

Comparison of post-lethality thermal treatment conditions on the reduction of *Listeria monocytogenes* and sensory properties of vacuum packed ricotta salata cheese

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1 **Comparison of post-lethality thermal treatment conditions on the reduction of *Listeria monocytogenes***  
2 **and sensory properties of vacuum packed ricotta salata cheese**

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14

15 **Abstract**

16 Ricotta salata is a whey protein cheese produced in Sardinia that in the last decades has been linked to  
17 several recalls and in 2012 to a severe human listeriosis outbreak. Contamination of ricotta salata with *L.*  
18 *monocytogenes* mainly occurs during post-process handling and generally origins from the processing  
19 environment. The application of water bath heat treatment in vacuum packed ricotta salata is a possible  
20 strategy to control *L. monocytogenes* superficial contamination. The objective of the present study was to  
21 select a heat treatment able to inactivate *L. monocytogenes* count of at least 5 log. Nine temperature time  
22 combinations, 75 °C, 85 °C and 90 °C applied for 15 min, 25 min and 40 min each were tested in ricotta  
23 wheels artificially contaminated with a mixture of 5 *L. monocytogenes* strains. Inactivation was assessed  
24 respectively one day and 30 days after heat treatment. The efficacy of treatments was evaluated based on the  
25 reduction in *L. monocytogenes* counts, on the impact on sensory properties and on the cost of the treatment.  
26 Two out of nine treatment combinations, i.e. 85 °C for 40 min and 90 °C for 40 min, were effective in  
27 reducing *L. monocytogenes* contamination level of 5 log. No significant difference was observed in sensory

28 properties after the heat treatments. Therefore both combinations are eligible to conduct a successive study  
29 aimed to extend the shelf-life of ricotta salata up to several months.

30 Keywords: *Listeria monocytogenes*, whey cheese, post-lethality treatment, sensory properties.

31

## 32 1. Introduction

33 Ricotta salata is a traditional whey protein cheese obtained in Sardinia (Italy) through the heat coagulation of  
34 the whey remaining after the production of sheep's milk cheeses. The main phases of production technology  
35 of ricotta salata are described as follows. Traditionally is manufactured using the whey remaining after the  
36 production of hard sheep's milk cheese, usually Pecorino Romano PDO (protected denomination of origin),  
37 which is stored in a silo at 45 °C until use. The whey is filtered and preheated at 60-70 °C using a plate heat  
38 exchanger. The whey is then transferred in large open kettles with approximately 1,200-1,500 liters capacity,  
39 added with 1% by weight of sodium chloride and heated to temperature above 80 °C for 30 minutes. As a  
40 result of heating, curd start floating on the top of liquid, this is collected using perforated scoops and  
41 transferred into plastic molds. The so called ricotta "*Toscanella*" is formed into cylindrical shapes and  
42 pressed to enhance drainage. The curd is salted either by dry-salting (5% w/v) or by brine-salting and dried  
43 for about 10 days in cold rooms at 10-12 °C. The manufacturing process result in cheese wheels weighing  
44 approximately 3 kg with a pH of 6.1-6.9,  $a_w$  of 0.940-0.970, moisture of 50-60% (< 50% if intended for  
45 grating), fat of 28-33% and protein of 14-23% (Spanu, Scarano, Spanu, Penna, Viridis, & De Santis, 2012;  
46 Spanu, Spanu, Pala, Viridis, Scarano, & De Santis, 2013). The final product is individually packed in vacuum  
47 bags and stored at refrigeration temperature with a set shelf-life which differs from three weeks up to several  
48 months, depending on the food business operators. Packaging of ricotta salata depends on the final use of the  
49 product, being ricotta salata wheels vacuum packed as a whole in shrinking bags if intended to be consumed  
50 grated, for mixing with other cheeses or as an ingredient, or cut into wedges before packaging if consumed  
51 plain. No preservatives are used for shelf life extension. In recent years contamination of ricotta salata with  
52 *Listeria monocytogenes* leded voluntary recalls by international companies importing the product from  
53 Sardinia. In 2008 the European Commission documented a case of *L. monocytogenes* infection associated  
54 with the consumption of ricotta salata cheese (RASFF, 2008). The most recent and severe episode occurred

55 in the USA where a multistate outbreak of listeriosis linked to ricotta salata imported from Italy caused 20  
56 hospitalization and 4 deaths (CDC, 2012). Heat treatments, such as thermization and pasteurization, applied  
57 to milk during cheese making and to whey during ricotta production inactivate *Listeria* cells to levels of  
58 approximately 3 to 6 log<sub>10</sub> cfu (Buazzi, Johnson, & Marth, 1992; Casadei, Esteves de Matos, Harrison, &  
59 Gaze, 1998; ICMSF, 1996; Villani, Pepe, Mauriello, Moschetti, Sannino, & Coppola, 1996). Contamination  
60 of whey cheeses with *L. monocytogenes* origins from the processing environment and is localized almost  
61 exclusively on the rind, with a reported prevalence in ricotta salata of approximately 20% (Pintado &  
62 Malcata, 2000; Lioliou, Litopoulou-Tzanetaki, Tzanetakis, & Robinson, 2001; Ibba, Cossu, Spanu, Viridis,  
63 Spanu, Scarano, & De Santis, 2013; Spanu, Scarano, Ibba, Spanu & De Santis, 2015). The intrinsic  
64 properties of ricotta salata support the growth of *L. monocytogenes*, once onto the product, to level as high as  
65 7.0 log<sub>10</sub> cfu g<sup>-1</sup> of rind, potentially harmful to human health (Spanu, Scarano, Spanu, Penna, Viridis, & De  
66 Santis, 2012). Ricotta salata produced in Sardinia is mainly exported in North America and in other  
67 European countries. However, international health authorities accept different health risk for *L.*  
68 *monocytogenes*, leading to an absence in 25 g recommended by FDA and 10<sup>2</sup> cfu g<sup>-1</sup> criteria at the time of  
69 consumption set by European Commission (EC) Regulation No. 2073/2005. Even with a strict application of  
70 good hygienic practices during production, superficial contamination of ricotta salata could not be totally  
71 avoided, but only reduced (Tompkin, Scott, Bernard, Sveum, & Gombas, 1999). Therefore, the application  
72 of alternative control strategies should be applied if the product is exposed to environmental contamination  
73 after the lethality treatment (e.g., cooking) and before packaging (FSIS, 2014). In order to reduce *L.*  
74 *monocytogenes* contamination in ready to eat food, a number of post-package decontamination methods have  
75 been proposed, such as thermal pasteurization, irradiation and high-pressure. The efficacy of these  
76 decontamination technologies in different ready to eat products have been reviewed (Zhu, Du, Cordray, &  
77 Ahn, 2005). The final choice of the treatment to apply in ready to eat food stays on the food business  
78 operator based on scientific evidences on the efficacy, but is certainly cost-oriented. Heat post-lethality  
79 treatments (i.e. hot water bath and steam pasteurization) are widely used in the food industry due to their  
80 effectiveness in reducing the load of pathogenic microorganisms (Arnoldi, 2002; Orta-Ramirez & Smith,  
81 2002). The effectiveness of a thermal treatment is influenced by several factors such as temperature-time

