

Article

Tourist Imaginary and Rural Values: What Are the Agricultural Perceptions? A Reflection on Crossed Imaginaries

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Abstract: This article deciphers tourist imaginary in a transitional context, in its permanence and evolutions, specifically associated with French countryside. Firstly, we question to what extent the rural represents a dreamt, imagined, and chosen place. Secondly, we analyze how the farmers who are visited fit into this surge of tourist imaginary: what rural perceptions emanate from the agricultural populations themselves? To answer our questions, we focus on the on-farm market, an agritourism concept that has been developing for some years in France. We highlight the interpenetration of two perceptive worlds in the same co-construction process. “Purifying,” “socializing,” or “nostalgic,” the countryside produces idealized representations both for the visitor and for the visited, simultaneously causing dissonances and contrasts in the interaction at play.

Keywords: agritourism; rural imaginary; rural France; on-farm market

1. Introduction

While exploration and conquest of other places had always existed, up until the first third of the 20th century, it was something reserved only for a minority of people who wished to reach beyond their familiar environment. A social luxury, this eclectic tourism changed very quickly and underwent various social mutations. This taste for exoticism, different places, the other, a change of scenery, until then reserved for the rich, became a social fact in the second half of the 20th century, asserted, exalted, and democratized. Subsequently, temporary escape became an integral part of everybody's social imaginary. In France, two, then four, and then even five weeks of holiday a year gave way to the rise of a mass phenomenon, ever-changing migratory movements shaped by dreams and fantasy. Over the years, the coast, the mountains, and rural areas became tourist destinations, showcasing multiple liberating, ludic, and purifying images that balanced out the time constraints of everyday life.

Studying this tourism phenomenon today leads us to reflect on the behaviours and motivations of tourist travel: into which field of representations does the tourist fall? What imaginary and sociability that lead to travel: a search for meaning, a search for social connection, a search for images, or a unifying “sacredness”? While the health crisis damaged and disrupted established tourism practices and representations, it is now proving to be a lever for questioning and for an inevitable transition that is forcing us to reevaluate tourism in a changing and evolving universe. Also, we will endeavor to decipher the tourist imaginary in a transitional context, in its foundations, its permanence, and its evolutions, in this case, specifically associated with rural areas.

The first part of this article will focus on considering the tourist act as a break from everyday life. We will try to see how, more specifically, the rural area today represents a dreamt, imagined, and chosen place. How did a countryside long rejected, denigrated, and devalued become this desired, preferred, and glorified place? The first stage of the study will be based on a review of scientific literature, before moving on to define the research questions and field methodology. In a third stage, based on the results and a conclusive discussion, the article will analyze how the farmers who do the welcoming or are visited fit into this surge of tourist imaginary: what rural perceptions and imaginaries emanate from the agricultural populations themselves? How do they intersect and fit into this contemporary tourist imaginary?



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2. Review of Literature

2.1. *The Tourist Experience, a Break from Everyday Life*

The following approach will briefly question the advent of leisure in French society: in what historical, social, and economic context did leisure become a common social practice for the individual, a commodity, a social reality? What function does it play and how does it integrate the phenomena of mobility, both in terms of time (annual, weekly trips ...) and geography? The emergence of social time free of work, with time for oneself, is the result of a long-term evolution of the economic and social system (Dumazedier, 1988). This is how leisure activities, fundamental elements of our society and now marked by a real “cultural revolution of free time,” emerged and spread. This leisure-time, reserved until the 19th century for privileged social categories excused from “productive labor” and subsequently called ostentatious by Veblen (1970), has now, with the growth of free time and institutional recognition, become democratized, popularized, and has spread across the entire population and generations. Once marginal because of its links with a despised idleness, mother of all vices, leisure-time is now deemed essential. In Dumazedier’s (1988) analysis, it already appeared in the 1970s, described as a chosen activity, one outside of professional, family, or educational obligations. It became a complementary and compensatory phenomenon of human labor. Thus, speaking to recovery functions that provide a release from fatigue, boredom, and the routines imposed by daily life, choosing and implementing this free time is seen as a time for oneself, detached from an institutional environment, during which the individual can experience self-liberation. Leisure time, in general, is seen today as a temporary valorization of a more liberated individuality, often dominated by fantasy, dreams, and myths. Not only a compensation for everyday life, but it also provides images of the ideal life.

Holiday activities are the most important among leisure activities, both in terms of their duration and their appeal. Holidays, called “great inventions of the 20th century,” are today a common commodity, a fact of society experienced by about 60% of French people (Berhuet et al., 2024). While travel increasingly represents the big adventure of the year, it’s not just a ritual practice; it’s a liberating myth even when the results are disappointing. Indeed, this encounter with the never-before-seen, the never-felt, the never-perceived, that need to escape something we know too well, a daily or over-standardized routine, means that the tourist act today is fabricated all year long, feeding off dreams, images, and representations. In this way, holidaymakers use travel images to penetrate unknown universes. These images allow tourists to grasp at a spectacle, a production, and not just an ordinary encounter. They establish a distance between the daily place and the holiday place. As explained by Gravari-Barbas and Graburn (2012), it is this distance, this imaginary of places or myth created by the image of places, that is ultimately the driving force behind the movement: “Tourist imaginaries facilitate the transition between here and elsewhere, near and exotic, known and unknown. They play a decisive role in travel plans.” Salazar (2023) explains to us:

It is hard to imagine tourism without the creative use of enticing as well as limiting imaginaries of both places and peoples. Tourism imaginaries are socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices. (p. 1)

Imaginaries have also been defined by Astudillo and Salazar (2024) as “ways to understand and (re)create history and projections of the self and others that ground ever-changing identities. They are embedded in the cultural meaning-making systems of each society.” From this perspective, they are understood as relevant analytical tools for rethinking the meaning and practice of heritage in the tourist experience.

Whether it’s a question of escaping an ordinary routine, freeing oneself from professional or family constraints, overcoming or distancing oneself from stress, insecurity, or a polluted environment, the tourist act, carried by imagination, stems from a socially constrained daily schedule. Resulting from a desire for change, it embraces the development of new aspirations to do with the body, sensitivity, affectivity, curiosity, belonging, and recognition. Constituting places of freedom, self-expression, fulfilment, and personal growth, but also prestige and reputation, tourism and its values create an imaginary world for the individual, one with a different logic to that of ordinary life. Between the known and the unknown, there is an imagined, dreamed, thought-out space, one that has most probably been idealized. It is this fantasy world of the tourist that we will try to penetrate: that of mental images revealing a perceived external reality.

In this sense, Amirou (1995) provides some elements for analysis. He describes the tourist imaginary as a “transitional object”: the tourist constructs a symbolic intermediate space between the familiarity of everyday life and the unfamiliarity of distant places, a zone that accommodates imagined forms of elsewhere, from exotic fantasies to ritualized holiday practices.

