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Research report

Ta chòrta: Wild edible greens used in the Graecanic area in Calabria, Southern Italy

Sabine Nebel[a], Andrea Pieroni[b], Michael Heinrich[a,*]

[a]*Centre for Pharmacognosy and Phytotherapy, The School of Pharmacy, University of London, 29/ 39 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AX, UK*
[b]*Department of Pharmacy, School of Life Sciences, University of Bradford, Richmond Building, Richmond Road, Bradford, BD7 1DP, UK*

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Abstract

Dietary patterns change rapidly all over the world. The body of available local food knowledge, which forms the basis of many local traditions, is decreasing dramatically. At the same time, consumers demand novel types of tasty food, which is easy to prepare. In the Mediterranean, vegetables and salads made from wild greens have been particularly important as local (traditional) foods since ancient times. This double interest in local plant use and diets led to an ethnobotanical and socio-nutritional survey carried out in 2002 and 2003 among the inhabitants of the Graecanic area in Southern Calabria, Italy. The Graecanic area is part of the cultural and linguistic heritage of the *Magna Graecia* and the later Byzantine Empire. The villagers in the area have retained many aspects of this cultural heritage, including their own language *Grecanico*, in which wild edible greens are called *ta chòrta*. The inhabitants of the Graecanic area regularly gather more than 40 wild food species. The present study demonstrates how the consumption of wild food plant species is strongly embedded in the local culture, and that they contribute to a healthy and balanced diet.

Keywords: Ethnobotany; Traditional food knowledge; Local food; Cultural heritage; Mediterranean diet(s); Italy; Magna Graecia

1. Introduction

Food use is changing very fast on all continents. In industrialised countries, there is a considerable rise in expenditure for convenience food (pre-prepared or ready made dishes). At the same time, nutraceuticals and functional foods are a rapidly growing segment of the market. Concurrently, there is a dramatic and un-revocable loss of "local knowledge" regarding food use, which forms the basis of many cultural traditions (traditional food knowledge). These and other changes (e.g. reduced physical activity, increased longevity) result in novel health risks for the populations in European countries and beyond (Popkin, 2004).

Traditional[1] food knowledge is strongly influenced and determined by socio-economic and cultural parameters, as well as religion and history (Johns, Chan, Receveur, & Kuhnlein, 1994). All food is part of human's everyday experience and the way it is perceived and classified forms the basis for food use in a culture. Around the Mediterranean, a multitude of cultures, religious beliefs, ecologic backgrounds and historic developments resulted in many diets which share a lot of elements but also revolve around distinct local or regional traditions (Nestle, 1995). "Local food" as part of local traditions, is based on ingredients, which are gathered, grown or produced locally and prepared into dishes, which often represent local specialities (Heinrich, Leonti, Nebel, & Peschel, 2005). Vegetables and salads comprising wild greens are especially important as local foods. They have been an element of Mediterranean dietary traditions for millennia.

In the past decade, only a few studies have systematically analysed the consumption of non-cultivated botanicals in the Mediterranean area (Bonet & Valles, 2002; Forbes, 1976; Guarrera, 2003; Paoletti, Dreon, & Lorenzoni, 1995;

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 20 7753 5844; fax: +44 20 7753 5909.
E-mail address: michael.heinrich@pharmacy.ac.uk (M. Heinrich).

[1]The term "traditional" or "traditionally" is used in this paper for defining something that has been an *integrated part of a culture for more than one generation* (Ogoye-Ndegwa & Aagaard-Hansen, 2003).

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Ertug, 2004; Pieroni, Nebel, Santoro, & Heinrich, 2005; Rivera et al., 2005; Tardio, Pascual, & Morales, 2005). All these studies clearly demonstrate that these local foods still represent a relevant part of traditional Mediterranean diets. Additionally, the nutritional potential of non-cultivated vegetables native to the Mediterranean and the Near East, and their potential health benefits have been recognised as an important area of research (Couladis, Tzakou, Verykokidou, & Harvala, 2003; Guil Guerrero, Gimenez Martinez, & Torija Isasa, 1998; Pieroni, Janiak et al., 2002; Tarwadi & Agte, 2003; Trichopoulou et al., 2000; Zeghichi, Kallithraka, Simopoulos, & Kypriotakis, 2003).