82 ratio, food composition, size and weight of the product and microorganism characteristics (Doyle, Mazzotta,  
83 Wang, Wiseman, & Scott, 2001; Ray, 2004; Sofos, 2002; Yen, Sofos, & Schmidt, 1991). Hence, the  
84 validation of a post-lethality treatment should be designed around the product, taking into account the  
85 formulation, packaging and the expected storage and use conditions. Therefore, results obtained on a specific  
86 product cannot be extended on another product, even if similar. Previous research demonstrated the efficacy  
87 of the immersion of vacuum packed ricotta salata wheels in water bath at 85 °C for 90 min in reducing *L.*  
88 *monocytogenes* counts of 6 log<sub>10</sub> cfu g<sup>-1</sup> of rind (Spanu, Spanu, Pala, Viridis, Scarano, & De Santis, 2013).  
89 However, the effect on sensory characteristics of such treatment was not investigated. Any technological  
90 interventions that negatively affect the sensory quality of a product become useless for a commercial  
91 purpose. For this reason sensory evaluation play a non negligible role in this type of investigation.  
92 The objective of the present study was to compare 9 different temperature-time conditions for the superficial  
93 treatment of whole ricotta salata wheels. The efficacy will be evaluated taking into account the extent of  
94 reduction and survival of artificially inoculated *L. monocytogenes* and the impact on sensory properties. The  
95 results will be used to select the temperature-time ratio to perform a further study aimed to extend the shelf-  
96 life of ricotta salata up to 180 days.

97

## 98 **2. Materials and methods**

99

### 100 *2.1. Ricotta salata samples*

101 A total of 465 vacuum packed ricotta salata wheels were provided by a local cheese-making plant using  
102 sheep milk. Samples were randomly selected from 3 different batches (155 ricotta wheels for each batch) and  
103 stored in a cold room at 4±2 °C until the experiment was performed. Immediately after their arrival samples  
104 were labeled according to their use for the experiment. Experimental Units (EUs) were defined ricotta salata  
105 wheels artificially contaminated with *L. monocytogenes* and successively submitted to heat treatment.  
106 Positive Controls (PCs) were defined ricotta salata wheels artificially contaminated with *L. monocytogenes*.  
107 Blank Samples (BLs) were defined the units not inoculated and used to evaluate the level of natural  
108 contamination of ricotta salata with *L. monocytogenes*. Sensory Units (SEs) were defined the not inoculated

109 samples used to evaluate sensory properties either after heat treatment (SEt) or as control with no treatment  
110 (SEc). Composition Units (CUs) were defined not inoculated samples used for the determination of intrinsic  
111 properties (pH and  $a_w$ ) and composition (moisture, fat and proteins) after heat treatments.

112

## 113 2.2. Artificial inoculation

114 The Technical Guidance document prepared by the EU Community Reference Laboratory (CRL) for *L.*  
115 *monocytogenes* (Beaufort, Cornu, Bergis, Lardeux, & Lombard, 2014) was used for the experiment  
116 designing. A mixture of 5 *L. monocytogenes* strains was used to artificially contaminate EUs and PCs ricotta  
117 salata wheels. Of the strains that composed the inoculum one was the reference strain ATTC 19111 (serovar  
118 1/2a) obtained from American Type Culture Collection (Manassas, VA, USA), while the other four were  
119 wild-type strains (respectively serotypes 1/2a, 1/2b, 1/2c and 4b), previously recovered from the cheese-  
120 making plant environments or from ricotta salata. The wild-type strains were selected in order to be  
121 representative of the main serotypes associated with foodborne listeriosis. All the strains were stored at -80  
122 °C in Brain Heart Infusion (BHI) broth (Oxoid, Basingstoke, UK) with glycerol (15% v/v). The inoculum  
123 level was aimed to demonstrate a reduction in *L. monocytogenes* level, or Performance Criterion (PC), of 5  
124  $\log_{10}$  cfu  $g^{-1}$  of rind, considered to suffice to attain a Food Safety Objective (FSO) of  $10^2$  cfu  $g^{-1}$  throughout  
125 the entire storage period under refrigeration. Previous experiments were conducted to standardize the  
126 preparation of inoculum according to the indications contained in the Guidelines for conducting *Listeria*  
127 *monocytogenes* challenge testing of foods (Scott, Swanson, Frier, Pruett jr., Sveum, Hall, Smoot, & Brown,  
128 2005). In order to prepare cells in the same physiological state (late exponential or early stationary phase)  
129 each strain was separately inoculated into tubes containing BHI broth and cultured overnight at 30 °C in a  
130 shaking water bath (100 rev  $min^{-1}$ ). To adapt cultures at refrigeration temperatures, cells were then  
131 subcultured into 10 mL of BHI and incubated at  $4 \pm 2$  °C for approximately 15 days. A “mixed working  
132 culture” was obtained by transferring equal volumes of each individual culture into a sterile flask. The  
133 concentration was adjusted to ca.  $10^7$  cfu  $mL^{-1}$  using sterile saline solution (0.85% NaCl). Plate count on  
134 Trypticase Soy Agar (TSA, Biolife, Milan, Italy) was used to confirm concentrations. The whole surface of  
135 ricotta salata wheels was evenly sprayed with 2 mL of *L. monocytogenes* mixed culture using an atomizer. A

136 holding period of 15 min at room temperature was allowed to inoculated samples in order to let the  
137 suspension attach, after which ricotta salata were individually vacuum packed in shrink bags (Criovac Cook-  
138 In HT-3000, Sealedair Ltd., St Neots, UK) and stored at refrigeration temperature until further use.

