

Animal-friendly Traditions? Animal Welfare Considerations in Product Specifications of EU Geographical Indications

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Abstract

Animal welfare features prominently in the EU's 'Farm to Fork' (F2F) strategy, the agricultural arm of the Green Deal. In addition, increased consumer awareness about animal welfare (Clark et al., 2016; Heerwagen et al., 2015) and social sustainability imply that producers of Geographical Indications (GIs) have an interest in animal welfare.

Although GIs tend to be perceived and advertised as more artisanal and animal-friendly, no previous research has broadly investigated the binding specifications for animal welfare across different GIs. While the GI regulation emphasises that GIs must meet their product specifications, including possible animal welfare requirements (Schober et al., 2023), there are no across the board requirements for GIs in terms of animal welfare. In addition, there are known issues and sometimes scandals related to animal welfare, also in the GI sector (Di Concetto, 2022).

In spite of the absence of general animal welfare requirements for GIs, some GIs stipulate animal welfare rules in their product specifications. For example, French PGI Gruyère cheese obliges farmers to let cows graze for a minimum of 150 days per year. However, it is not clear how common such rules are. Therefore, this paper investigates to what degree product specifications of GIs guarantee higher animal welfare standards. Individual producers may of course adopt better practices, but product specifications represent the minimum requirements a GI imposes and hence, a potential regulatory tool to improve and guarantee quality.

This study systematically analyses product specifications of 86 GI cow cheeses from France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands to construct a new practice-based animal welfare index. It reveals that 41% of the considered GIs commit to mandatory grazing days and 24% define a minimum space of grassland per cow. However, overall, the results indicate that the current contribution of GI product specifications to animal welfare is limited. When compared to established animal welfare labels such as the Dutch Beter Leven ("Better Life"), none of the GI product specifications would guarantee meeting its one-star rating (out of three). Hence, producers and consumers interested in animal welfare should seek such established certification labels rather than relying on GI labels. For animal-based GIs to become genuinely animal-friendly, harmonisation and higher standards regarding indoor husbandry, painful procedures and calf treatment could be considered. National authorities could stimulate GI producer groups to improve their product specifications and performance with respect to animal welfare, as the INAO has already been doing in France. This would ensure high GI quality also in terms of animal welfare. Barring such efforts, a potential EU-wide animal welfare label might expose the fact that not all GIs perform well in terms of animal welfare, leading to a reduced overall perception of GI quality and sustainability.

All in all, this research unveils an ambiguous relationship between GI cow cheeses in the EU and animal welfare. The collected data shows that GIs currently do not guarantee high levels of animal welfare, and that work remains to be done.

Keywords: Animal Welfare; Standards; Labels; Dairy; Food Quality; Sustainability