Furthermore, beyond socio-economic variables such as age, income, place of residence, time, and type of job, he evokes the notion of the search. The search for oneself, the search for a place,

the search for the other, all form part of a set of motivations inherent to tourist travel, thereby proclaiming the search for new constructive values of identity. This search for meaning, developed here, specifically refers to the identification of ostentatious behaviours and imitation effects. Indeed, holidays, due to the places, the practices, and the representations, are in fact external indications of the individuals' and households' tastes. Social distinction, a symbol of class, speaks of the individual's social status, built around a "search for societal belonging."

Tourism, in the search for the other and commonplaces, also plays a socialization role. In the face of poverty and the breakdown of family ties, in the face of the complexity of daily life, tourism remains a search, albeit ephemeral, for social bonds that tend to break the isolation, loneliness, and atomization experienced by individuals. The need for sociability, having more human relationships, participating in more fraternal societies nourished by spontaneous exchanges, becomes a driving force behind tourist travel. As we will see, the rural space and its identity markers play a symbolic role of conviviality and solidarity in the collective conscience. Therefore, observes Amirou (1995), a collective phenomenon, tourism is similar to the search for a "communitas," "a kind of nostalgia where social status, individualities, and societal environment are erased to found a simulacrum of ideal society." Is it, subsequently, this atomization of social ties, subordination to an anonymous and unbound environment, and, more recently, pandemic lockdowns and also frequenting places emptied of all identity, that lead the individual to go off in search of more reconciling and humanized values? The widely used expression by Edgar Morin summarizes this value vacuum: "the vacancy of values is what makes holidays valuable." Also, the majority of tourism research agrees that this "transhumance society," so named by Viard (2006), is a consequence of the conditions created by the development of our industrial era.

Ultimately, travel, seen as a plural search for significance and meaning, is considered beneficial to the individual because it brings with it a new identity. Upon returning from a trip, the identity of the tourist is renewed, renovated, and enriched by values acquired from contact with the other, new places, and oneself. In "the tourist experience," Laplante (1996) sees "a global model" that builds identity before, during, and after the trip. Tourist travel, exploring other places, is accompanied by an identity fantasy where the individual feels that they have come back different, reconciled with societal values. So, time spent on holiday, seen as a form of "mental hygiene," has become a determining element in the construction of individual and collective identities.

The Sacralization of Tourism

Often compared to a pilgrimage, tourism can be equated to a sacred encounter. After all, tourism practices create a ritual, sacralizing or spiritual dimension around certain tourist sites or destinations. Being out of the ordinary, these locations or "High Places" are revered, consecrated, making them strong, privileged, or paradisiacal emblematic spaces. They are exhibited and spectacularized for the tourists. The High place is specified by its sacred character, as analysed by Debarbieux (1995): "This sacred place ensures the communication of the Worlds and the linking of Heaven and Earth, the visible and the invisible, the local and the all-encompassing. [...] It is the point of the territory that it symbolically structures." Therefore, for tourists, these High places provide images, points of collective attachment. They are staging sites that symbolize belonging to the same unit, the same whole. They give the place a character of universality or exemplarity. Furthermore, each individual carries some sacred places within them, qualitatively different from the others because they are unique or indicative of a story, a personal experience, or a family memory. Mythical spaces, constructed spaces, can be a place of individual or specific collective experience (one's natal land, a transient city, a meeting place, etc.).

The dialectic between the profane and the sacred, described by Jafari (1988) as a dialectic between "the ordinary and the non-ordinary," refers to the opposition between daily life and tourist life; the latter being assimilated to a universe of the sacred, the ritualized. This tourism religiosity is also expressed by Amirou (1995), who pits a "periphery" against a "center," an "outside" against an "inside." In contrast to the everyday "periphery," the touristic "center" is a home, a unitary emblem, a place of sociability, solidarity, and conviviality in which the community blissfully flourishes. The tourist is searching for this center, this idyllic interior, a reassuring "inside," rich in meaning, emotional, more symbiotic and natural. "The holiday space is just one scene among others where the original fantasy of Unity can be replayed" (Amirou, 1995).

We have observed that farmers or rural people travel little, or certainly less than city-dwellers. This phenomenon can be explained, in addition to the economic variables and constraints implied by the production cycle, by a more developed community presence, a stronger sociability and proximity, as well as a more significant sense of belonging to the land, to the earth. Every day, in contact with their land, farmers have space, fresh air, and relative autonomy in their work. Do they need holidays? Is their daily setting not precisely what many city dwellers are looking for? A somewhat sedentary lifestyle, coupled with greater solidarity, makes the need to leave and get away from the everyday world seem less important for rural people than it is for urban people.

The tourist imaginary also translates into the search for a reassuring, secure, understanding, “mothering” environment of protection and forgotten sensations. Places of “affectivity” and feelings, tourist places are chosen partly due to the emotional shock they provide, their memory roots, and their sensory and perceptive dimension. “We not only move from one space to another but above all from one emotion to another. [...] Some places are idolatrous, others provoke aversion. These places exist only because of their emotional charge of euphoria, pleasure,” adds Amirou (1995). Also, the tourist organizes and defines their journey towards an emotional self-realization.

The ritual aspect of tourist travel is also verified by the repetitive, renewed, and routine dimension. By making a certain trip, a certain recommended and consecrated itinerary, the tourist is adhering to a set of collective codes recognized by the community. Urbain (1991) observes in the tourist: “an uninterrupted series of ceremonies accenting a ritualized route that imposes a series of obligatory visits on millions of travelers. [...] Bending to a chain of implications as if to a law, the tourist performs a rite.” A rite defined as “a conventional act performed mechanically through which the individual expresses their respect and deference to an object of fundamental value.” We should add, however, that while the notion of rite implies the idea of common attitude and collective cohesion, the journey is accompanied by an exclusivity, a rarity, an individualized emotion that each person seeks to empower. The tourist is then the hero of multiple unique experiences to which no other person can relate. The collective myth suddenly becomes indexed under individual myth.

Additionally, the participation or non-participation in a rite has a function of social integration or exclusion of the tourist in the host group. Therefore, the tourist phenomenon would translate as the consumption of a series of local rites, allowing a social and cultural integration of the individual in the local group by absorbing and reproducing cultural codes. These ritual situations prove to be a privileged form of staging the memory that one finds in dancing, at the dining table, in social life, and in various commemorations; let us then pose the problem of the non-acceptance, or non-integration of the tourism phenomenon in certain territories (conjuring images of colonization or cultural appropriation). Can we not look for the causes of this phenomenon in the forms of adaptation to local rites? The refusal to adapt to the daily life discovered, on the part of the tourist, or vice versa, the refusal to distribute or share this same daily life on the part of the locals? Often equated with “a rite of passage,” the tourist journey is characterized by the transition from one state to another, from a troublesome everyday life to an idealized universe. True identity fantasies, tourist trips suggest a break, the desire to go beyond, to overcome the boundaries of everyday life in order perhaps to come back better or different ... like a pilgrim seeking to convert their soul.

