as cited in Festa et al., 2020).

In this way, territorial resources and capabilities form a competitive advantage that enables local product chains to function within a cohesive territorial dynamic. This facilitates information flow and coordination among stakeholders, thereby reinforcing their position in international markets. From an RBV perspective, this territorial advantage arises from a strategic combination of resources that meet Barney’s (1991) four VRIN criteria: (1) value, (2) rarity, (3) inimitability, and (4) non-substitutability. Territory thus represents a key competitive advantage, mobilizing a set of endogenous resources and capabilities that activate and enrich the core mechanisms of the RBV framework.

3. Qualitative research protocol

Given that fewer than ten Swiss companies produce and export *La Tête de Moine* AOP cheese, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. This method allows for an in-depth and nuanced analysis of these firms’ internal resources and capabilities. Qualitative research is frequently adopted in studies on international market development (e.g., Rundh, 2023) to capture the complexity of the phenomena under investigation and to provide a multifaceted understanding of specific contexts.

3.1 Sample size and description

To identify and analyze the internal resources, capabilities, and export-related competencies that contribute to building a competitive image for Swiss cheese products—particularly *La Tête de Moine* AOP—we conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the sector. The sample was purposively selected in collaboration with the Interprofessional Organization of *La Tête de Moine* AOP.

Table 2 presents the composition of the semi-structured interview sample.

3.2 Data collection

To enhance data richness, methodological triangulation was employed by combining in-depth interviews and a focus group. The “within” method involves the use of at least two data collection techniques (Vivek et al., 2023). First, semi-structured interviews were conducted, during which participants were encouraged to elaborate on their views while being guided by an interview framework. These interviews lasted between 90 and 240 minutes on average.

Following the interviews, a subset of participants was invited to take part in a roundtable discussion to reflect on the qualitative findings. As Kitzinger et al. (2004) note, focus groups are typically composed of four to eight participants, as larger groups may hinder effective dialogue. In this case, eight key stakeholders from the *La Tête de Moine* AOP sector participated, alongside four academic experts specializing in economics and management, with particular expertise in international business development and marketing.

The session began with a presentation of the research results, followed by ample time for open discussion on each topic. Recommendations were subsequently formulated based on the insights gathered during this half-day session. The focus group lasted approximately 3.5 hours.

Table 2. Composition of the qualitative study sample

Interviewee	Structural typology	Area of activity within the sector	Interviewee's hierarchical position	Typical professional profile of employees
Informant 1	Association	Brand protection, marketing, and promotion	Manager	Master cheesemakers, agricultural engineers, commercial employees, and multi-skilled workers
Informant 2	Company	Marketing and promotion	Project manager	Marketing and communications professionals, economists, agronomists
Informant 3	Company	Marketing and promotion	Manager	Scientific collaborators
Informant 4	Association	Services and defense of interests	Manager	Sales staff, marketing and communications professionals, economists, agricultural engineers
Informant 5	Association	Services and defense of interests	Chairman	Master cheesemakers, agricultural engineers, commercial employees, marketing technicians
Informant 6	Association	Services and defense of interests	Chairman	Farmers
Informant 7	Company	Cheesemaker-refiner and retailer	Export manager	Staff covering the full value chain, from production to sales of dairy and vegetable products
Informant 8	Company	Cheesemaker-refiner and retailer	Sales manager	Master cheesemakers, dairy technologists, apprentices, food workers, agricultural engineers
Informant 9	Company	Cheesemaker	Cheesemaker	Dairy technicians, salespeople, and multi-skilled workers
Informant 10	Company	Farmer (milk producer)	Milk producer	Farmers
Informant 11	Company	Farmer (milk producer)	Milk producer	Farmers
Informant 12	Company	School of agriculture, consulting, and project development center	Project manager	Agricultural engineers and economists

3.2.1 The interview guide

The interview guide served as a tool to structure the conversation, not as a strict questionnaire but as a flexible framework designed to support the interview process. Its purpose was to provide reference points that helped facilitate in-depth dialogue (Giannelloni & Vernet, 2001). Thematic components were drawn from existing literature, the study's objectives, and the interviewer's contextual understanding (Evrard et al., 2009; Romelaer, 2005). The development of the guide followed four stages, as outlined in Table 3.

The in-depth phase of the guide allowed for a detailed analysis of the export strategies of *La Tête de Moine* AOP, with a focus on identifying their resource-capability (R-C) benefit groups according to RBV theory (see Table 1), as well as examining the contribution of territorial factors to the product's internationalization process.

Table 3. Structure of the interview guide

Phase	Content
Introduction phase	Presentation of the study and its objectives to establish rapport and introduce the purpose of the interview.
Centering phase	Get the respondent to talk about the reality of the <i>La Tête de Moine</i> AOP sector and their general knowledge of the sector's activities.
In-depth phase	Theme 1: Organizational characteristics
	Theme 2: Management strategy and export marketing
	Theme 3: Export levers (knowledge and relational networks)
Conclusion phase	The aim is to close the interview while prompting the respondent to add further information.

3.2.2 Analysis method

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This method involves breaking down participants' discourse into units of meaning in order to identify recurring themes. Rather than focusing on specific words, thematic analysis emphasizes the underlying patterns in the data and supports them with illustrative verbatim extracts (Evrard et al., 2009). It is the most widely used technique for qualitative analysis and involves classifying or coding elements of the data into categories to extract meaning and understand their significance (L'Ecuyer, 1988).

The analysis followed the steps outlined by Bardin (2013). First, a pre-analysis phase was conducted, during which all interviews were fully transcribed, and the dataset was organized and prepared for coding. This was followed by the encoding phase, where the theme was used as the unit of analysis. According to Boyatzis (1998, p. 161), a theme is "a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon."

