

Contadinner: Knowledge Sharing and Social Innovation in the Italian Agricultural Sector

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The birth of the rural hub “Vazapp”: social innovation to foster a cultural change in the Southern Italian agriculture

In 2014, when he was 33 years old, Giuseppe Savino decided to leave the permanent job he had been carrying out for 6 years at an Italian aerial service transportation company and found a not-for-profit organization called “Terra Promessa”, along with his brother Michele, his two friends Valeria Carannante and Sanny Torretta, and Don Michele de Paolis, a Salesian priest died at the end of 2014. Son of a farmer based in the area of Foggia, in Apulia, a region located in the South East of Italy, Giuseppe envisioned a revolutionary concept of agriculture: no longer strain and hard work only, but also dream, culture and innovation. This change, in Giuseppe’s vision, needed to ground on a deep cultural change that should have happened in the whole agricultural sector of the Southern Italy: from the typical isolation of farmers to mutual trust and proneness to share knowledge and practices.

A few days after, Giuseppe was given 250 euro by Don Michele to register the trademark “Vazapp”. In vernacular, *va’zàpp* means “go hoeing the soul” and it is an exhortation typically used in the Southern Italy in a derogative manner to warmly invite someone to stop saying lies or using his/her time in an unproductive way. Overturning such a derogative meaning, Vazapp was born under the initiative of a few young professionals led by Giuseppe Savino as a rural hub “which provides innovative solutions to activate social relations among farmers” (Lombardi et al., 2020, p. 12) and whose core mission is to foster territorial identity, social innovation and knowledge sharing among farmers. More generally, the mission of Vazapp is to give dignity and hope to farming so to foster young people to experience it, to make it become their own world and to deeply change it rather than leaving their territory in search of something different and often very risky. Paramount to implement this mission, Vazapp’s people thought, is their ability to instill trust in farmers, which means allowing farmers to overcome the diffidence and the tendency to stay isolated rather than collaborating and sharing their know-how, ideas and farming practices that typically characterize them.

The social value of the Vazapp’s mission can be easily understood in the light of the evidence that the territory in which Vazapp is born can be considered as an instance of what the European Union has defined, in the Horizon 2020 program, as Marginalized Rural Areas (MRAs), that is areas characterized by deep social issues, such as massive emigration of educated people, dramatic youth unemployment rate and ageing of farmers (May et al., 2019). In this respect, the mission of Vazapp is highly consistent with that of the EU H2020 program called SIMRA (Social Innovation Marginalized Rural Areas) aimed at deeply understanding the features of marginalized rural areas. Among these features, the lack of social relationship among individuals and communities is certainly one of the most relevant (Bassi et al., 2014). More specifically, Vazapp’s attempt to foster collaboration among farmers represents a lively example of *social innovation*, defined as “new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations” (Murray et al., 2010), implemented through “the reconfiguring of social practices, in response to societal challenges, which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors” (Polman et al., 2017).

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The team of Vazapp has rapidly grown and now counts about 20 professionals including architects, designers, photographers, communication experts, social media managers, videomakers, university professors, data analysts, agronomists and one farmer (Giuseppe Savino). The team meets on a weekly basis in a rural house to discuss current and new initiatives and to share ideas.

Knowledge sharing among farmers in practice: the experience of Contadinner from Vazapp

The first and most important pillar in the pursuit of Vazapp's mission is *Contadinner* (i.e., Farmers' Dinner). Contadinner is a social event, namely a dinner, involving about 20 farmers and about 20 among entrepreneurial and institutional stakeholders. More specifically, Contadinner is "an interacting format aimed at gathering farmers into one farmhouse, helping them develop and tighten relationships with their neighbours" (Lombardi et al., 2020). While this format initially involved only farmers located in the area of Foggia, it has later been brought outside that area to involve also farmers located in other areas of Apulia (i.e., in the area of Barletta-Andria-Trani, known as BAT, in the area of Bari and in the area of Brindisi). Contadinner, in essence, is not just a dinner. It is the biggest social innovation, bottom-up event in the Italian agricultural sector, which has to date involved a total of about 600 farmers (400 in the area of Foggia and the rest in other areas of Apulia), whom are given the chance to get to know each other through the exchange of life experiences, ideas, knowledge and projects. Contadinner have also involved about 500 stakeholders.

How does a contadinner work? A contadinner is a dinner hosted at the rural house of one farmer who is typically approached by Vazapp's professionals and proposed to consider the possibility to host a dinner inviting his neighbors. *Why a dinner?* "Has someone ever talked to farmers when it could be easier for them? They are always called to participate at meetings during the day, but when there is daylight farmers usually work!", Giuseppe Savino likes to say. Thus, dinner is really the only moment in a day in which farmers have time to talk and to listen to others. *Why a dinner at home?* Because to listen to somebody and to hear something truthful one needs to be psychologically close to him, in a comfortable environment, possibly eating good and genuine food. The most typical reply of the farmer approached by Vazapp's professionals is: "No, I am embarrassed, my house is not good and comfortable enough to host so many *strangers* for dinner". People from Vazapp at that point reassure the farmer that they would take care of redesigning the house with the work of their architects and designers and, in a few weeks, they would make it become a more beautiful and comfortable place.