139

### 140 2.3. Heat treatment and experimental design

141 The experiment was conducted in three independent trials, one for each batch, conducted one month apart.  
142 Heat treatment was performed by immersion of vacuum packed ricotta salata wheels in hot water bath. Nine  
143 different temperature- time conditions were tested: 75 °C, 85 °C and 90 °C applied for 15 min, 25 min and  
144 40 min each. The number and the types of ricotta salata samples used for each treatment condition are  
145 reported in table 1. Immediately after the heat treatment ricotta salata wheels were immersed in a tank  
146 containing iced water for approximately 2 hours and then stored at  $4\pm 2$  °C until analysis. The analysis points  
147 or testing times (T) were: the day of inoculum and heat treatment, defined as T<sub>0</sub>; 24 hours after heat  
148 treatment, defined as T<sub>1</sub> and 30 days after heat treatment defined as T<sub>30</sub>. T<sub>1</sub> was performed the day  
149 subsequent the heat treatment to avoid false negative caused by the presence of sub-lethally injured *L.*  
150 *monocytogenes* cells that may survive the heat treatment but are not immediately culturable. The PCs were  
151 analysed at T<sub>0</sub>, 6 hours after inoculation to assess if the level of contamination was effectively  $10^5 \log_{10} \text{cfu g}^{-1}$ .  
152 The BLs were also examined at T<sub>0</sub>, to account for eventual natural contamination of ricotta salata with *L.*  
153 *monocytogenes*. The EUs and CUs were submitted to heat treatment and analysed at T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>30</sub>. Part of SE  
154 units were treated (SEt) and part, used as negative controls (SEc), were no treated (Table 1).  
155 The sampling plan with sample units, testing times and related analysis is summarized in table 2. The  
156 effective temperature obtained on ricotta salata surface during each heat treatment was monitored using an  
157 additional ricotta salata wheel where a data logger (KT 20T, Kimo, Montpon Ménéstérol, France) was placed  
158 1.5 cm below the surface and the temperature recorder during the treatment.

159

### 160 2.4. Microbiological analysis

161 Detection and enumeration of *L. monocytogenes* (ISO 11290-1:1996/Amd 1:2004; ISO 11290-2:1998/Amd  
162 1:2004) and enumeration of aerobic mesophilic bacteria (ISO 4833:2003) were conducted on 25 g of ricotta

163 salata aseptically collected cutting the rind up to 2 cm. In order to detect the presence of sublethally injured  
164 cells that may survive in the product but may not be cultured on selective media, on heat treated samples the  
165 enumeration of *L. monocytogenes* was also conducted using the Thin Agar Layer (TAL) method. The TAL  
166 method consists in the overlay of a nonselective agar medium onto agar plates containing a selective medium  
167 that combines the ability to enumerate and to differentiate heat injured cells (Kang and Fung, 1999; Wu and  
168 Fung, 2001). From each positive sample, 5 suspected colonies of *L. monocytogenes* were submitted to  
169 phenotypic identification. Multiplex PCR was carried out to confirm identification and to separate the major  
170 serovars (1/2a, 1/2b, 1/2c and 4b) into distinct serogroups (Doumith, Buchrieser, Glaser, Jacquet, & Martin,  
171 2004). The *prs* gene, specific for *Listeria* spp. was used as internal amplification control. A selection of the  
172 strains recovered from EUs at T<sub>30</sub> was submitted to pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) to confirm that  
173 the strains recovered were the same that were inoculated. From each of the 3 replicate were selected up to  
174 five strains for each temperature-time combination. In order to capture as much variability as possible a  
175 preliminary screening of isolates to submit to PFGE was conducted based on the serogroups. PFGE was  
176 carried out using the protocol proposed by Graves & Swaminathan (2001). The obtained restriction profiles  
177 were analysed by visual examination to distinguish inoculated strains among each other and from strains  
178 originating by natural contamination.

179

### 180 2.5. Physico-chemical properties and composition

181 Intrinsic properties and chemical composition of ricotta salata were determined to account for possible  
182 interaction with *L. monocytogenes* survival and growth. PH and a<sub>w</sub> were measured using pH meter GLP22  
183 (Crison Instruments SA, Barcelona, Spain) and water activity meter Aqualab 4TE (Decagon, Pullman, WA,  
184 USA), respectively. Near infrared transmittance (NIT) compositional analyzer (FOSS, Eden Prairie, MN,  
185 USA) was used for the analysis of fat, moisture, protein and total solids. Differences in intrinsic properties  
186 and composition ( $\bar{x} \pm SD$ ) of ricotta salata cheese between the different temperature-time combinations used  
187 for the heat treatment and over time (T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>30</sub>) were compared using Fisher's least significant difference  
188 (LSD) test. Statistical analysis was performed with Statgraphics Centurion XVI software (StatPoint  
189 Technologies, Warrenton, VA, USA).