Table 4. Predefined codebook

Predefined codes	Predefined subcodes	Theme questions in the interview guide
Strategic flexibility	Flexible coordination between employees	When hiring a new employee, what will you pay particular attention to?
Technological mastery		Have you had to make any technological changes?
Relational quality	Relationships with competitors	Is your company a member of an industry association or local cooperative?
Production method		What production method do you use?
Integration of upstream and downstream activities	Packaging unit (capability to prepare product packaging, e.g., preparing bottles or ripening cheese according to quality standards)	Do you have a packaging unit?
Planning system		Do you have a planning system?
Forecasting system		Do you make export forecasts?
Storage		What is your storage capacity and quality?
Quality management system		Do you have an integrated laboratory within your company?
Innovation		In your opinion, how important are innovation, research, and development in your business?
International experience		Which markets represent your largest export destinations?
		How did your company gain access to foreign markets?
		What proportion of your total turnover is generated by exports?
		What entry strategy do you adopt—indirect or direct exports?
Degree of openness	Market sources, institutional resources, other resources	Have you implemented a business intelligence system?
		What types of knowledge did your company draw on to support its export activities?
Orientation – export market	Responsiveness to export market information	Do you think you are able to convey the quality and value of your product to foreign customers?
	Generation of export market information	How do you identify cultural differences between your country and your export destinations?
		Do you consider these differences when establishing business relationships with foreign market players?
Relationship quality	Relationship with competitors	Are you familiar with your competitors in your export markets and the products they offer?
	Relationship with foreign customers	Have your foreign customers made suggestions that helped you improve aspects of your manufacturing process?
The firm's competitive advantages		Do you believe your company has advantages that differentiate it from competitors in international markets?
Marketing strategy	Standardization	How do you define export quality in your business?
	Product adaptation	Do you offer product varieties manufactured exclusively for international markets?
	Price adaptation	Do you make any adjustments to the product specifically for export?
	Distribution adaptation	
	Communication adaptation	Have you implemented a communication and promotion strategy for foreign markets?
Capacity for absorption of information/transfer of knowledge		Which hierarchical levels in your organization are most exposed to and engaged with market information?
		Is geographical proximity to other firms essential for initiating export activities?
Export commitment	Financial investment for export	
	Participation in informational programs	Do you travel regularly for business?
	Participation in experiential programs	Do you participate in national or international competitions? Have you received any awards or recognition?
Environmental support	State support	To what extent does the government—through, for example, economic promotion offices—play a role in supporting your export efforts?
	Industry/sector support	To what extent do the cheese sector and industry bodies play a role in supervising or guiding your activities?

The coding process combined both deductive and inductive approaches (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It began with an *a priori* template of codes or codebook, as proposed by Crabtree and Miller (1999), which served to structure the data for interpretation. The codebook was developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework, specifically the resource-based view (RBV) as applied to the export behavior of agri-food SMEs (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). These codes and subcodes were also translated into thematic questions in the interview guide (see Table 4).

Additional themes emerged directly from the data through inductive coding (see Table 5), following the method outlined by Boyatzis (1998). The entire corpus was then categorized using the set of identified codes, leading to the final stage of interpretation. The codes applied—both predefined and emergent—reflected the

different resource-capability dimensions adapted from the RBV framework (see Table 1). The process was iterative, involving continuous comparison between the data and the RBV categories to ensure analytical rigor and conceptual alignment.

Table 5. Emerging codes and subcodes

Emerging codes	Emerging subcodes	Example of data from interviews
Territorial dimension	Social capital	"Cheesemakers may compete, but when it comes to decision-making, we collaborate, discuss, and reach solutions that satisfy everyone."
	Identity capital	"We really emphasize the most important values: raw milk, milk quality, artisanal production, origin, region, and the PDO."
	Historical resource	"The <i>La Tête de Moine</i> AOP sector has the potential to sustain its 800-year tradition."

Thematic analysis was conducted as a reflexive and iterative process, involving continuous collaboration between sectoral experts and academic researchers. The focus group sessions with stakeholders from the *La Tête de Moine* AOP sector, together with four academic experts, allowed for a rigorous triangulation of the qualitative findings. This process ensured compliance with two key criteria of methodological rigor, as outlined by Tobin and Begley (2004): credibility (analogous to internal validity) and dependability (comparable to reliability).

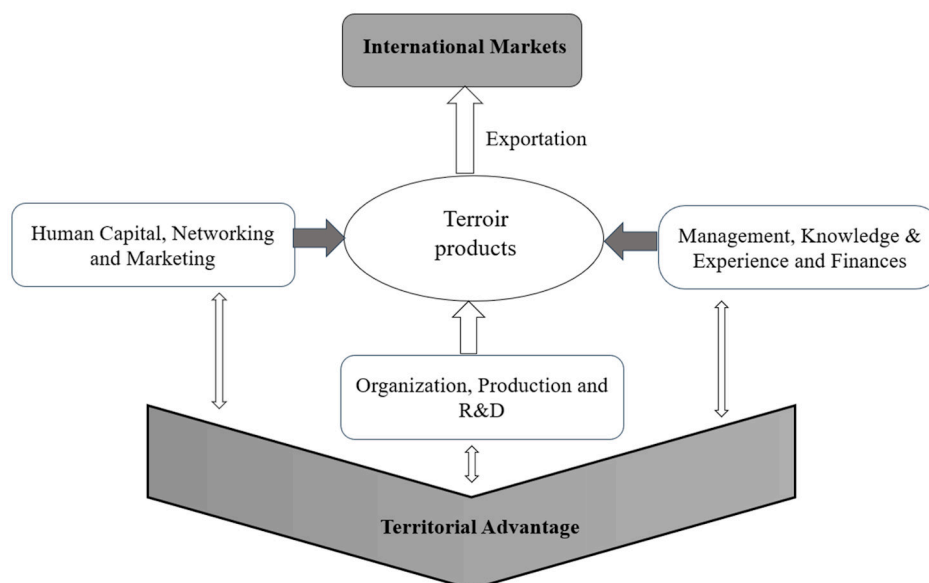
According to Schwandt et al. (2007), credibility refers to the degree of "fit" between participants' perspectives and the researcher's representation of those views. To ensure credibility, the extended roundtable discussions with interview respondents provided an opportunity to review and verify interpretations, helping to identify and reduce potential sources of distortion.