During a contadinner, farmers invited get together in a circle (see Figure 1) and talk to each other, until a moderator (typically a Vazapp's professional) helps them create pairs of farmers who start talking for about 10 minutes and get to know each other better. After these 10 minutes, each individual farmer goes back in the circle and tells all the others what he has learnt about the person he had been paired with, his/her needs, stories or anecdotes. In addition to about 20 farmers, the host has the possibility to invite other 20 stakeholders, such as entrepreneurs, restaurant and hotel managers, representatives of farmers' associations and other local governmental institutions working to improve the welfare of farmers and the whole local agricultural sector, who could grasp farmers' needs and beliefs in a more transparent and "true" way than they could do during their official top-down meeting with farmers. Indeed, opening one's house to others means allowing others to get their feet in one's life, and this helps create an environment in which people feel at ease in sharing their experiences, their stories and their beliefs.

The experience of a Contadinner suggests that during their brief conversations, farmers get a lot of interesting and useful information about each other. Of great importance, knowing about the stories of the single farmers proves particularly useful for the representatives of farmers' associations. In fact, while typically committed to represent the stakes of farmers as a category at political and institutional level, such associations are often unaware about the peculiar stories of the farmers they represent and are thus unable to truly comprehend their needs and what they could do, individually and collectively, to bring innovation that benefits the whole sector.

During the dinner, Vazapp's professionals administer a survey to participants. Through such a survey Vazapp gathers information about farming practices, policies for land management, perceptions about the sector and farmers' needs, motivations and desires about their job. The ultimate goal of this research activity is to come up with a formal document called "Young Farmer's Chart", whose mission is to illustrate in a systematic manner the most important needs, motivations, threats and opportunities emerging from farmers' experiences, and to finally address the agricultural policies laid out by both national and local authorities. A tangible outcome of such a data gathering activity is a scientific work conducted by Lombardi et al. (2020), based on a survey with 334 farmers participating to different contadinner. Results of the data analysis conducted by the authors using the Social Network Analysis technique offer empirical evidence that through the Contadinner format Vazapp has been able to establish new and durable relations among farmers that allow them to exchange knowledge, skills and practices.

Vazapp, moreover, is currently engaging in contacts with farmers located in other Italian regions to geographically scale up Contadinner and some other initiatives in its portfolio¹. While engaged in many initiatives aimed at fostering collaboration and cultural exchanges among farmers, Vazapp considers Contadinner its flagship initiative to fulfill its mission. In fact, built around the idea of farmers getting together for dinner to consume locally grown food that each guest brings to the host farmer's house and, most importantly, to share their experience and knowledge about farming as well as about equipments used and best farming practices, a Contadinner is the first, and thus the most critical, touchpoint between Vazapp's professionals and the farmers involved. The success of a Contadinner often makes those farmers prone to engage in other knowledge sharing and collaboration initiatives as it instills trust and reciprocity. More broadly, most of the people taking part in a Contadinner get delighted by the experience of sharing part of their life with people whom they discover to be much closer to them than they might have ever thought. Antonio Stasi, Project Manager at Vazapp, highlights this idea of sharing and collaboration embedded in the Contadinner format in a video interview accessible at the following link: https://youtu.be/ibCLIV_sF_g.

This phenomenon is highly consistent with findings from studies in social psychology, which have advanced the idea of *interpersonal closeness*, defined as the perceived psychological proximity

1. Gala dei contadini, We are in paglia, Meloday, Shakespeare ai contadini, A cena con i tuoi (see <https://vazapp.it/cosa-facciamo/>).

between two people (Dubois et al., 2016; Gino & Galinsky, 2012). Interpersonal closeness might stem from the perceived affective, cognitive, and behavioral overlap between two or more individuals, and often drives people's decision to disclose personal information to others and to cooperate (Batson et al., 2002). This means that two people can be close to each other not only from a structural point of view, for instance because they are relatives or good friends, but also because they have something in common in their lives. And being all farmers and all located in the same area certainly makes such farmers much closer to each other than each of them might think. Therefore, the essential value in the Contadinner lies in its ability to make such an interpersonal closeness among farmers salient to them, possibly giving rise to a new era of cooperation. A second video interview with Antonio Stasi explains that happiness associated with sharing and being listened by someone they can deeply trust is the real driver of the success of Contadinner. The video is accessible at the following link: https://youtu.be/OdIrLqGX_H8.