Finally, contemporary city life presents identity crisis indicators that justify the aforementioned notions of “break away” and search. Overcrowded cities, the complexification of social life and professional relationships, the transformations of social roles, promiscuity, but also insecurity, unemployment ... these are all elements that make the city a place that’s often criticized, seen as artificial and rejected, especially during the holiday periods. Instead of bringing people together and unifying, the city seems to isolate people more, increasing anonymity and solitude. In this vein, Mathieu (2017) has noted the emergence of an anti-city ideology where the city is consistently portrayed as a technical hub dominated by material infrastructures whose modern features have taken on negative connotations. The city is depicted as congested, artificial, and prone to pollution, offering poor living conditions marked by long commutes, economic difficulties, and visible

As we will see, the rural area, in opposition to the city, now has a positive image, reinforced since the health crisis. This urban crisis, just like any other crisis, generates myths, and especially tourist myths. Desires and expectations revolve around leisure and holidays; tourist trips, as factors of hope, compensate for a certain disenchantment with the world. Tourism and its imaginary correspond to a need for compensation and rebalancing in the face of industrialization and contemporary rationalism.

Let us ponder the rural space more, then, a space highly valued in the collective consciousness due to its eternal and natural representations. How do these new rural tourist sites meet new aspirations, and are they sources of images, myths, and symbols for the tourist?

2.2. *The Rural Area, a Place of Compensation and Identity Building*

In a context of changing rural areas and the diversification of agricultural activities, part of the tourism demand over the last fifteen years seems to have shown an elevated interest in rural areas. Here, it’s a matter of examining the advent of these practices, the nature of the field of representations, and the current patrimonialization movement; the “myth of the natural,” the search for an “original community,” and the enthusiasm for recovering the past seem, today, to structure the rural imaginary of city dwellers.

The Social Reshaping of Rural Areas and the Resurgence of Consecrated Images

For a long time, the French rural world was loaded with negative values. It was confined to purely agricultural functions, and its landscapes were of little appeal. A fragile territory, place of

grunt work, on the brink of poverty, the countryside was of no interest to the explorers of the time, until the 19th century, that is. It conjured up images of misery, poverty, isolation, and boredom (Weber, 1971). The first forms of leisure in rural areas date back to the 19th century, when a few circles of intellectuals discovered the countryside and its landmarks. The 20th century was already more prosperous: the 1920s, after the war, saw the countryside as a refuge against the horror, a recourse against the dominant order; then, the paid holidays of 1936 brought about an undeniable increase in tourist attendance, dominated by a working class whose peasant origins were still all too recent. The countryside then took on new ideological values, some of which have survived to this day.

But it was only from the 1980s onwards that the rural sphere emerged as a true leisure area and became aware of the economic role played by tourism. After the growth and allure of post-war cities, after the great exodus, people once again dreamt of conviviality and simplicity. They rejected the misdeeds of the industrial civilization and saw the most deserted places in a new rose-tinted light.

This new appreciation may have led to an idealized, even fantasized, vision of the rural sphere that hid the complexity of contemporary rural spaces by erasing diversity, power relations, or possible tensions between its inhabitants. After all, today, the social reshaping of rural areas is obvious: “Peri-urbanization,” “urban deconcentration,” “urban exodus,” “urbanization” ... an endless list of terms that highlight the fact that the current countryside has less and less to do with the old “farming societies.” The social group of farmers continues to shrink, and new categories of the population (employees, pensioners, middle classes...) are gradually emerging. We’re therefore talking about the disappearance of the farming population or “deagrarianization” of the rural environment (an expression that refers to new uses of space); The recurrent crisis in the agricultural sector and its policies has led to a steady decline in the number of farmers and the use of land for agriculture. Furthermore, the incessant growth of communication and information means associated with a significant change in productivity and production systems has greatly contributed to rural districts opening themselves to the outside. The social and economic spaces of rural areas, as well as their networks, have expanded and now stretch far beyond the village. These new territories have new functions: residential and recreational. After all, the large proportion of pensioners, second homes, and summer tourist movements attest to the recreational role played by rural areas. Spaces with high ecological, symbolic, and cultural values are quickly becoming tourist spaces. At the same time, with the development of ecology, rural areas have been assigned an environmental function. The maintenance of rural areas is therefore a real issue for the whole of society. The historian Duby and Wallon (1975) note that since the 1970s, “the fusion between town and countryside is hastening”; indeed, if we look at the consumption system, we note that rural areas have seen, in just a few years, a massive influx of household equipment that is commonplace today. Some people talk of standardization. In 1980, Mendras (1980) evoked “a strong and growing standardization of French society due to the total elimination of rural civilizations and the progressive urbanization of rural regions.” Kayser (1990), too, observed a “normalization” and noticed the countryside entering the consumer society as early as the 1990s. Furthermore, at the heart of environmental and broader societal transitions, rural areas are the subject of new collective representations analysed in particular by Stokowski et al. (2021), focusing on residents of rural communities and the construction of an imaginary of tourism transition. In addition, a study published in 2024 on images and representations of agriculture in French society shows the diversity and structuring role of these perceptions in public debates, which are useful for analyzing current controversies (agribashing, pesticides, animal welfare): whether seen as nourishing, in crisis, polluting or virtuous, the image of French agriculture is becoming a strategic issue, reflecting various contemporary social tensions (Gassie et al., 2024).

Finally, now reinforced by a health crisis that has made, for a time, the “world unavailable” (Cousin et al., 2021) and reconfigured our relationship with local discovery (as evidenced by the strong interest for domestic and inland tourism during the summer of 2020), this “rural” reference point of identity is involved in the construction of the urban imaginary. After holding a negative image for centuries, the rural space is now peaceful, solid, and secure, to the point of being idealized. Purifying, socializing, conservative, the countryside is beheld, exalted, adulated (Bessiere, 2000). These perceptual figures of the rural imaginary that we will discuss later also inevitably question the perceptions of the host populations, both rural and agricultural, subsequent receivers and participants in their own images.

3. Questioning and Methodology

From a historical point of view, several authors have shown that rural and agricultural populations have more often been “objects” of the rural imaginary than “subjects” (Banos & Candau, 2014; Caquot-Baggett & Annes, 2016; Frémont, 1997; Reed-Danahay, 2002). In other words, they have often been excluded from the construction, reproduction, and perpetuation process of these

representations, which nevertheless concern them. It's also clear that, although they represent an increasingly small proportion of the population, the social group of farmers is a fundamental cultural reference point in France and Europe, and one with its own identity, which exceeds 1.5% of the working population (Givois & Apers, 2025). Albeit caught up in a movement of modernity, it retains elements of specificities and particularities that, today, still constitute a strong rural identity. Therefore, agri-tourism, defined as the set of tourist activities practiced on an agricultural holding (Lerbourg, 2013) and presented as a means of diversification with multiple benefits, is at the heart of our study. In this sense, it is closely related to other forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, culinary tourism, or rural tourism (Durrande-Moreau, 2018). Agritourism can also be approached more narrowly, referring specifically to tourism or leisure activities conducted directly on working farms (Durrande-Moreau et al., 2017). While agri-tourism, through the valorization of agricultural products, is analysed as a means to renew dialogue and weave links between the agricultural population and civil society (Banos & Candau, 2014), for the agricultural population it can also be seen as a means to promote a rural identity, to repossess its own image, control it, and create a dialogue with a non-agricultural population. The subsequent social interaction between the agricultural and non-agricultural population would therefore give farmers an opportunity to showcase their work and their daily life, surpassing the process of idealization and marginalization of rural representations.

