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**MAPPING LOCAL FOOD CIRCULATION: EMPIRICALLY BASED CONSUMPTION SYSTEMS IN THREE PORTUGUESE RURAL TERRITORIES**

*Paola Hernández (paolaher@uevora.pt)*

This study examines the social dynamics that shape local food consumption in three Portuguese rural municipalities—Évora, Mértola, and Arouca—with the objective of understanding how residents access locally produced foods. Through an empirically grounded approach, the research develops Local Food Consumption Systems that map the diverse flows, practices, and actor relationships enabling local food circulation across these territories.

A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining consumer surveys, semi-structured interviews with representatives of local food initiatives, informal conversations, and participatory observation. Information gathered was triangulated to identify how production, processing, distribution, and consumption processes are activated by different actors. These insights

supported the construction of qualitative system maps that illustrate the pathways through which local foods circulate and the meanings residents attribute to them.

The analysis reveals that rural inhabitants engage in multiple and flexible strategies to obtain local foods, shaped by their own definitions of “local.” Five types of Local Food Consumption Systems emerged across the case studies: no-market, integrated, home-grown, artisanal, and undifferentiated. Their distribution differs across territories: In Évora, integrated and artisanal systems prevail, reflecting strong livestock-based traditions, cheese-making expertise, and the influence of gastronomy-oriented tourism. Mértola is characterised primarily by undifferentiated systems, a pattern associated with demographic aging, a significant reduction in agricultural land use, and limited local production capacity, although artisanal activities still sustain everyday food habits and trusted relationships. Arouca displays all system types, with a notable presence of home-grown and locally integrated systems, linked to its predominance of small farms, emphasis on food quality, and environmental conservation efforts connected to the Arouca Geopark.

The study demonstrates that territorial characteristics and community practices influence how local foods are accessed. These empirically derived systems offer a nuanced understanding of rural food environments and provide valuable insights for governance strategies aimed at strengthening local food networks.

Palavras-chave: local food consumption systems; food access; rural Portugal; territoriality; food environment.