Dependability, typically ensured through a process of auditing, was also addressed. Academic experts specializing in economics and management—particularly in international business development and marketing—acted as an external audit trail. They reviewed the documentation of data collection procedures, analytical methods, and final results, thereby strengthening the dependability of the research process (Schwandt et al., 2007).

4. Results and discussion

The results are presented in three parts. Section 1 provides a monographic overview of *La Tête de Moine*, outlining its historical development and distinctive features. Section 2 examines the resource-capability (R-C) advantages that support the sector's internationalization process. Section 3 explores whether the territory functions as a competitive advantage in the global expansion of *La Tête de Moine*, focusing on the endogenous resources and capabilities that reinforce the benefits proposed in the resource-based view (RBV) framework. This analysis contributes to the development of a conceptual framework for the internationalization of terroir products, presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Conceptual research framework



4.1 Monograph of the *Tête de Moine* AOP sector: History and development

With a history spanning over 800 years, *La Tête de Moine* AOP is a renowned hard Swiss cheese, also known as “Bellelay cheese.” It was originally produced by monks at Bellelay Abbey in the Jura Bernois region of Switzerland during the 12th century. Historical records from around 1190 indicate that the monks used the cheese as a form of currency (Interprofession de la Tête de Moine AOP).

La Tête de Moine AOP has been officially registered as a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO; AOP in French) product with the Swiss Federal Office of Agriculture (FOAG) since 2001, making it the second Swiss cheese to receive this designation—following *L’Etivaz* and preceding the internationally known Gruyère. It is produced using a traditional recipe based on high-quality, high-fat raw milk from cows grazing in the high pastures of the Jura region (Cantons of Berne and Jura), fed exclusively on non-silage fodder.

The cheese is available in three primary varieties—Classic, Réserve, and Extra—each distinguished by its cellar maturation time. As one stakeholder noted, “The longer a cheese stays in the cellar, the stronger and more full-bodied its taste” (Informer 8). The Classic variety is the most popular, both domestically and internationally, and is matured for a minimum of 75 days. It has a light-yellow rind and a fine, creamy texture with a mild, aromatic flavor. The Réserve variety is matured for at least 120 days and offers a more pronounced taste, while the Extra variety, matured for a minimum of six months, develops a rich, full-bodied flavor.

In addition, two specialty variants are produced: a Bio version of the Classic, certified to meet Swiss organic standards, and a Fermière variety, made entirely on the farm using milk from the same source. Only two farmers produce the Fermière version, and it is sold exclusively through their farm shops in the Canton of Jura.

La Tête de Moine AOP is made with a minimal number of ingredients: raw milk, salt, rennet, and lactic acid bacteria. It is shaped into a cylindrical loaf approximately 10 cm in height and diameter and weighing around 800 grams. As a premium cheese, it is recognized internationally for its deep heritage, exceptional quality, and unique mode of consumption. Traditionally, “the cheese is scraped to be eaten” (Informer 1), a practice that dates back centuries. Originally, this was done with a vertical knife to create delicate, rose-like slices.

In the 1980s, this practice was revolutionized by Nicolas Crevoisier, who invented the Girolle—a tool consisting of a round wooden board and a central rod to secure the cheese. A rotating blade scrapes the surface into thin slices, known as “rosettes” or “cheese flowers,” which help preserve the cheese’s subtle flavors. As one interviewee noted: “It’s often eaten as an aperitif, especially at family gatherings. We get together, celebrate, and scrape *La Tête de Moine* AOP” (Informer 8).

To meet evolving consumer needs, Crevoisier also developed the Rosomat, an electric version of the Girolle designed for use in cheese dairies and retail settings, allowing for freshly scraped rosettes. In 1996, a portable and lightweight alternative—the Pirouette box—was introduced. Made from recycled plastic, this version is particularly well suited for the export market, enabling consumers without access to a Girolle to enjoy the cheese. The Pirouette box is typically sold with a half-loaf of *La Tête de Moine* AOP, especially during the holiday season, and is designed to fit easily into any kitchen.

An analysis of *La Tête de Moine* AOP sales volumes from 1980 to 2022 reveals a substantial increase over the past four decades (see Figure A1). A key driver of this growth has been the introduction of the Girolle, which significantly enhanced the cheese’s accessibility and appeal. As a result, the product gained popularity both within Switzerland and internationally. By 2022, international sales accounted for approximately two-thirds of total production, amounting to around 2,000 tons, as shown in Figure A1.

In summary, the prestige of this premium Swiss cheese lies in its combination of “ancestral know-how,” its adherence to a “traditional production method” rooted in the original recipe, and its “unique method of consumption.”