In our reflection, we ask ourselves how much the agricultural population itself participates in building a rural and tourist imaginary.

To answer our questions on agricultural perceptions, we will focus on the farm market, a concept that has been developing for some years in France (Banos & Candau, 2014). These markets come in several different types: they can be regular (all year round) or seasonal (usually during the summer period), individual (one producer offering several products) or collective (a farmer organizes the market on their farm but several other producers are present and sell their products), ones that allow customers to eat on-site (customers/tourists are encouraged to buy farm products and enjoy them on-site) or not, or even ones that organize activities (music, horse/pony rides, farm tours, etc.).

This study is grounded in data derived from qualitative semi-structured interviews. Regarding on-farm markets, our goal was to investigate not only how farmers stage their farm, their own appearance, and farm activities so as to embody the “rural idyll,” but also how they construct meaning around their work and involvement in agritourism. Central to this aim was gaining a deeper understanding of their rationality in incorporating tourism into their activity and setting up an on-farm market. As stated, we believe on-farm markets are particularly suitable to explore our research questions, in providing a space to re-imagine agriculture. These on-farm markets bring different people, farmers and non-farmers, rural and urban dwellers, to one particular place, at a given time. Therefore, farmers can stage and choreograph agriculture, as well as their own image.

We began by selecting potential respondents through their involvement in agricultural networks such as *Bienvenue à la Ferme*, *Accueil Paysan*—popular French agritourism networks—or their presence in agricultural outlets showcasing farmers involved in direct selling or organic agriculture. We then used a snowball sampling method to identify other respondents. We met with 25 farmers, all located in South West France (Occitanie region¹). Interviews were conducted during two research fields: one during the summer of 2015 (15 interviews conducted), and one during the summer of 2019 (10 interviews conducted)². Interviews took place on the farm and were usually followed by a tour of the farm. Our interview guide covered several themes: the farm history, farmers' life trajectory, values, motivations, and networks, and the on-farm market. Special attention was paid to how the market grew up and was organized and run, and to relations with other farmers and visitors. Our sample brings together a variety of experiences and life trajectories (farmers with a farm background or a non-farm background, practicing agriculture alone or with a partner, involved in conventional or unconventional agriculture). All participants share the same general involvement in activities of agricultural diversification, and farm tourism in particular, through the organization of an on-farm market. All markets organized were seasonal and collective, and gave an opportunity for tourists to picnic on the farm. Additional agriculture-related activities (farm tour,

¹ Located in the south of France, the Occitanie region is characterized by its great geographical diversity, stretching from the Mediterranean coastline to the Pyrenees and the Massif Central mountains. This natural heterogeneity is accompanied by a strong presence of rural areas, where agriculture, livestock farming and tourism are major economic pillars. Marked by an ancient agropastoral history and a rich cultural heritage, Occitanie occupies a central place in the construction of rural and agricultural imaginaries, often associated with ‘authenticity’, ‘terroir’, nature and food quality, but also affected by contemporary tensions linked to environmental and social transitions.

² This research is part of different research programs, one exploratory research (2015–2018), TOURALIM 1 (2018–2021) and TOURALIM 2 (2022–2026). All these research programs question relationships between tourism, agriculture and food in French rural spaces.

milking demonstration, animal feeding, etc.) and non-agricultural activities (concert, etc.) were provided for visitors.

It is also noteworthy that all farms in our sample are working farms whose tourism activity is not their main source of income. Farmers became involved in agritourism for different reasons, from generating additional income to reconnecting with non-farm people. This desire to communicate about their job and their enthusiasm for it is regularly referred to in brochures or websites advertising these events. Educating people (about the production of agricultural goods, the specificities of one region and its products, particular customs and traditions, etc.) as well as linking up urban and rural dwellers, are also mentioned as a motivation for farmers to organize these on-farm markets.

Finally, a general inductive approach to data analysis was used. Both authors systematically read and coded each transcript, which brought out the significant textual themes. Certain limitations to these data should however be noted; given the small sample size, it is not possible to say how widely these findings are representative of all agricultural entrepreneurs. We offer them to encourage further scrutiny of how farmers represent agriculture through agritourism. In particular, we believe this work reveals the existence of two somewhat contradictory approaches, resulting from opposing rationalities, with different implications regarding the images of the rural and agricultural world offered to tourists.

Finally, our in-depth analysis of the statements gathered will highlight the perceptions emanating from these farmers in terms of the production of images. In what way do they converge, enhance, or thwart the tourist imaginary that so corresponds to them?

4. Results and Discussion: Towards a Cross-Analysis of Rural Tourism Imaginaries

In addition to the imaginary of places and practices, the tourist imaginary is crossed by an imaginary of actors (Gravari-Barbas & Graburn, 2012). The tourist imaginary is also the imaginary of the tourists themselves: both producers of imaginaries and the very element imagined by the welcoming and host populations. Stereotyped images of the tourist, their practices and codes, have long produced a strong and powerful imaginary that infuses the approaches and behaviours of the hosts. Based on the analyses of Gravari-Barbas and Graburn (2012), we can therefore consider tourist imaginaries to be constituted of shared representations, fed by “material and immaterial images, worked by imagination and socially shared by tourists and/or tourism stakeholders.” As for the tourist imaginary associated with the rural sphere, we will see that the perceptive figures widely distributed around the image of the countryside (Bessiere, 2000) influence, penetrate, and construct the discourses and representations of agricultural actors, even seeing them adjust their practices. How do the farmers surveyed play with and thwart the tourist imaginaries? How do they create interest? How do they decode the imaginary from a local “authenticity”? Therefore, following a cross-analysis of the components that make up the tourist imaginary, produced on the one hand by tourists and on the other hand by agricultural populations, we will develop the following reflection.