190

191 *2.6. Sensory analysis*

192 The "Difference from control test" was applied to highlight sensory differences between heat treated samples  
193 (SEt) and the negative control (SEc). This test is very helpful to determine difference between one or more  
194 samples against the control and, if the difference is significant, to measure its size (Meilgaard, Civille, &  
195 Carr, 1999). On the other hand this test can cause a sensory fatigue when many samples have to be taken into  
196 account because, during each session, the control sample as reference and as blind sample must be served. In  
197 order to avoid the sensory fatigue only five out nine temperature-time combination were evaluated: 75 °C  
198 and 90 °C treated for 15 min and 40 min, and 85 °C treated for 25 min. Thirty judges (14 females and 16  
199 males, aged 25-50 years) specialized in dairy products, previously selected for their sensitivity and after  
200 attending a course of 60 hours in sensory analysis (ISO 8586-1: 1993), evaluated the samples against an  
201 untreated control on a numerical category scale (0 = no difference and 9 = very large difference). Ricotta  
202 salata samples were kept at 4-6 °C until sensory assessments. Before analysis the ricotta samples were  
203 portioned extracting two opposing slices. The slices were further portioned into parallelepiped pieces (5 x 1.5  
204 x 1.5 cm) and served, at room temperature, in odorless plastic containers marked with a random three-digit  
205 number (Meilgaard, Civille, & Carr, 1999). Judges were also provided by a tray containing an unsalted  
206 cracker and a glass of water. The evaluation was carried out in a randomized and balanced order (Macfie,  
207 Bratchell, Greenhoff, & Vallis, 1989). Statistical analysis was performed with Statgraphics Centurion XVI  
208 software (StatPoint Technologies) by the one-way ANOVA (factor: samples) and the Fisher's LSD.

209

210 *2.7. Validation of heat treatment*

211 The experiment was conducted in three independent trials for each of the 9 temperature-time combinations.  
212 Samples used in each trial belonged to three different production batches (batch A, B and C). Analyses were  
213 conducted at two different sampling times ( $T_1$  and  $T_{30}$ ). For each heat treatment combination and sampling  
214 time were analyzed three samples. To account for a margin of safety, the effectiveness of heat treatment, i.e.  
215 performance standard ( $\Delta$ ) was considered in the worst conditions, i.e. the minimum level of  $\log_{10} \text{cfu g}^{-1}$   
216 reduction in *L. monocytogenes* counts. Reduction obtained as consequence of heat treatments was calculated

217 independently for each batch, by computing the minimum difference between the concentration ( $\log_{10}$  cfu g<sup>-1</sup>) before the treatment ( $T_0$ ) and after the treatment ( $T_1$  and  $T_{30}$ ) observed in the triplicate samples.

219

## 220 2.8. Statistical analysis

221 Mean mesophilic bacteria counts ( $\log_{10}$  cfu g<sup>-1</sup>), intrinsic properties ( $\bar{x} \pm SD$ ) and composition ( $\% \pm SD$ )  
222 between the different temperature-time combinations at  $T_1$  and  $T_{30}$  were compared using Fisher's least  
223 significant difference (LSD) test. All statistical analyses were performed with Statgraphics Centurion XVI  
224 software (StatPoint Technologies, Warrenton, VA, USA).

225

## 226 3. Results

### 227 3.1. *L. monocytogenes* contamination and background microflora

228 Natural contamination of ricotta salata rind with *L. monocytogenes* occurred in 6 out of 18 BLs (30.0%) all  
229 originating from the first batch. Enumeration of *L. monocytogenes* was possible in five BLs, showing a level  
230 of contamination of  $2.68 \pm 0.51 \log_{10}$  cfu g<sup>-1</sup> ( $\bar{x} \pm SD$ ). The mean level of artificial contamination expressed as  
231  $\log_{10}$  cfu g<sup>-1</sup> ( $\bar{x} \pm SD$ ) obtained on the rind of PCs units at  $T_0$  was  $4.82 \pm 0.43$ ,  $5.5 \pm 0.04$  and  $5.36 \pm 0.09$  in the  
232 first, second and third replicate, respectively. Enumeration of aerobic mesophilic bacteria was conducted on  
233 18 BLs, 9 PCs and 162 EUs. In BLs aerobic mesophilic population ( $\bar{x} \pm SD \log_{10}$  cfu g<sup>-1</sup>) was  $7.41 \pm 0.47$ ,  
234  $7.45 \pm 1.04$ ,  $7.83 \pm 1.00$  while in PCs was  $7.21 \pm 0.31$ ,  $7.78 \pm 0.68$  and  $8.83 \pm 0.11$  in the first, second and third  
235 batch respectively. The mean  $\log_{10}$  cfu g<sup>-1</sup> reduction in total bacterial counts observed at  $T_1$  ranged between  
236 ca. 1.0 and 3.0 for ricotta treated at 75 °C, 4.0 and 5.5 for treatment at 85 °C and from 5 to 6 for 90 °C. After  
237 30 days of refrigerated storage the microbial population increased of less than 1.0  $\log_{10}$  cfu g<sup>-1</sup> in ricotta  
238 salata treated at 75 °C and of ca. 1.0 and 2.0  $\log_{10}$  cfu g<sup>-1</sup> in samples treated respectively at 85 °C and 90 °C.  
239 Pair-wise comparison of aerobic mesophilic bacteria counts between ricotta salata samples submitted to the 9  
240 treatment combinations and between samples analysed at  $T_1$  and  $T_{30}$  are reported in table 3.

241

### 242 3.2. Inactivation and survival of *L. monocytogenes*

243 The lethal effect was evaluated on 9 EUs (3 for each replicate) for each temperature-time combination at  $T_1$   
244 and  $T_{30}$ . The minimum differences in *L. monocytogenes* counts between  $T_1$  and  $T_0$  ( $\Delta_1$ ) and  $T_{30}$  and  $T_0$  ( $\Delta_{30}$ )  
245 for each of the 9 treatments are reported in table 4. At  $T_1$  three out of nine combinations, i.e. 85 °C for 40  
246 min, 90 °C for 25 min and 90 °C for 40 min, were effective either with the enumeration and detection  
247 methods. However, the 90 °C for 25 min combination showed the survival of *L. monocytogenes* after storage  
248 at 4 °C for 30 days. The complete description of the effect of each treatment at  $T_1$  and  $T_{30}$  is reported in table  
249 5 and figure 1.