4.2 Resource-Capability pairs in the *La Tête de Moine* AOP sector

This section presents a thematic analysis of the full data corpus, identifying key resource-capability (R-C) pairings recognized in the literature and outlined in Table 1. Major findings are summarized in Table 6. These insights are synthesized into a conceptual framework for the internationalization of terroir products, illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 6. Major findings with reference to the extended RBV theory

R-C pairs groups	<i>La Tête de Moine</i> AOP
Organization, Production, and R&D	Presence of an Interprofessional Organization with decentralized export activity management
	Strict specifications to meet AOP requirements
	Invention of the Girolle and Rosomat tools
	Use of cow-milking and cheese-ripening robots
	Adherence to traditional production methods
	Full traceability across the entire value chain
Management, Knowledge and Experience, and Finance	Conservative management and cautious approach to foreign expansion
	Export activity established since 1983
	Exported to 44 countries, primarily those sharing Swiss cheese culture
	Market intelligence collected by the marketing and promotion organization for Swiss cheeses
	Government involvement through an annual operating budget distributed across the dairy sector
Human Capital, Networking, and Marketing	Presence of professional expertise throughout the value chain
	Extensive network of stakeholders (interprofessional organizations, Federal Office, associations, customers, competitors, etc.)
	Marketing activities coordinated by Switzerland Cheese Marketing (SCM)
	Organization of the annual Tête de Moine AOP festival, cheese competitions, and related events
Territorial Capital	Strong territorial dynamics and technical/organizational expertise
	Deep territorial roots; second Swiss cheese to be registered as AOP-IGP (2001)
	Rich heritage spanning over 800 years

Group 1: Organization, production, and R&D

Organization *La Tête de Moine* AOP sector is highly institutionalized, with an interprofessional organization overseeing its operations and coordinating with key stakeholders. These stakeholders include: the Interprofession de la Tête de Moine AOP; milk producers; cheesemakers; cheesemaker-refiners and retailers¹; and sector-specific associations such as the Producteurs de lait Tête de Moine (APLT), which represents milk producers, and the Tête de Moine Fabricants (AFT), created by cheesemakers and refiners to promote the product within Switzerland.

Additional actors include the AOP-IGP Association (the Swiss PDO-PGI authority), the Association faïtière des artisans suisses du fromage (FROMARTE), which advocates for Swiss cheesemakers at political and commercial levels, and the Fondation rurale interjurassienne (FRI), a rural development center offering consultancy and agricultural training. Lastly, Switzerland Cheese Marketing (SCM) is responsible for international promotional efforts. Numerous other contributors are active in the sector but are not detailed here (see Figure A2 for the stakeholder map).

As observed in the cases of *Olio Toscano* PG and *Prosciutto Toscano* PDO, collective organizations are often instrumental in the internationalization of agri-food SMEs (Belletti et al., 2007; Santini et al., 2010; Sanz Cañada & Macías Vázquez, 2005). Several authors have emphasized the success of “co-opetition” strategies, in which multiple food exporters collaborate to expand their reach in international markets (Bigliardi et al., 2011; Galdeano-Gómez et al., 2016).

The PDO-PGI register, overseen by the Swiss Federal Office of Agriculture (FOAG), ensures the legal protection of registered product names. This designation is recognized internationally under the Lisbon Agreement administered by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO, 2023). Depetris-Chauvin and Fernández-Olmos (2024) highlight the critical role played by such regulatory councils in the export success of Spanish wineries.

Swiss producers applying for PDO or PGI certification must adhere to detailed production specifications, including milk origin, animal feed, grazing duration, milk storage conditions, and specific cheesemaking and maturation processes. The official specifications for *La Tête de Moine* AOP are publicly available² and verified by the Intercantonal Certification Organization (OIC)³. Belletti et al. (2007) argue that PDO certification functions as a key differentiation tool for accessing foreign markets, where such labels are widely recognized by retailers. Serrano et al. (2022) describe this model as a “domestic clustered network,” which generates enhanced internationalization opportunities. These findings align with Duvaléix et al. (2021), who demonstrate the impact of PDO certification on the international competitiveness of the French cheese industry.

Production *La Tête de Moine* AOP is produced year-round using traditional methods. To maintain freshness and quality, milk must be processed within 24 hours of milking and stored in cooled tanks on the farm. Depending on the arrangements, milk is delivered once or twice daily between producers and cheesemakers, or vice versa. As in the case of traditional Italian cheesemakers (Testa, 2011), producers adhere to historic methods and ingredients. Traceability is a core element of the production process. Milk samples are collected at each milking to detect microbial or blood-related contamination. Farms equipped with robotic milking

systems receive real-time analyses, allowing detailed tracking of each cow's milking history and early identification of health issues.

Upon arrival at the cheese dairy, the milk undergoes inspection, and samples are sent by the cheesemaker to external laboratories. These are frozen and retained for several months—at least until the cheese's expiration date—enabling full traceability back to individual batches, deliveries, and producers. As one interviewee noted, “Each *Tête de Moine* AOP cheese can be traced back to its specific milk producer” (Informant 8).

Cheesemakers and refiners typically hold certifications such as IFS (International Food Standard), and larger operators may also meet ISO FSSC 22000 (Global Food Safety) and ISO 9001 standards. Once cheeses reach maturity, a quality assessment, known as taxation, is conducted at the premises of the cheesemaker or refiner. This process evaluates criteria such as appearance, aroma, taste, and texture. Cheeses that meet these standards are certified for sale under the *Tête de Moine* AOP label.

Research and Development (R&D) The introduction of the Girolle and Rosomat has played a pivotal role in the growing popularity of *La Tête de Moine* AOP. As one informant observed, “*La Tête de Moine* has become accessible to everyone, with the enjoyable ritual of scraping and creating rosettes” (Informant 3). In 2022, rosettes—particularly pre-packed—accounted for approximately 40 percent of export sales.