4.1. Towards a Typology of Tourist Imaginaries Associated with Rural Areas

4.1.1. A Purifying and Therapeutic Countryside

Today, the idea of nature is clouded by multiple images of preservation and conservation brought to light by tourism (Bessiere, 2000). The last few decades have been marked by a powerful drive behind the conservation of nature, preserving its air, its water, and its wildlife. A new relationship with nature has emerged, one that is particularly evident during holidays. Reserves, parks, and tourist routes place particular value on the preservation of the natural environment, its purity, unspoiled beauty, and overall greatness. Thereby, a powerful collective aspiration to live more in symbiosis with nature has emerged among urban citizens, feeling threatened by the excesses of urban life. The countryside has therefore come to be seen as a natural reserve, a purifying and hygienic place. Testimony of a type of nature that’s unspoiled, preserved, still pure, and accessing it would translate as a spiritual journey to a place with therapeutic virtues. Moreover, seeing and having contact with nature (for example, panoramic places), for the tourist, becomes a moral regeneration. Here, we come again to the aforementioned sacralising dimension where the countryside and its preserved places become spaces of veneration and healing. Amirou (1995) emphasizes this therapy, both physical and spiritual. The return to nature acquires a transformative, almost redemptive quality, as rural spaces, once viewed as desolate, are reinterpreted as curative place for urban populations in search of redemption.

The city now incorporates the old values once intended for rural areas: the city combines negative features and symbolizes turmoil, peril, and poverty. The attractiveness of rural areas may be a sign of rejection of the consumer society. Doing outdoor activities, this return to nature, often stems from a refusal to partake in a type of leisure that feels artificial and “gadgetized.” In some

cases, tourists travel to rural areas to show their opposition to the pressure of the consumer society. This profound desire to rebalance and return (the rediscovered nature) also demonstrates a certain nostalgia for a past where man was in symbiosis with his environment. The image of the countryside as an antidote to the city and its evils is also evident in the success of the many green classes available, along with summer camps, different types of hikes, and second home purchases. The concepts of ecotourism and space tourism, aimed at a harmonious development of tourist structures, also fit with this imaginary. The importance attributed to landscape today reinforces the image of a “lost paradise.” The landscape, seen as a cult, becomes a place of identity, heritage, and memory. The whole countryside is akin to a landscape, a spectacle to contemplate and consume. This heritage-nature is overrun with plenty of clichés about the relationship between man and space. In this way, says Lowenthal (2008), the enduring idealization of the farmer as an inherent ecologist proves difficult to dispel, as the small number of individuals who continue to cultivate the land are frequently portrayed as stewards of nature.

As far as the farmers who welcome tourists are concerned, our study shows the same enthusiasm for a purifying countryside, a savior of all evils, where nature and rural culture are closely linked. Like an echo, as both producer and receiver of images, the agricultural perceptions gathered centrally demonstrate how nature plays a key role in justifying and legitimizing their diversification activity: rejection of polluted cities, a change of life in order to return “to a regenerative and therapeutic nature.” The motivations for farming and its subsequent touristic, environmental, and biological diversification are underlined in the responses, which successively emphasize the beauty and appeal of the natural setting, the attractions of the area, and the biotopes of both the plant and animal world. This imaginary is repeatedly used in opposition to the city, a place of flight and abandonment for some of them. “If I were to do it all over again, I’d do exactly the same, and worse. I’m very happy. Because being a researcher was a really theoretical job, a little ungrounded. Here, in nature, I’m much closer to everything. It’s exciting. I feel reconnected with the environment after years of being ‘ungrounded’ in city offices,” explains Alice, a fruit producer. In the representations of the farmers interviewed, the countryside is associated with the organic and ecological. An unrivalled space in terms of biodiversity and naturalistic values, the countryside is a place that’s free of pollution, where it’s good to take refuge and work in order to escape a city that is described as “oppressive” (Denise, producer of duck fat). An opportunity to live and work, this countryside is also the place for producing healthy food, without any gimmicks. From developing farming methods that are as close to nature as possible, to producing pure food “taken from the land,” agriculture and rural life are represented here as idyllic places for environmental reconciliation. “We live in this environment. Some people pay to come here; we’re so lucky!” exclaims Denise again. Patrick, a dairy and meat producer, says: “As I often say, when I’m sitting in front of my bay window looking out at the mountains, on Friday evening at 7 p.m., I think of the bypass in Toulouse, the ring road in Paris, the motorways and all that, and I tell myself that I made the right decision. Here, I cut my own wood to keep me warm, we eat vegetables from the garden, we breathe relatively clean air compared to many people, we certainly don’t have the pollution problems they have in Paris. What I offer to visitors here is nothing but natural.”

In terms of food and its purifying and therapeutic values, the answers are recurrent among the farmers surveyed who work and advocate for a more rational and “cleaner” production and consumption model. “We have a role to play. To produce good food and show our visitors that we respect nature. That’s our main role, and then to produce good food in systems that are reproducible. ... In what I do, there’s a small element of resistance to the industrial steamroller,” says Alice, a fruit producer. The food products distributed at farm markets carry messages and perceptions about the health and naturalness of foods; from foods linked to the soil, the landscape, natural attributes, or harvesting. The agri-touristic service therefore makes the eater aware of a diet that’s “truer,” “more natural,” free from pollution. This food reconciliation for the eating tourist (Bessiere, 2012) is constructed through the denunciation of contemporary food trends. The images produced therefore juggle an idealization of a rediscovered land with the prosecution of a more industrialized food system. “Restoring a dietary truth” then becomes the mantra of some of the farmers interviewed, determined to promote an image of sincerity and “authenticity” (MacCannell, 1976). The following quotes reflect this stance:

“When tourists come here, they want to eat good food and real products. What they’re looking for here are good, natural products. It’s for their health too” (Cédric, cereal producer). “The things we’re fed every day are intended to kill us slowly, and nobody notices. When you see what children are being fed ... Well, I mean, by feeding them, we’re killing them. We want to show that you can have foods that are a little less attractive but still high-quality and natural” (Christelle, meat producer).

Sustainable and local food is based on values of proximity, respect for the environment and the planet. Subsequently, around the rural and agricultural area, we find tourist images with purifying and therapeutic values, produced by the farmers visited and corresponding to the tourist

imaginary. Other images focused on the functions of inter-knowledge and sociability also emerged from the analysis.

4.1.2. A Socializing and Unifying Countryside

For the general public, the rural environment, chosen as a holiday destination, plays a role of socialization and community membership in the face of the impoverishment of the daily social bond. We dream of conviviality, a village-like solidarity; the search for a first-hand “original *communitas*” is symbolized by the village square, markets, local festivals, local rustic meals, etc. Moreover, the rural social group successfully evokes the image of the family unit and the warm community, where the relationship with oneself and others is valued. This is reflected in the brochures of many agri-tourism structures which, under the brand “Welcome to the farm,” combine a warm welcome, family atmosphere, and rustic and natural products. Further proof is found in the success of homestays, where the tourist eats at the owner’s table and shares the same house. The countryside is indeed the place of intimacy, interiority, the private life; it’s the re-discovered “home,” the unifying universe. “An idyllic social setting,” the village and hamlet are the symbol of a collective life where everyone knows each other, meets up with each other and welcomes each other. Urbain (2002) observes that the contemporary tourist wants to be “the hero of a return to the land”, imagining their trip as a search for ancient ways of life and a renewed connection with a simpler, more intimate form of social interaction just outside the reach of modern networks.