250 Overall, 334 strains were confirmed as *L. monocytogenes* by molecular identification. Twenty-seven strains  
251 (90.0%) isolated from BLs were serogroup 1/2a, while 3 (10.0%) were serogroup 1/2c. Of the 49 strains  
252 isolated from PCs, 17 (34.7%) were serogroup 1/2a, 15 (30.6%) serogroup 1/2b, 11 (22.4%) serogroup 1/2c  
253 and 6 (12.2%) serogroup 4b. From EUs at  $T_1$  were isolated 95 strains which were grouped as follows: 32  
254 (33.7%) serogroup 1/2a, 12 (12.6%) serogroup 1/2b, 16 (16.8%) serogroup 1/2c and 35 (36.8%) serogroup  
255 4b. From EUs at  $T_{30}$  were isolated 160 strains which were grouped as follows: 52 (32.5%) serogroup 1/2a, 23  
256 (14.4%) serogroup 1/2b, 41 (25.6%) serogroup 1/2c and 44 (27.5%) serogroup 4b. Of *L. monocytogenes*  
257 recovered from EUs at  $T_{30}$  were submitted to PFGE 19, 13 and 30 strains from batch A, B and C  
258 respectively. Strains recovered showed the same PFGE profile of the inoculated strains and belonged  
259 exclusively to the wild type: 18 (29.0%) were 1/2a, 12 (19.4%) were 1/2b, 13 (21.0%) were 1/2c and 19  
260 (30.6%) were 4b.

261

### 262 3.3. Temperature monitoring

263 The initial temperature of ricotta salata rind before the immersion in hot water was  $6.0 \pm 0.8$  °C. Figure 2  
264 shows the temperature profile recorded on the rind of ricotta salata during water bath heat treatments for the  
265 three temperatures.

266

### 267 3.4. Sensory features

268 The results of sensory analysis (average values  $\pm$ SD) are shown in table 7. The blind control allowed  
269 estimating the *placebo* effect, produced by asking to find a difference when in fact no differences exist.

270 Statistic inferences are estimates by comparing the samples and the blind control. All the heat treated  
271 samples are significantly different from the untreated one (blind control) with the exception of that treated at  
272 lowest temperature-time combination (75 °C for 15 min). However the difference size goes from 1.3 to 1.8  
273 points that converted in the verbal scale correspond to “slight/moderate difference”. The heat treated samples  
274 were not different between each other, meaning that heating from 75 to 90 °C for a time ranging between 15  
275 and 40 min do not significantly change the sensory characteristics of ricotta salata.

### 276 3.5. Ricotta salata composition

277 Physico-chemical characteristics were determined on untreated samples (18 BLs) and heat treated samples  
278 (162 CUs). Intrinsic properties values ( $\bar{x} \pm \text{SD}$ ) for untreated samples were  $6.42 \pm 0.09$  for pH and  $0.963 \pm 0.01$   
279 for  $a_w$ . Composition values ( $\% \pm \text{SD}$ ) were respectively of  $55.35 \pm 2.09$  for moisture,  $21.75 \pm 2.42$  for fat,  
280  $14.55 \pm 1.37$  for proteins and  $4.56 \pm 1.38$  for salt. Differences in intrinsic properties and composition between  
281 the 9 treatment combinations at  $T_1$  and  $T_{30}$  are reported in table 6. PH and  $a_w$  were always within limits for *L.*  
282 *monocytogenes* growth and no significant difference was observed between values of ricotta salata submitted  
283 to heat treatment with different temperature-time conditions ( $P > 0.05$ ).

284

## 285 4. Discussion

286 In the last decades ricotta salata has been associated with several recalls due to *L. monocytogenes*  
287 contamination and more recently even with foodborne listeriosis outbreaks. Contamination of ricotta salata  
288 with *L. monocytogenes* mainly originates from food processing environment and is localized almost exclusively  
289 on the rind (Pilo, Marongiu, Corgiolu, Viridis, Scarano, & De Santis, 2007). Whole ricotta salata wheels are  
290 generally intended to be consumed grated including the rind. Post-process control strategies are needed in  
291 order to comply with international health authorities limits. Hot water bath treatment in vacuum packed  
292 ricotta salata has been previously evaluated, demonstrating to be an effective and economic method to  
293 inactivate surface contamination of ricotta salata cheese (Spanu, Spanu, Pala, Viridis, Scarano, & De Santis,  
294 2013). However, optimization of the process was needed in order to account for the level of reduction in *L.*  
295 *monocytogenes* counts ( $\log_{10}$  cfu  $\text{g}^{-1}$ ), changes in sensory properties and cost of the treatment. In the present  
296 study was compared the listericidal effect of nine temperature-time combinations for the treatment of