Innovation in production processes has primarily focused on equipment, such as robotic milking systems and automated maturing technologies. These advancements have improved working conditions while maintaining high standards of animal welfare. The precision of these tools minimizes animal stress, in line with existing research linking technological intensity to export development (Serra et al., 2012).

Packaging innovations have also been noteworthy. One example is a hybrid packaging solution that reduces plastic use by nearly 50 percent, combining 100 percent recycled and recyclable PET with cardboard. “We closely monitor advancements by suppliers across the entire food industry, not just within the cheese sector, and adopt superior solutions promptly,” explained one respondent (Informant 8). Another added, “Fresh packs for rosettes maintain product integrity better than traditional plastic packaging through controlled atmosphere environments” (Informant 8). This aligns with the findings of Santini et al. (2010), who emphasize the role of innovative packaging in boosting the export potential of traditional Italian wineries. These findings also support the conclusions of Mancini and Consiglieri (2017), who identify product innovation as a key driver of PDO product export performance.

Group 2: Management, knowledge and experience, and finance

Management The Interprofession is responsible for overseeing both the quantity and quality of *La Tête de Moine* AOP cheese production on an annual basis. Although it is a small organization, it utilizes spreadsheet software for production planning, volume allocation, and inventory control. Cheesemakers, refiners, and retailers, depending on their size, often use ERP systems tailored to their operations. Once annual forecasts are calculated, they are reviewed during a volume allocation meeting, attended by the various producers and refiners in the sector. These forecasts are then updated regularly during monthly stakeholder meetings. As one respondent explained, “Each cheesemaker then schedules production based on their allocated quantities for the period” (Informant 8).

Despite the formal structure, the sector maintains a degree of flexibility that supports collaborative coordination between cheesemakers, refiners, and retailers. In cases of surplus stock, producers are able to redistribute volumes collectively: “If one has excess stock, we can coordinate between us to allocate production or stock volumes” (Informant 8).

Milk producers are typically small, family-run enterprises, where spouses often work together and children frequently study agri-food disciplines. This family business model fosters continuity and supports the transmission of values that enhance the product's originality and perceived authenticity (Wielsma & Brunninge, 2019).

In terms of market strategy, each producer retains autonomy over how they approach national and international markets. Sales may occur directly or through intermediaries, both within Switzerland and abroad. Larger multinational entities may leverage their own international networks, including foreign branches and subsidiaries.

Knowledge and experience Scholars have noted that firms—particularly SMEs—require specific forms of experience to successfully enter international markets (Majocchi et al., 2005). Over time, firms accumulate market-specific knowledge and develop organizational routines that support their adaptation to foreign contexts (Olmos, 2011). In the case of *La Tête de Moine* AOP, international expansion began in 1983, shortly after the invention of the Girolle.

Gomes-Casseres (1989) distinguishes between two types of international experience. The first is geographical experience, which refers to a firm's familiarity with foreign markets. *La Tête de Moine* AOP is now exported to 44 countries, primarily to those with a similar cheese culture to Switzerland. As of 2022, 80% of foreign sales were concentrated in Germany, France, and the Benelux region—markets considered to be mature. Nevertheless, the brand continues to explore new international destinations.

The second form, industry experience, concerns the firm's knowledge of sector-specific norms and practices. *La Tête de Moine* AOP benefits from synergies with other well-established Swiss cheeses such as Gruyère, Emmentaler, and Appenzeller. As one interviewee explained, "*Tête de Moine* AOP broadens the range of Swiss cheeses. It can rely on Gruyère, Emmentaler, or Appenzeller for export" (Informant 8). This kind of accumulated experience has also been shown to support the export success of wine producers (Cheriet & Maurel, 2021; Karelakis et al., 2008). It enables firms to adapt to different contexts and test varied combinations of market access, logistics, and customer relationships.

Finance Since 2007, the trade relationship between Switzerland and the European Union has benefited from a free trade agreement that eliminates most export barriers, thereby enhancing operational flexibility. As one respondent put it, "we can maneuver as we wish" (Informant 5). The Swiss cheese sector also receives substantial public support. Switzerland Cheese Marketing applies annually for an operating budget, which, if approved, is funded equally by the Swiss government and member contributions—50% from the state and 50% from participating producers.

Group 3: Human capital, networking and marketing

Human capital The entire *La Tête de Moine* AOP sector operates within a localized supply chain, with key stakeholders situated in close proximity. Milk producers are located just a few kilometers from cheesemakers, refiners, and retailers. The sector is supported by a diverse workforce across its value chain, including professionals with backgrounds in dairy production, agriculture, marketing, sales, and international trade. This includes not only milk producers and cheesemakers, but also agricultural engineers and specialists in export and brand development.

These professionals bring significant expertise in the Swiss food and cheese industries, combined with strong communication and multilingual skills. This supports the findings of Pinho and Martins (2010), who emphasize the importance of employees' formal education for enhancing international competitiveness. Similarly, Olmos (2011) found that wine businesses with higher levels of human capital are more likely to be internationally integrated.

Networking The network supporting *La Tête de Moine* AOP is both robust and multifaceted. Several key institutions contribute to its development. First, the Inter-Jurassic Rural Federation (FRI) serves as both an agricultural school and a rural development hub. Among its public-interest initiatives is the organization of the Swiss Terroir Products Awards, funded by the cantons of Bern and Jura, where *La Tête de Moine* AOP is regularly featured. Second, the PDO-PGI association acts as an intermediary between certified product sectors, markets, and government institutions. Third, Switzerland Cheese Marketing (SCM), in collaboration with the public relations office of the Swiss Federal Office of Agriculture (FOAG), plays a leading role in promoting and safeguarding Swiss cheese interests nationally and abroad.