What Contadinner means from a marketing standpoint

Consistent with the mission of Vazapp, Contadinner has been conceived with the goal to deeply change the attitudes and behaviors of individual farmers, benefitting the whole agriculture sector through fostering collaboration models that could increase farmers' productivity and social innovation. Indeed, building on their knowledge of local farmers' behaviors, Vazapp's professionals noted that in the vast majority of cases farmers had a competitive rather than collaborative attitude, whereby they did not want to socialize their farming practices, their ideas or their equipments with other farmers, driven by feelings of envy, jealousy, fear to be imitated and lack of trust in their neighbors. In an era in which sharing has become a common practice in many sector of our life, however, the team of Vazapp wondered if this situation was really unchangeable and thought that making the need for learning and innovation salient to farmers by inviting them to organize a dinner with other farmers might have generated a positive response which could have acted as a trigger for a new era of cooperation and knowledge sharing, ultimately bringing benefits to the whole territory and its economy.

Therefore, from a marketing standpoint, the Contadinner case illustrates Vazapp team's ability to cater to the latent need for cooperation and sharing of good practices felt by their "customers" (e.g., local farmers). A core marketing concept is indeed that companies do not generally *create* needs, as these are embedded in individuals, that is they are chronic. Since many of people's needs are latent, what companies can do is make those needs vivid and salient while at the same time offering a solution to fulfill them that could resonate with customers and create value to them. Vazapp's professionals have been able to grasp such unmet farmers' needs and motivations through empirical research conducted through surveys with farmers who participate to the Contadinner while offering an almost *ready-to-wear* solution through their very close cooperation with farmers in organizing the dinner.

Second, the case highlights the importance of sharing and peer-to-peer collaboration. The interesting aspect here is that while people generally believe that sharing economy models (e.g., AirBnB, car sharing platform, etc..) and peer-to-peer collaborations (e.g., crowdsourcing, online review platforms, etc..) are peculiar to the digital environment, the Contadinner case demonstrates that the sharing economy regards also the physical environment, as it is based on the idea that having people (i.e., farmers) meet in one specific, physical place (a farmer's house) around a table with good food on it might trigger the sharing of knowledge and farming practices, knocking over the psychological barriers that typically characterize single farmers' behaviors.

Third, the case is interesting from a marketing perspective because it shows that individuals can fulfill their own specific needs through engaging in relations with other individuals. While in many cases individuals satisfy their needs through their decision to engage in a specific behavior, the Contadinner case demonstrates that the exchange with others might be essential to fulfill individuals' need for learning and innovation.

Looking ahead – The puzzles to solve

Looking ahead, the case of Contadinner poses a series of questions that puzzle the team of Vazapp when looking forward.

The first is whether to bring the Contadinner model to Italian regions other than Apulia, and, if so, how. Here the open questions are many:

1. Are attitudes and behaviors of farmers located in different regions of Italy the same or similar to those of farmers from the area of Foggia and other areas of Apulia?;
2. Would Vazapp's professionals be able to replicate their farmer engagement model in territories that are different on many dimensions from the territory they come from?
3. What could be the reactions of the other players of the food supply chain, especially in areas of the Northern Italy where there is a much stronger concentration of big wholesalers, distributors and retailers who might be engaged in initiatives aimed at strengthening their collaboration with farmers?
4. What could be the reactions of local authorities and stakeholders? What could or should Vazapp's professionals do to gain acceptance at an institutional level? Can they engage in some sort lobbying activity?

Another issue is how to monitor the evolution of the relations among farmers originated from the contadinner. Also in this case, some questions that might deserve an answer emerge:

1. What should be the methods through which the team of Vazapp can monitor the evolution of relations among farmers?
2. How often should relations among farmers be monitored? Who should be in charge of such monitoring?
3. What indicators should Vazapp's professionals consider to assess the evolution of such relations?
4. Could the team of Vazapp develop innovative initiatives aimed at upgrading the relations among farmers?

Last is how to make farmers see tangible benefits from the relations born during the Contadinner, in terms of new strategies and commercial opportunities. As in the previous points, some interesting questions might arise:

1. How should the knowledge and ideas shared among farmers be exploited commercially?
2. Can the relationships born during contadinner and subsequent interactions lead to a more credible go-to-market strategy?
3. What do actors operating in the food supply chain (e.g., wholesales, distributors, retailers) think about the benefits accruing from contadinner and other types of collaboration among farmers?
4. Is there a way for Vazapp's professionals or other stakeholders to connect pools of collaborating farmers with the business community operating in the food industry?

These and many other questions puzzle Giuseppe Savino and the whole team of Vazapp while looking back and realizing all they have done in their first 6 years of hard work to foster a revol-

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utionary change in the mentality and the culture of Southern Italian farmers. The time where a decision about whether, how and to what extent to scale up Contadinner and other initiatives in Vazapp's portfolio seems to have come.

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Figure 1. Examples of Contadinner