Practicing rural tourism is seen as a relational learning process where one learns to live alongside others, to develop forms of sociability that are still unknown. Countryside tourism then takes on an almost initiation-like aspect.

For the farmers, the opinions and imaginaries gathered crystallize the same desires and perceptions: the creation of a friendly, festive atmosphere, one of sharing and exchange on the welcoming farm. “When they come here, they’re happy because they feel welcome. We welcome them in as if they were coming into our own home,” comments Denise, duck fat producer. Christophe, a poultry farmer, explains: “In the morning, everyone visited the market on their own. Then we had lunch together. Everyone sat around between 1 and 3 p.m. We chatted and we laughed. It was wonderful.”

The social function of agri-tourism requires no further proof (Wright & Annes, 2014). It focuses on the discovery of the other, the creation of new sociabilities, and an openness to dialogue. Our study highlights how discourse predominates in the encounter, as well as social openness and the creation of social bonds. This function of inter-knowledge, a source of personal enrichment, in many cases seems to exceed the sole economic and market functions of agricultural diversification. The reinforcement and construction of new sociabilities around products sold and promoted on the farm are recurrent in the statements: it’s all about generating exchange and a social link that revolves around the service on offer. The search for sociability in an agricultural universe which is sometimes isolated, socially and geographically closed, seems to be a major objective of the agricultural diversification strategy. When tourists visit the farm, it implies a change of scenery and a new discovery for the farmers themselves. Replacing the farmer’s “impossible” holidays, the interaction between visitors and those visited provides hospitality, entertainment, development, and socialization, things commonly sought after in the tourism quest (Amirou, 1995). Christelle, a meat producer, explains: “They come here, we chat, I think it’s important. That was the main reason I did it. I’ve always been in contact with people, I worked in companies and then, from one day to the next, nothing. Because you’re isolated there, you quickly become isolated.” “It’s fulfilling in terms of relationships, in terms of contact, as well. Selling isn’t the only thing. It’s not just about money; you make contacts, there are exchanges, and new acquaintances. All of those things that ... Yes, it’s not just about the money. Money’s not everything,” says Nadine, a fruit producer.

Furthermore, the “socializing” dimension of agri-tourism is reflected in the production of new forms of sociability. The study highlights a co-production or co-construction of new models of exchange between visitors and those visited, based on forms of mutual or reciprocal cohesion. This new way of making links refers to a collaborative approach, bringing producers and consumers together in the same place in search of proximity and collective participation. This cross-accountability process refers to the “work of the consumer.” It’s reflected in the tourists’ involvement on the farm: picking their own vegetables or fruit, collecting eggs, sponsoring a hen, a goat, bringing the herd in to graze. These actions involve and associate the visitor with production activities on the farm, creating loyalty and awareness of shared work. In the same spirit, we find the *wwoofing* phenomenon, defined as an organisation system that consists of people working on an organic enterprise or farm in exchange for board and lodging. These new modes of shared sociability are marked by tourists participating in visits: active and attentive listening on the part of the visitors who are engaged and educated about the consumption of farm products, for example. This tourist participation can go as far as involvement in the administration or smooth running of the farm: advice, changes in practices, suggestions for experimenting and innovating from the tourists are sometimes welcome. Through exchanges and meetings, the consumer expresses their wishes or

desires, influencing how the farmers choose the activities they offer. The tourist considers this search for learning and knowledge satisfied by the Other (the farmer, the welcomer, the host) a source of enrichment. The engaged and invested visitor searches for extensive information on different aspects of the operation, creating multiple sociabilities in the same place, having many experiences and discoveries in a relatively short period of time. These new forms of sociability identified, which are more invested and more committed, are accompanied by a conservative dimension, attached to the reproduction of a rural heritage.

4.1.3. A Conservative and Nostalgic Countryside

In the collective consciousness, the rural world is still the symbol of a “different life,” conservative values, and reserves of meaning. Therefore, this return to the healthy values of the countryman leads us to re-examine the rural ideology as a curator of moralistic values, synonymous with a certain immutability and security of identity. The image of the countryman, after centuries of a negative or even pejorative image, has come to embody the idea that rural life is the source of our traditions and of the tastes and habits that define the nation. As the countryside lost population to the cities, this figure became nostalgic, turning rural life into a symbolic place of origins and authenticity (Burguière & Revel, 1993).

In point of fact, while the countryman was once a sign of misery and poverty, today it is a symbol of authenticity and truth. The image of the farmer as male, as a modern entrepreneur, the countryman close to nature, understated and respectful, has resurfaced. This image is shaped by a set of values: he lives a healthy life, outdoors, is hardworking, economical, a good family father, even devout; he is attached to his land... In short, he is and has exactly what the city dweller believes to not be or have. Moreover, living in the heart of his land, he is close to history, that of his father and his grandfather before him. The past is very present, integrated with the current day; it continuously borrows knowledge and know-how from the past. Lowenthal (2008) states that a profound shift in attitudes has occurred: whereas rural life was once dismissed as disorderly and intellectually stunted, it is now esteemed as embodying natural wisdom and communal virtues absent from major urban centers.

The native countryman has become, to the tourist, the model of the paradisiacal being protected from decadence and evils of all kinds ... so much so that we seek to meet him so that he can explain to us, so that he can tell us that he performs the same actions as his ancestors, so that he can show us his “rustic” productions, made using a common family know-how. The tourist, a dreamer, chooses farm-inns, the most authentic ones possible, tastes the food, the most natural types possible. That way, he can go back, reassured to have seen and heard what he thought was lost. Country areas also have a nourishing image. The rural space has always been a nutritional one, essential for the survival of the community. Like a mother who comforts and reassures, the countryside provides a healing support and identity for tourists. Many farm products come with multiple images of protection, guarantee, childhood, and maternal references, sacralising the “homemade” or the “grandmother’s secret.” The rural area, which is home to old stones, ancestral knowledge and know-how, traditions and memory, gives the townspeople the belief that there is still something stable, rooted, true, authentic, which can help them regain their lost identity. This way, faced with an uncertain future, the loss of reference points, childhood memories start to resurface, with an abundance of advertising images; a nostalgia for the good old days marked by memory is then established, the reproduction of signs of the past or an eagerness to know, see and understand “what was done before” or “what is still being done”; all this in an attempt to not lose traces of one’s own identity. This search for a past, for a memory, responds to a desire to be part of a historical line. Subsequently, everything must tell a story: the village’s bell tower, the landscape, the local gastronomy, etc. Everything must prove its roots, a guarantee of authenticity and belief. Our study highlights the conservative role of agri-tourism, through statements and images focused on safeguarding an agricultural and rural heritage. The past is invoked in many statements, like a mirror or an indestructible foundation that justifies the agri-touristic activity. The cultural vocation of the farmer is subsequently confirmed and reinforced in the multiple scenes observed on farms, conveying images of past and nostalgic reflections of life “as it was before.” Revealing, for the most part, of “folklorisation” or simplification processes, these statements are based on a marketing rhetoric around the organisation of markets on the farm. Farmers use the term “terroir” to describe their products as unique or specific. “Local products from the terroir,” “here, we have a special terroir,” “the unique characteristics of our terroir” are commonly mentioned by interviewees anxious to transmit an image that will meet the tourist’s expectations. These farmers want tourists to experience their farm visit as a unique, positive, out of the ordinary event, one which corresponds to their idealized vision of the rural and agricultural space. “During their visit, I only show them the positive things, and I wrap it up in fancy paper! It’s normal, when you’re on holiday, you don’t want to see ... you don’t want to step in shit, basically. For them, it’s idyllic, and that’s what they must find,” says Philippe, a honey and poultry producer.