SCM works closely with organizations such as Agro-Marketing Switzerland, Swiss Tourism, Présence Switzerland, and Switzerland Global Enterprise (SGE), relying on insights from local staff in international branches. As one informant noted, "Knowledge of their market is therefore a real added value for Swiss cheeses" (Informant 2). Further partnerships with federal bodies such as SECO (State Secretariat for Economic Affairs) and the Department of Foreign Affairs, along with strategic guidance from SGE, help position the sector for targeted development in foreign markets.

This approach aligns with the strategic networking model, which holds that SMEs must forge external links to acquire critical knowledge and overcome limitations related to their size or "resource poverty" (Vahlne & Johanson, 2017). Bai and Johanson (2018) further argue that network capabilities play a central role in facilitating international expansion.

La Tête de Moine AOP also benefits from the visibility and distribution networks of more established Swiss cheeses such as Gruyère, Emmentaler, and Appenzeller. As Informant 8 explained, "It is easy to slip one or two loaves of cheese into the pallet. We can try to develop our business models based on these cheeses." Within the Interprofession, regular exchanges of information occur not only among stakeholders in the *Tête de Moine* sector but also with other interprofessional groups, such as the Interprofession of Gruyère. "Within the sector, we're competitors, but we're also the same members of the Interprofession *La Tête de Moine* AOP and the associations. We talk to these other members together... we get a feeling from them about how they would like to develop and which different markets, but we don't talk in depth" (Informant 7).

These findings support research by Serrano et al. (2022), who show that membership in networks with strong international presence—both in volume and intensity—enhances access to foreign markets and improves export performance.

Marketing Marketing and communication activities are jointly managed by the *La Tête de Moine* AOP Interprofessional Association and Switzerland Cheese Marketing (SCM). The Association of *La Tête de Moine* Fabricants (AFT), in agreement with the Interprofession, is responsible for the brand's visual identity. It must approve all flyers and promotional materials developed by SCM for use in foreign markets.

SCM has operated for over 25 years and maintains a presence in 22 countries, with branches in key markets such as Germany, France, Italy, the Benelux region, Spain, and the Nordic countries. It uses long-term analyses—including economic fragility indexes—to assess both current and potential markets for Swiss cheeses. Beyond promotion, SCM supports exporters through its international partnerships, campaigns, and in-market representation. It also coordinates the activities of various interprofessional cheese organizations by convening regular meetings with country-specific marketing managers, thereby ensuring alignment and maximizing impact.

The PDO-PGI association contributes by monitoring sales performance and shifts in consumer awareness and brand credibility. Its assessments are based on export statistics and market data gathered from the industry and federal sources. The international success of *La Tête de Moine* AOP appears to be strongly supported by the strategic planning capabilities of SCM, AFT, and the PDO-PGI association (Ibeh et al., 2006). As Crick et al. (2000) observed, higher-performing British agricultural exporters tend to engage in deliberate planning and use market intelligence effectively.

The sector demonstrates adaptability to customer preferences. As one stakeholder explained: “We can't change the product, but we can respond in terms of labelling, such as translation into a different language or the addition of a logo, or in terms of packaging. Some customers will ask for plastic wrapping, others for aluminum, particularly if the cheese loaves are then to be transformed into rosettes in local creameries, such as in France” (Informant 8). Additional information can also be included on packaging, such as “made with raw milk” or “lactose-free.” In more mature markets, producers may emphasize factors such as maturation time and proximity to milk sources. “Customers want to be close to their suppliers” (Informant 8).

These findings align with Duval (2017), who found that successful French wine exporters increasingly focus on adapting the packaging—or container—rather than altering the product itself. However, this contrasts with the study by Maurel (2009), which found that successful French wine exporters often do adapt their products to suit foreign consumer preferences and tastes.

To raise its international profile, SCM organizes in-market activities aimed at educating and engaging local distributors and consumers. As one informant explained, “SCM organizes various activities for businesses in the markets where it is present. The aim of these activities is to raise awareness of Swiss cheeses and to pass on the intrinsic values of Swiss cheeses to staff, so that they can become ambassadors for Swiss cheeses to their customers” (Informant 2).

Consumers themselves can become informal promoters of Swiss cheeses. “When tourists visit Switzerland, discover our cheeses, and enjoy them, they can become real ambassadors for our cheeses to their friends back home” (Informant 2). Campaign strategies are tailored to each country's culture, market volume, distribution channels, and target audience. As Informant 3 noted, “Promotional campaigns vary from one country to another. They depend on the culture of the country, the estimated sales volumes in the market, the distribution channels, and the target audience that the campaign aims to reach.”

To enhance its international visibility, the sector actively participates in a wide range of events, including trade shows, competitions, and fairs held both in Switzerland and abroad. Notable among these is the annual *La Tête de Moine* AOP Festival, held each May in Bellelay, Switzerland, which awards a prize for the best cheese. The sector also takes part in the Swiss Cheese Awards, a biennial event established in 2001 that celebrates excellence across Swiss cheese production.

Internationally, *La Tête de Moine* AOP is promoted at high-profile industry events such as ANUGA (Food and Beverages World Trade Fair) in Germany, SIAL (International Food Exhibition) in France, and the Fancy Food Show in the United States. These venues are crucial for showcasing products and engaging directly with global markets. Participation in such events plays a key role in increasing the sector's visibility and strengthening its international positioning.

These observations align with earlier research on the relationship between promotional effectiveness and export performance. Scholars have long emphasized that well-organized promotional activities can significantly influence a firm's international success (Ibeh et al., 2006; Morgan & Sarris, 1992; Olmos, 2011).