297 artificially contaminated whole ricotta salata wheels. The recovery of *L. monocytogenes* from not inoculated  
298 blank samples, confirms that natural contamination of ricotta salata is not a rare finding. The prevalence of  
299 contamination of ricotta salata produced in Sardinia is estimated around 20% (Ibba, Cossu, Spanu, Viridis,  
300 Spanu, Scarano, & De Santis, 2013; Spanu, Scarano, Ibba, Spanu & De Santis, 2015). This level can result,  
301 when ricotta is stored at refrigeration temperatures for up to two months, in concentration of the pathogens of  
302 approximately  $10^7 \log_{10} \text{ cfu g}^{-1}$ , potentially harmful to human health (Spanu, Scarano, Spanu, Penna, Viridis,  
303 & De Santis, 2012). The present study was aimed to validate the temperature-time combinations able to  
304 reduce *L. monocytogenes* concentration of  $5 \log \text{ cfu g}^{-1}$ , considered sufficient to comply with the food safety  
305 objective of  $<100 \text{ cfu g}^{-1}$  for the products placed on the market during their shelf-life (EC, 2005).  
306 Enumeration of *L. monocytogenes* in positive control units confirmed that the desired level of contamination  
307 of  $10^5 \text{ cfu g}^{-1}$  was obtained. Out of nine temperature-time combinations only two,  $85 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  for 40 min and  $90$   
308  $^\circ\text{C}$  for 40 min, showed to be effective in reducing *L. monocytogenes* to undetectable levels either at  $T_0$  and  
309  $T_{30}$ . These combinations allowed to reach respectively  $56.3 \pm 1.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  and  $57.7 \pm 1.4 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  on ricotta surface,  
310 effective in killing *L. monocytogenes*. On one hand, little or no efficacy was observed for treatment  
311 conducted at  $75 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , regardless of the time of application, while on the other hand no efficacy was  
312 demonstrated for treatment conducted for 15 min, regardless of the temperature used. Despite an initial  
313 inactivation of up to 5.0 log at  $T_0$  as consequence of treatments performed at  $75 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  (i.e. 25 and 40 min), *L.*  
314 *monocytogenes* was still culturable with the detection method. The survival and successive growth during  
315 storage at refrigeration temperature for 30 days resulted in counts as high as ca. 7 log. Failure of heat  
316 treatment at  $75^\circ\text{C}$  to inactivate *L. monocytogenes* could be explained with the difference between water  
317 temperature and the maximum temperature obtained on ricotta rind ( $47.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ). Treatment conducted at  $85 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$   
318 for 25 min resulted in a temperature on ricotta rind of  $49.8 \pm 1.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  which allowed *L. monocytogenes* survival  
319 to concentrations of up to 1 log at day zero. As consequence the microorganism grew during the successive  
320 storage to level as high as 5 log. Although *L. monocytogenes* was not countable with the enumeration method  
321 after 30 days in samples treated at  $90 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  for 25 minutes, it was still detectable with the qualitative method.  
322 No guarantee can be provided that the pathogen will not growth to levels potentially dangerous to human  
323 during ricotta salata shelf-life. The highest temperature detected on ricotta salata rind after 25 min was  $52.5$

324 °C for the treatment at 90 °C. This could explain the presence of heat injured cells, which recovered after the  
325 subsequent storage at refrigeration temperature for 30 days. Strains capable to survive and growth after heat  
326 treatment belonged to the wild type, suggesting that they are characterized by a greater resistance as  
327 compared with reference strains. As far as the gap between the temperature of water during treatments and  
328 the temperature recorded on the ricotta salata rind it should be noted that temperatures were detected 1.5 cm  
329 below the ricotta surface, which may underestimate the effective temperature reached on the interface  
330 between packaged ricotta and water. The heat transfer is a function of the thermal properties of foods, which  
331 depend, among other factors, by chemical composition and temperature. However, due to the complexity of  
332 heat transfer calculations, specific experiments should be conducted in order to define the specific thermal  
333 properties of ricotta salata. Changes in sensory properties of heat treated ricotta salata were observed with  
334 respect of untreated samples, but no differences were among treatments. This indicates the feasibility of  
335 using more protective treatments with no negative implication for ricotta salata sensory profile.

336

## 337 **5. Conclusion**

338 Contamination of Ricotta salata with *L. monocytogenes* can effectively be controlled by the application of  
339 water bath heat treatment applied after packaging of the product. Treatments performed at 85 °C for 40 min  
340 or 90 °C for 40 min can be effectively used to obtain a reduction of 5 log of the pathogen. No significant  
341 difference was observed in the sensory properties between the treatments. Although treatments at 85 °C for  
342 40 min might gather food processors favors as compared to 90 °C for 40 min, the latter may provide a greater  
343 safety of the product when is stored for periods of time longer than 30 days. Treatments applied for 40 min,  
344 either at 85 °C and 90 °C, are eligible as combination of choice to be used in a further study to assess the  
345 efficacy as post-lethality treatment aimed to extend ricotta salata shelf-life.

346

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353

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449 ready-to-eat meat products. *Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science and Food Safety*, 4(2), 34-42.

1 Table 1. Temperature-time combinations used for water bath heat treatment of ricotta salata

Temperature-time condition		Ricotta salata samples					Total
Temperature	Minutes	BL <sup>1</sup>	PC <sup>2</sup>	EUs <sup>3</sup>	CUs <sup>4</sup>	SEs <sup>5</sup>	
No treatment	-	18	9	-	-	42	69
75 °C	15	-	-	18	18	12	48
	25	-	-	18	18	3	39
	40	-	-	18	18	12	48
85 °C	15	-	-	18	18	3	39
	25	-	-	18	18	12	48
	40	-	-	18	18	3	39
90 °C	15	-	-	18	18	12	48
	25	-	-	18	18	3	39
	40	-	-	18	18	12	48
Total		18	9	162	162	114	465

2 <sup>1</sup>BLs (Blank Samples): not inoculated units; <sup>2</sup>PCs (Positive Controls): samples inoculated with *L.*

3 *monocytogenes*; <sup>3</sup>EUs (Experimental Units): samples inoculated with *L. monocytogenes* and successively

4 heat treated; <sup>4</sup>CUs (Composition Units): heat treated units for physico-chemical analysis; <sup>5</sup>SEs (Sensory

5 Units): samples used to assess the effect of heat treatment on sensory properties.

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15 Table 2. Number of ricotta salata wheels and analysis performed at each sampling time.

Analysis	Test units	Sampling time			Total
		T <sub>0</sub> <sup>a</sup>	T <sub>1</sub> <sup>b</sup>	T <sub>30</sub> <sup>c</sup>	
Detection and enumeration of <i>L. monocytogenes</i> and aerobic mesophilic bacteria	BLs <sup>1</sup>	18	-	-	-
	PCs <sup>2</sup>	9	-	-	9
	EUs <sup>3</sup>	-	81	81	162
	CUs <sup>4</sup>	-	81	81	162
Intrinsic properties and composition	BLs <sup>1</sup>	18	-	-	-
	CUs <sup>4</sup>	-	81	81	162
Sensory analysis	SEs <sup>5</sup>				38

16 Superscript letters are referred to the time between inoculation and analysis: <sup>a</sup> = day of inoculum and heat  
 17 treatment; <sup>b</sup> = 24 hours after heat treatment; <sup>c</sup> = 30 days after heat treatment. Superscript numbers are referred  
 18 to test units: <sup>1</sup>BLs (Blank Samples): not inoculated units; <sup>2</sup>PCs (Positive Controls): samples inoculated with  
 19 *L. monocytogenes*; <sup>3</sup>EUs (Experimental Units): samples inoculated with *L. monocytogenes* and successively  
 20 heat treated; <sup>4</sup>CUs (Composition Units): heat treated units for physico-chemical analysis; <sup>5</sup>SEs (Sensory  
 21 Units): samples used to assess the effect of heat treatment on sensory properties.