Also, agricultural perceptions highlight the educational and citizenry dimension of hosting people on the farm: welcoming people to share, explain, educate, and pass on a legacy. These are the objectives mentioned by many of the people surveyed. This committed dimension of the discourse is reflected, for example, on the farm, by visits from the younger generations, leisure centers and schools, but also elderly people (from retirement homes or clubs for retired people). The farm, as a meeting place, plays an intergenerational role in transmitting messages. The one visited, in their role as teacher for the visitor-learner, plays a role of providing advice, training and relaying information to open the visitor's eyes to a rural and agricultural culture. "When we tour the orchard, I want to explain how we grow the fruit, how we make apple juice using the know-how passed down by my grandparents," says Alice, a fruit producer. "We don't just sell the apple, we sell the way it's produced, how it's picked, how it was passed on to us, how we work, us as farmers, we sell Ourselves," she adds.

The welcome on the farm is therefore set up with the recurring idea of protecting the past, safeguarding knowledge and know-how, and transmitting them. This vision of agriculture as a heritage, shared and valued for and by tourism, is defended by farmers who are convinced of their role in this "resurrection of memory." Their function in saving and preserving traditions is highlighted in their statements, which nourish the urban tourist imaginary. "We're also there to show people how the old generations used to work, how they respected nature and grew quality products. I make my cheese the way my grandmother always taught me," says Paul, a cheese and poultry producer.

These crossed imaginaries, tourist and agricultural, feed off each other, strengthening and nourishing themselves at a common meeting place, infusing valuation and staging practices. "Purifying," "socializing," or "nostalgic," the countryside produces idealized and fantasized representations, both for the visitor and for the visited. However, it also seems to be a place of agitated representations, where tensions and imaginative contradictions emanate.

4.2. Discussion: Tensions and Controversies Around a Crossed Tourist Imaginary

4.2.1. Images and Imaginaries: Correspondences and Dissonances

At a time when the image is omnipresent in our contemporary societies, material images (brochures, photos, posts, videos, films, but also handmade crafts or food souvenirs sold on the farm) and immaterial ones (legends, tales, stories, recipes, anecdotes, memoirs, etc.), play an increasingly crucial role in the tourist experience in rural areas. What's more, we can sense some interference between the images created by the actors and the tourist imaginary (Graburn, 1976). While the agricultural populations try to manufacture and market elements of their own culture, generating tourist imaginaries, they are at the same time obliged to know about and meet the needs and expectations of tourists visiting their farms. This is how images and imaginaries hold dynamic relations, constantly co-constructed and reworked. There are interferences that fluctuate between agreements and disagreements, dissonances and correspondences. Many of the farmers surveyed are wavering between producing images created from scratch "for the occasion" to meet an external tourism demand (legends and stories about cultural know-how or animal breeding) and, on the other hand, the dissemination of true images that reflect a daily reality (animals in pens or the industrialization of food production). These inadequacies or dissonances identified reflect a conflict between the "real" and its representation, generating a feeling of rejection or discomfort on the part of both tourists and agricultural actors. Conversely, the correspondence between the images produced and tourist imaginaries reinforces the proximity between real and imaginary, nourishing the satisfaction and attractiveness of places. Thus, the concept of crossed imaginaries refers neither to a simple coexistence of representations nor to a homogeneous or consensual fusion of imaginaries, but rather to a relational, dynamic and asymmetrical process; It is based on a process of situated co-construction, produced by repeated interaction between tourism and agricultural actors, during which representations of rural life are mobilized, adjusted, negotiated and sometimes contradicted.

Our observations on the farm markets reveal deviations, reinterpretations, or falsifications of the slices of heritage on offer, such as agricultural products for sale or recipes. These can be represented as original and inherited, while they are actually sometimes artificial, recent constructions with no historical trace at all (for example, an aperitif described as "homemade," invented and produced for "the occasion," or a Roquefort pâté, also concocted during the summer). These products, appointed as "folklorism" or stereotypes, may seem like a form of escape therapy, a dimension manufactured for the occasion in order to meet a social imaginary, here, a tourist one. Features of a past life are selected, reintroduced into our present life, adopting a whole range of symbolic apparatus for a tourist hungry for stereotyped images. "They're invention mechanisms of 'popular cultural heritages' that act in the construction of national identities," described by Cuisenier (1995). Traces or slices of heritage are staged, put on a show, dramatized; some aspects are enhanced, magnified, others hidden, concealed, thus forming a new cultural simulacrum that distorts the original unity.

4.2.2. An Organized and Advertised Staging

Our survey shows the importance of organisation and preparation in setting up the system for receiving visitors on the farm. During the farm markets, the specific layout of the places the tourists will visit is thought out and implemented “for the occasion,” involving work and collective action. “We fix up the place nicely. It’s ‘Versailles’ between the hen house and the stream,” explains Denise, duck fat producer. As well as setting up food stands or stalls, the staging also includes organizing additional festive, cultural, and entertainment elements: hot air balloons, animals on display, games, trails, bands, musical instruments, conferences, debates, etc. It’s accompanied by an organized and structured communication effort (wearing an apron or a hat with “Welcome to the farm” on it). Putting yourself in the spotlight so as to be identified and reported in the press becomes a strategy for some farmers, mindful about their image. This staging usually also involves tidying up and ordering. Showing everything to be clean and beautiful in accordance with biodynamics, for example, no plastic or material that goes against the ethics of the place and practices, making and being clean, seducing, decorating, and cleaning are a priority for many farmers. The desire to hide certain aspects of agriculture and livestock farming in favor of the more manicured, smoother sides of the farm emerges in a few comments: “Washing,” “changing clothes,” and hiding certain aspects of agriculture to welcome tourists can be similar to forms of artificialisation or denaturation of the image portrayed on the farm. Two spheres can therefore be highlighted: agriculture on the one hand and tourism on the other, drawing two poles or two roles “to play” that do not intermingle. The care taken in the “presentation” of the farm and its environment therefore seems disconnected from the production process, according to some of the farmers interviewed. “I try to be presentable, not too grubby so I don’t scare people away, but if I happen to find a nice shirt, jacket, or hat, I make sure to put it on” (Patrick, milk and meat producer).