In terms of geographic diversification, the sector currently focuses on consolidating its position in markets where it already has a presence. As one informant explained, “At the moment, we are concentrating primarily on existing markets. Opening up new markets requires major financial investment and a great deal of prospecting” (Informant 2). This gradualist strategy aligns with the concept of targeting “psychologically close” or geographically proximate markets first, as proposed by Testa (2011, p. 1408). A similar pattern was observed by Maurel (2009) in the case of small wineries in France’s Rhône Valley, which largely export within the European Union, despite the potential of other high-growth markets.

4.3 Territorial capital as a competitive advantage for international expansion of *La Tête de Moine*

Territorial anchoring plays a crucial role in the international success of the *La Tête de Moine* AOP sector. As Morretta et al. (2020) explain, territorial capital consists of a set of localized capabilities embedded within the territorial environment. These include human capital, creative capital, social capital, cultural capital, and institutional capital.

Our analysis reveals how several of these elements intersect to influence the international development of *La Tête de Moine* AOP. Building on the work of Backman (2014), the sector relies heavily on skilled professionals from diverse backgrounds across its value chain. These include local farmers and milk producers, as well as cheesemakers and refiners with high levels of expertise, technical know-how, and a deep understanding of the Swiss food and cheese industries.

In terms of social capital, Malecki (2012) emphasizes the importance of collaboration across actors within a given ecosystem. This is clearly reflected in the *La Tête de Moine* AOP sector. While cheesemakers, refiners, and retailers may be competitors in the marketplace, they often work together to reach consensus and coordinate actions. As one informant noted, “Cheesemakers may compete, but when it comes to decision-making, we collaborate, discuss, and reach solutions that satisfy everyone” (Informant 9).

These dynamics are further supported by regional institutions that provide both financial and administrative assistance. This institutional coordination contributes to the organizational coherence of the territory (notably the Bernese Jura and Jura cantons) and plays an active role in strengthening the international visibility of *La Tête de Moine* AOP. As Rodríguez-Pose (2013) argues, strong institutional capital fosters innovation, lowers transaction costs, builds trust and transparency, and facilitates the productive use of territorial resources.

Finally, *La Tête de Moine* is closely tied to a historical and cultural narrative, according to which the cheese was first created by monks at the Bellelay Abbey in the 12th century. This cultural capital contributes to the product’s identity and perceived authenticity, offering a powerful tool for branding and differentiation in global markets.

4.4 Practical recommendations

Globalization and increasing market competition have prompted many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to adopt export strategies. However, challenges remain, especially for terroir products whose appeal lies in their strong regional identity. Drawing on the Resource-Based View (RBV), this research has examined how internal resources and territorial factors contribute to competitive advantage in international markets. Focusing on the Swiss cheese *La Tête de Moine* AOP, the study combined interviews and focus groups to uncover the sector’s strengths. Findings show that 60% of the cheese’s production in 2021 was exported. Key drivers of this success include strategic marketing, effective internal communication, and strong regional ties. Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed to enhance global competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

The *La Tête de Moine* AOP sector has the potential to maintain its 800-year tradition while continuing to respect people, animals, and the environment. While strict PDO-PGI regulations ensure quality and authenticity, they may also limit flexibility. For example, restrictions on ingredients or aging processes can make it difficult to innovate in response to changing consumer preferences. Although this adherence is a strength, it also presents challenges in adapting to evolving market demands. Communicating the cheese’s cultural heritage and traditional values remains an important—yet complex—task in international contexts.

To promote its image more effectively, the sector should consider using digital platforms such as its website and social media to share videos that highlight its artisanal tradition, collaborations with milk producers, and creative recipes. These communications should remain consistent with PDO-PGI guidelines in order to protect the product’s legal designation. At the same time, adapting to technological developments must be done carefully to avoid compromising the cheese’s identity and traditional quality.

Sustainability is becoming an increasingly important concern, particularly regarding greenhouse gas emissions from dairy production. Although not yet a pressing issue for the sector, several milk producers are

already engaged in ongoing research and monitoring to improve sustainability practices. Packaging is another critical area. While pre-packed rosettes are popular, their plastic packaging may be perceived negatively by environmentally conscious consumers. Finding more sustainable packaging options is essential to preserving consumer trust and supporting the sector's environmental goals.

Climate change also presents new challenges for production. Switzerland is experiencing more extreme weather, including summer droughts that reduce grass availability and, consequently, milk yields. During winter, cows are housed indoors and fed dry fodder, which can also affect milk production. These seasonal fluctuations are especially problematic given that production must peak in summer to meet demand at year's end.

A proposed solution is to distribute production more evenly across the year, particularly by increasing output in the spring, when milk supply tends to rise. This surplus could then be slow-aged and stored for later sale without compromising quality. Another pressing issue is generational renewal. Because milk must be processed within 24 hours, continuous production is essential. The sector must engage younger generations to ensure continuity and retain vital artisanal knowledge.

From an international trade perspective, administrative and customs complexities continue to hinder market access, especially for small-volume exporters. Geopolitical instability, logistical disruptions (such as transport strikes), and varying regulatory frameworks across countries also pose significant challenges. As a result, identifying distributors who understand the unique positioning of *La Tête de Moine* AOP is key to successful market entry and long-term growth.

Finally, emerging markets in Africa and Asia present promising opportunities, as Western food products gain recognition among new consumer bases. To tap into these markets, the sector should emphasize its core values, close producer relationships, and potential for premium, creative recipes. Increasing the visibility of milk producers and cheesemakers—particularly through packaging—could also prove effective, as today's consumers increasingly value transparency and traceability. By highlighting its local, artisanal character and aligning with Switzerland's global reputation for high-quality dairy products, *La Tête de Moine* AOP can continue to expand its international footprint.