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32 Table 3. Comparison of aerobic mesophilic bacteria counts ( $\log_{10}$  cfu  $g^{-1}$ ;  $\bar{x} \pm SD$ ) of heat treated ricotta  
 33 salata with 9 different temperature-time combinations analyzed 24 h after the treatment ( $T_1$ ) and after storage  
 34 at refrigeration temperature for 30 days ( $T_{30}$ ).

Treatment		Aerobic mesophilic bacteria			
Temperature	Minutes	+ve/n	$T_1$	+ve/n	$T_{30}$
75 °C	15	9/9	6.94±0.62 <sup>A</sup>	9/9	7.06±0.80 <sup>A</sup>
	25	9/9	5.69±0.55 <sup>B</sup>	9/9	6.20±1.36 <sup>A</sup>
	40	9/9	5.12±0.42 <sup>B</sup>	7/9	6.50±1.28 <sup>A</sup>
85 °C	15	9/9	3.90±0.85 <sup>C</sup>	9/9	4.88±0.88 <sup>B</sup>
	25	9/9	3.71±0.94 <sup>C</sup>	5/9	4.58±1.14 <sup>B</sup>
	40	9/9	2.45±1.97 <sup>D</sup>	4/9	4.14±1.78 <sup>BC</sup>
90 °C	15	9/9	2.02±1.22 <sup>D</sup>	6/9	4.15±0.82 <sup>BC</sup>
	25	9/9	1.68±1.29 <sup>D</sup>	3/9	2.90±0.78 <sup>C</sup>
	40	9/9	2.01±1.12 <sup>D</sup>	3/9	3.67±1.62 <sup>BC</sup>

35 Means in the same column on the same testing time ( $T_1$  or  $T_{30}$ ) with different capital letter are significantly  
 36 different ( $P<0.05$ ).

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48 Table 4. *Listeria monocytogenes* reduction ( $\Delta$ )<sup>a</sup> on ricotta salata rind after water bath heat treatment

Temperature	Batch	15 min		25 min		40 min	
		$\Delta T_1$	$\Delta T_{30}$	$\Delta T_1$	$\Delta T_{30}$	$\Delta T_1$	$\Delta T_{30}$
75 °C	A	-0.23	4.18	-4.54	2.26	-3.24	2.57
	B	-2.59	0.48	-5.45	-5.45	-5.45	-5.45
	C	-1.78	-1.36	-5.27	-1.73	-5.27	-5.27
85 °C	A	-4.54	-4.54	-4.54	-4.54	-4.54	-4.54
	B	-5.45	-1.51	-5.45	-0.22	-5.45	-5.45
	C	-2.15	-2.67	-3.97	-5.27	-5.27	-5.27
90 °C	A	-4.54	-4.54	-4.54	-4.54	-4.54	-4.54
	B	-5.45	-5.45	-5.45	-5.45	-5.45	-5.45
	C	-3.97	-2.13	-5.27	-5.27	-5.27	-5.27

49 <sup>a</sup>Values are the difference between concentration ( $\log_{10}$  cfu  $g^{-1}$ ) the day of artificial inoculation ( $T_0$ ) and 24  
50 hours ( $\Delta T_1$ ) and 30 days ( $\Delta T_{30}$ ) after treatment. For each batch and for each temperature-time combination  
51 values are the minimum difference between the initial contamination level and the maximum count after the  
52 treatment in the triplicate samples.

53 Table 5. Enumeration and detection of *L. monocytogenes* in ricotta salata artificially contaminated and heat treated with different temperature-time combinations  
 54 and relative compliance with Regulation CE limits evaluated 24 h (T<sub>1</sub>) and 30 days (T<sub>30</sub>) after the heat treatment.

Treatment		<i>L.monocytogenes</i>						
Temperature	Minutes	Batch	T <sub>1</sub>		T <sub>30</sub>			
			Enumeration	Detection in 25 g	Enumeration	Detection in 25 g		
			+ve/n	log <sub>10</sub> cfu/g	+ve /n	+ve/n	log <sub>10</sub> cfu/g	+ve /n
75 °C	15	A	2/3	3.67±0.89	3/3 <sup>1</sup>	3/3	8.20±0.48 <sup>2</sup>	3/3
		B	1/3	2.86±0.00	1/3 <sup>1</sup>	1/3	5.93±0.00 <sup>2</sup>	3/3
		C	1/3	3.49±0.00	3/3 <sup>1</sup>	3/3	3.47± 0.48 <sup>2</sup>	3/3
	25	A	0/3	0.00±0.00	1/3 <sup>1</sup>	2/3	6.39±0.58 <sup>2</sup>	3/3
		B	0/3	0.00±0.00	1/3 <sup>1</sup>	0/3	0.00±0.00 <sup>2</sup>	0/3
		C	0/3	0.00±0.00	1/3 <sup>1</sup>	1/3	3.54±0.00 <sup>2</sup>	2/3
	40	A	2/3	1.30±0.00	3/3 <sup>1</sup>	3/3	6.87±0.34 <sup>2</sup>	3/3
		B	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
		C	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
85 °C	15	A	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	1/3
		B	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	2/3	2.82±1.58 <sup>2</sup>	2/3
		C	1/3	3.12± 0.00	2/3 <sup>1</sup>	1/3	2.60 ± 0.00 <sup>2</sup>	3/3
	25	A	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
		B	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	1/3	5.23±0.00 <sup>2</sup>	1/3
		C	1/3	1.30± 0.00	1/3 <sup>1</sup>	0/3	0.00±0.00	1/3
	40	A	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
		B	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
		C	0/3	0.0±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
90 °C	15	A	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	2/3
		B	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	1/3
		C	1/3	1.30± 0.00	3/3 <sup>1</sup>	2/3	2.92±0.22 <sup>2</sup>	2/3
	25	A	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
		B	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
		C	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	2/3
	40	A	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
		B	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3
		C	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3	0/3	0.00±0.00	0/3

55 Compliance are intended as follows: <sup>1</sup>not compliant with the Regulation CE 2073/2005 detection limits before the food has left the immediate control of the food  
56 business operator ( $T_1$ ); <sup>2</sup>not compliant with the Regulation CE 2073/2005 enumeration limits for the products placed on the market during their shelf-life ( $T_{30}$ ).