4.2.3. Stay True to What You Are

However, the interviews mostly show a desire not to make the relationship with visitors seem artificial or unnatural: a willingness to remain “true,” to not corrupt an image or identity. The shunning of trickery and desire for sincerity in the way of being and showing themselves are discussed: no or little change in behavior towards visitors seems to be the battle cry of a number of farmers, attached to their image of “agricultural modernity”: “Showing oneself the way one is,” “being honest about the way you are and the way you work,” “not lying” about the evolution of the profession and production techniques, are just some of the discourses evoked on the myth of a past, obsolete or illusory tradition. These comments, as opposed to a process of folklorisation or tourist simplification, reveal the desire to convey the image of an agriculture in motion, detached from any backward-looking and museumified connotations. Here, any staging for visitors is reduced and unexaggerated. It is unmanufactured, spontaneous, and unpretentious, leaning heavily on daily life, as indicated by Arnaud, duck breeder: “We welcome people as we are. Sometimes we’re clean, sometimes we’re dirty. They have to take us the way we are.” Nadine, a fruit producer, also talks about this attitude: “Well, they’re well aware that they’re not going to find us in a suit and tie with our nails painted and everything. If I’m in makeup, so be it; if I’m not, that’s just the way it is. If I’m braiding garlic, or there’s dust on my shoes, that’s the way it is; they have to take me as they find me. And I think that’s what they need, the authentic.”

4.2.4. Tourist Imaginaries Between Production and Consumption

As we’ve seen, farmers who offer a tourist activity adhere closely to the tourist imaginary, which justifies, shapes, and orients said action. The agricultural populations obey an exterior urban imaginary, while simultaneously manufacturing another, generated by their own perceptions of the rural and agricultural world. The development of the rural tourist imaginary seems to be the product of a dialectical process, a to-ing and fro-ing and co-construction between two interacting worlds. While being largely mobilized in the agri-touristic offer, rural imaginaries are also produced, re-composed, and appropriated by the tourists themselves, who criticize, validate, or divert them. In this way, sometimes producers and consumers of imaginaries, farmers and tourists, co-produce a rural tourist imaginary. Farmers do not deny the modernity of their profession; rather, they engage in strategic storytelling that reconciles current agricultural practices with tourist expectations. This process illustrates a form of hybridization: the agriculture presented is neither strictly traditional nor entirely technicized, but rather reconfigured through interaction with tourists. The ‘crossed imaginary’ thus manifests itself as a space for symbolic negotiation, where the reality of agriculture is partially reinterpreted in order to maintain the tourist relationship without completely betraying the professional identity of the farmers. Furthermore, this mutual (re)constitution process is involved in shaping the identity of agricultural populations. The rural tourist imaginaries brought about by this inter-combination of images produced and consumed can therefore contribute to the creation of agricultural communities that will identify with this imaginary until they eventually claim it as an intrinsic component of their own identity (Naef, 2012). Leaving an often indelible mark on the places of reception, the tourist imaginary contributes to the construction of new rural

and agricultural identities. This is the case, for example, with agricultural operations that have become, through tourism, the “historic” cradles of ancestral culinary know-how, propelling farmers into a strategic model of well-identified production practices. “The tourist imaginary therefore plays the role of a self-fulfilling prophecy, contributing to bringing about the imagined territoriality” (Staszak, 2000).

5. Conclusion

An analysis of tourist perceptions of rural areas highlights the central role of rurality as a space for identity compensation, both for tourists and for the farming communities that welcome them. Through a study of farm markets in Occitanie, this article shows that rural imagery is not solely the result of idealized urban projections, but is co-produced, negotiated, and sometimes reappropriated by farmers themselves through their hospitality practices, discourse, and staging. Empirical results identify three major structuring figures of the rural tourist imagination: a purifying and therapeutic countryside, a socializing and unifying countryside, and a conservative and nostalgic countryside. These figures, widely documented in the literature, are reactivated and reformulated here by agricultural actors, who use them to give meaning to their diversification activities. The values of naturalness, health, food quality, and environmental regeneration appear to be major drivers of agritourism engagement, reinforcing the image of a restorative rural space, in explicit opposition to the city, which is perceived as polluted, stressful, and dehumanized. The study also highlights the fundamental role of agritourism as a means of mutual socialization. Farm markets are meeting places where social bonds based on conviviality, exchange, and participation are developed. For farmers, welcoming tourists often goes beyond the purely economic function: it fulfils a need for recognition, dialogue, and a break from professional isolation. For visitors, it allows them to temporarily immerse themselves in an idealized form of sociability, perceived as more authentic, more human, and more collective. These interactions produce hybrid forms of sociability, situated at the crossroads of consumption, learning, and engagement.

Furthermore, the results highlight the major role played by agritourism in constructing and transmitting a nostalgic image of heritage. Many farmers claim to have an educational and memorial function, consisting of transmitting knowledge, skills, and stories inherited from the past. However, this heritage preservation is accompanied by recurring tensions: between claimed authenticity and strategic staging, between fidelity to contemporary agricultural reality and idealized tourist expectations. The practices observed thus oscillate between deliberate folklorisation, symbolic simplification, and an assertive desire to ‘stay true’, revealing the contradictions inherent in any rural tourism venture. Beyond these results, this research contributes significantly to the renewal of rural tourism analysis by shifting the focus to farmers as active producers of tourist imagery, rather than simply as supports or objects of representations constructed from outside. By linking research on tourist imaginaries with that on agritourism and agricultural diversification, the article shows that rural tourism cannot be understood solely as an economic resource or a lever for territorial development. It also constitutes a space for the production of meaning, in which issues of social recognition, cultural transmission, and the recomposition of professional agricultural identities are at stake. The analysis thus highlights the dialectical and performative nature of rural tourist imaginaries. As producers, mediators, and consumers of imaginaries, farmers and tourists co-produce representations that have a lasting influence on agricultural practices, forms of hospitality, and the trajectories of farms. This process contributes to the construction of new rural and agricultural identities, sometimes to the point of producing self-fulfilling prophecy effects, where the tourist imaginary helps to shape the reality it claims to represent.

This research does, however, have certain limitations. The qualitative nature of the survey and the small sample size mean that the results cannot be generalized to the agricultural world as a whole. Furthermore, the analysis focused on farms involved in agritourism, leaving out farmers who refuse or reject these practices, whose perceptions would also be worth exploring.

In this regard, several avenues of research can be considered. Comparative studies, conducted in other regions or national contexts, would make it possible to analyze the diversity of rural imaginaries. Longitudinal approaches would offer valuable insight into the evolution of agricultural representations in the face of environmental, food, and tourism crises. Finally, a deeper understanding of tourist perceptions themselves, mirroring agricultural discourse, would contribute to a better understanding of the logic of co-construction, tension, and negotiation at work in the contemporary construction of rural tourism imaginaries.

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