5. Conclusion

The Resource-Based View (RBV) has traditionally explained an organization's competitive advantage by focusing on internal resources—both tangible and intangible. This study extends that framework by emphasizing the critical role of territorial resources in creating value and sustaining long-term competitive advantage. By underscoring the contribution of local assets to international expansion, the research also enriches existing models of SME internationalization, such as the Uppsala model.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. First, it focuses on a single sector. Future research could replicate the study across multiple cultural contexts and compare different terroir products from various countries. Such comparisons would help determine whether the RBV framework applied to *La Tête de Moine* AOP is transferable to other agri-food sectors or regional specialties worldwide.

Moreover, prior studies suggest that competitive advantage arises from the dynamic interplay between resources and capabilities (İpek, 2018). It would therefore be valuable to explore this interaction further in the context of *La Tête de Moine* AOP. Future research could investigate how these synergies contribute to the sector's ongoing international development and adaptability in evolving global markets.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that have been used is confidential.

Footnotes

¹ A distinction is made between “cheesemakers” and “cheesemakers-refiners and retailers.” The cheese produced by cheesemakers is then transferred to the cheesemakers-refiners for maturation (in cellars). These cheesemakers-refiners also act as retailers. Once the cheeses are matured, a portion of this inventory is returned to the original cheesemakers for direct sale through their own channels (national and international), while the remaining portion is sold by the cheesemakers-refiners and retailers.

² Source: <https://www.tetedemoine.ch/fr/infos/cahier-des-charges> (accessed 20 December 2023).

³ Source: OIC, 2023, www.oic-izs.ch (accessed 20 December 2023).

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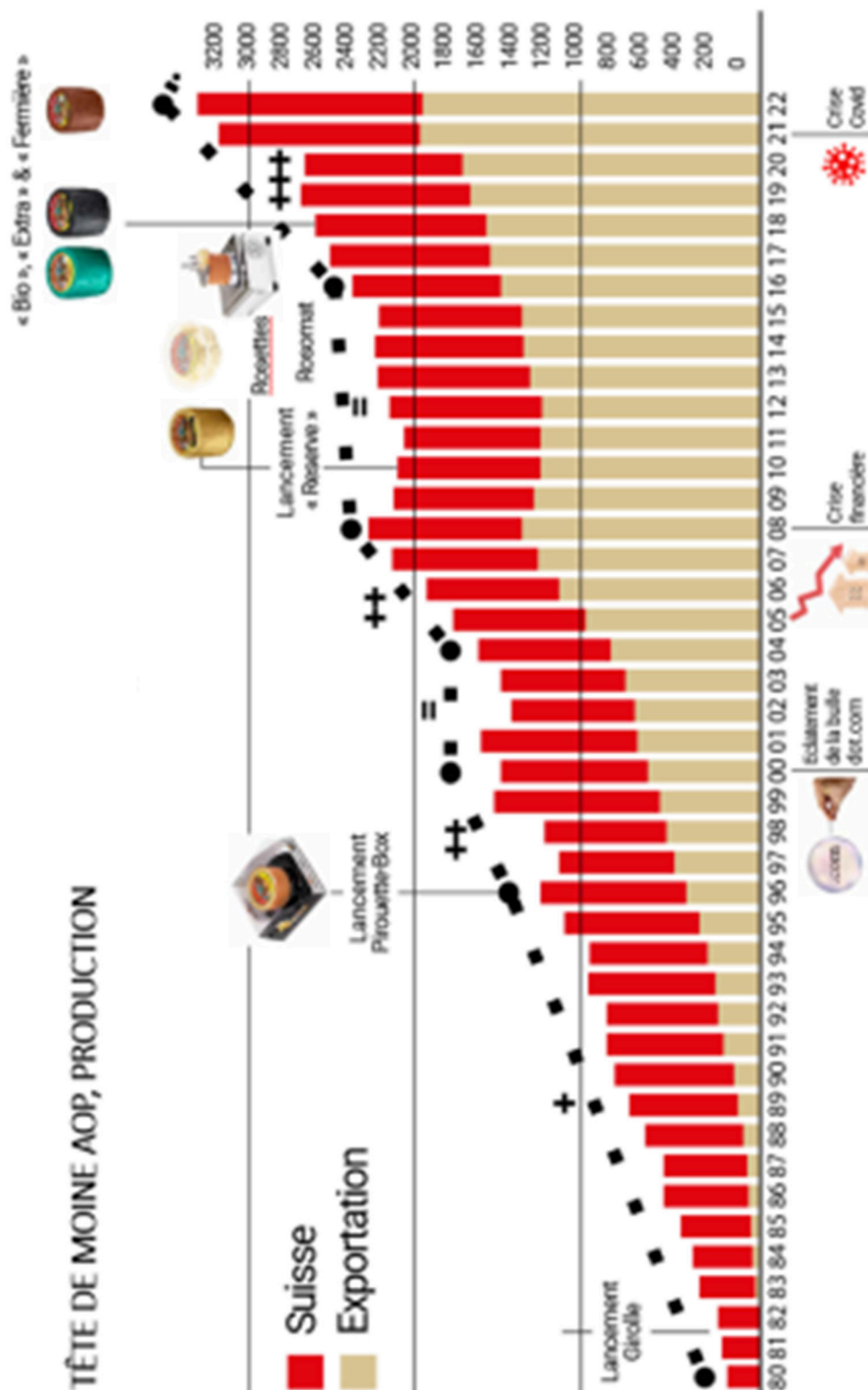
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Appendix

Figure A1. Exportation volumes 1980-2022 (tons)



Source: Interprofession Tête de Moine AOP, 2023

Figure A2. Map of key stakeholders of the sector La Tête de Moine AOP