However, assessing changes in local diets are difficult since in many instances "traditional" or local dietary patterns have already disappeared and often no quantitative data on food consumption in traditional societies is available (Tumino, Frasca, Giurdanella, Lauria, & Krogh, 2002). Consequently, systematic investigations regarding traditional food culture are urgently required. This applies especially to those areas which, for geographical and historical reasons, remain relatively isolated and where traditional food use practices are still alive, but at risk of disappearing in the future due to industrial or other development.

In this interdisciplinary study, ethnobotanical and nutritional anthropological methods were used to assess the diversity and the role of wild food plants in local nutrition and cuisine. The study identifies plants traditionally consumed in rural communities in Southern Italy, quantifies their consumption and, equally important, adds new value to local food products which have been used for many generations. This report represents the first step of an European Union-funded research project, which aimed at contributing to the continued use of non-cultivated food plants, as well as to the search for new nutraceuticals from non-cultivated local resources, which are of potential interest in the prevention of aging related diseases (The Local Food-Nutraceuticals Consortium, 2005).

2. Background

The migration of the Greek and other peoples in the Mediterranean in history is reflected in many ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities which still exist today (Rother, 1989). This study focuses on relatively isolated Greek communities in Calabria, Southern Italy. Historically, parts of Southern Italy, as we know it today, came under Greek influence during the eighth century BC, and were known as *Magna Graecia* (Cerchiai, Jannelli, & Longo, 2004). The Greek influence continued over centuries until the end of the later Byzantine Empire in 1453 AC. Today, the Greek minorities in Southern Italy (Graecanic areas) have receded into the eastern Province of Salento, Region of Apulia, and into the Province of Reggio di Calabria in the Region of Calabria (see Fig. 1) (Pan & Pfeil, 2000).

Fig. 1. Map of Italy. A—Region of Apulia; S—Province of Salento; C—Region of Calabria; RC—Province of Reggio di Calabria.

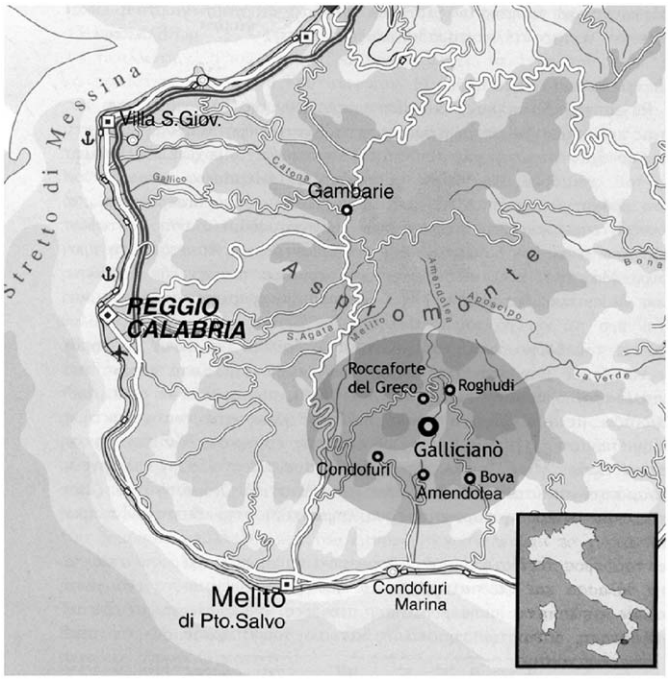

Fig. 2. Graecanic area in the Province of Reggio di Calabria, Region of Calabria. Graecanic villages: Amendolea, Bova, Condofuri, Gallicianò, Roccaforte del Greco and Roghudi (Condemi, 1999).

The Graecanic communities in Calabria are located in the Aspromonte Mountains in the southern strip of Apennine Mountains: Bova, Amendolea, Condofuri, Gallicianò, Roccaforte del Greco, and Roghudi (see Fig. 2) (Condemi, 1999). The population of these villages varies