57

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT



58 Table 6. Intrinsic properties ( $\bar{x} \pm SD$ ) and composition ( $\% \pm SD$ ) of ricotta salata submitted to 9 different heat treatment combinations and analyzed 24 h ( $T_1$ ) and  
 59 30 days ( $T_{30}$ ) after storage at refrigeration temperature.

Treatment		pH		$a_w$		Moisture %		Fat %		Proteins %		NaCl %	
Temperature	Min	$T_1$	$T_{30}$	$T_1$	$T_{30}$	$T_1$	$T_{30}$	$T_1$	$T_{30}$	$T_1$	$T_{30}$	$T_1$	$T_{30}$
75 °C	15	6.41±0.12 <sup>A</sup>	6.32±0.06 <sup>A</sup>	0.959±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	0.952±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	54.96±1.44 <sup>A</sup>	54.59±1.67 <sup>A</sup>	20.97±1.88 <sup>A</sup>	20.87±2.29 <sup>A</sup>	15.19±3.38 <sup>AB</sup>	14.75±1.35 <sup>AB</sup>	5.02±0.84 <sup>A</sup>	5.50±1.33 <sup>A</sup>
	25	6.42±0.11 <sup>A</sup>	6.36±0.05 <sup>A</sup>	0.954±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	0.951±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	54.90±2.08 <sup>A</sup>	54.94±1.36 <sup>A</sup>	21.73±2.01 <sup>AB</sup>	22.70±3.01 <sup>A</sup>	15.56±2.63 <sup>B</sup>	14.05±1.09 <sup>A</sup>	5.04±0.72 <sup>A</sup>	5.57±0.79 <sup>A</sup>
	40	6.41±0.13 <sup>A</sup>	6.35±0.07 <sup>A</sup>	0.950±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	0.654±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	55.09±2.23 <sup>A</sup>	53.53±1.93 <sup>A</sup>	20.90±3.11 <sup>A</sup>	22.71±2.32 <sup>A</sup>	14.44±1.29 <sup>ABC</sup>	14.56±0.93 <sup>AB</sup>	5.18±0.30 <sup>A</sup>	5.20±0.74 <sup>AB</sup>
85 °C	15	6.41±0.12 <sup>A</sup>	6.36±0.09 <sup>A</sup>	0.952±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	0.953±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	54.53±2.04 <sup>A</sup>	54.17±2.16 <sup>A</sup>	21.31±2.26 <sup>AB</sup>	21.65±2.52 <sup>A</sup>	14.20±2.32 <sup>ABC</sup>	15.01±1.54 <sup>AB</sup>	5.26±1.12 <sup>A</sup>	4.98±0.95 <sup>AB</sup>
	25	6.41±0.12 <sup>A</sup>	6.33±0.08 <sup>A</sup>	0.956±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	0.956±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	55.40±2.03 <sup>A</sup>	54.07±2.74 <sup>A</sup>	21.23±1.73 <sup>AB</sup>	22.29±3.13 <sup>A</sup>	13.97±1.04 <sup>ABC</sup>	15.37±1.12 <sup>AB</sup>	5.24±0.84 <sup>A</sup>	4.63±0.59 <sup>B</sup>
	40	6.38±0.10 <sup>A</sup>	6.33±0.11 <sup>A</sup>	0.953±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	0.956±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	54.72±1.81 <sup>A</sup>	53.91±2.12 <sup>A</sup>	21.65±2.21 <sup>AB</sup>	22.48±2.09 <sup>A</sup>	14.95±1.78 <sup>ABC</sup>	14.94±0.97 <sup>AB</sup>	5.16±0.76 <sup>A</sup>	5.09±0.76 <sup>AB</sup>
90 °C	15	6.40±0.11 <sup>A</sup>	6.33±0.09 <sup>A</sup>	0.953±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	0.954±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	54.30±1.64 <sup>A</sup>	53.61±1.62 <sup>A</sup>	23.07±0.88 <sup>B</sup>	22.75±2.15 <sup>A</sup>	13.33±0.56 <sup>C</sup>	14.48±1.50 <sup>AB</sup>	5.36±0.66 <sup>A</sup>	5.18±0.44 <sup>AB</sup>
	25	6.38±0.12 <sup>A</sup>	6.35±0.15 <sup>A</sup>	0.955±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	0.954±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	54.78±1.66 <sup>A</sup>	54.24±2.24 <sup>A</sup>	21.74±2.01 <sup>AB</sup>	22.52±2.36 <sup>A</sup>	14.38±2.00 <sup>ABC</sup>	14.33±0.82 <sup>AB</sup>	5.12±0.90 <sup>A</sup>	5.32±0.79 <sup>AB</sup>
	40	6.35±0.11 <sup>A</sup>	6.35±0.12 <sup>A</sup>	0.954±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	0.955±0.01 <sup>A</sup>	54.58±1.37 <sup>A</sup>	54.22±2.02 <sup>A</sup>	23.03±1.08 <sup>B</sup>	21.80±2.26 <sup>A</sup>	13.70±0.54 <sup>AC</sup>	15.50±2.66 <sup>B</sup>	5.19±0.87 <sup>A</sup>	5.03±0.93 <sup>AB</sup>

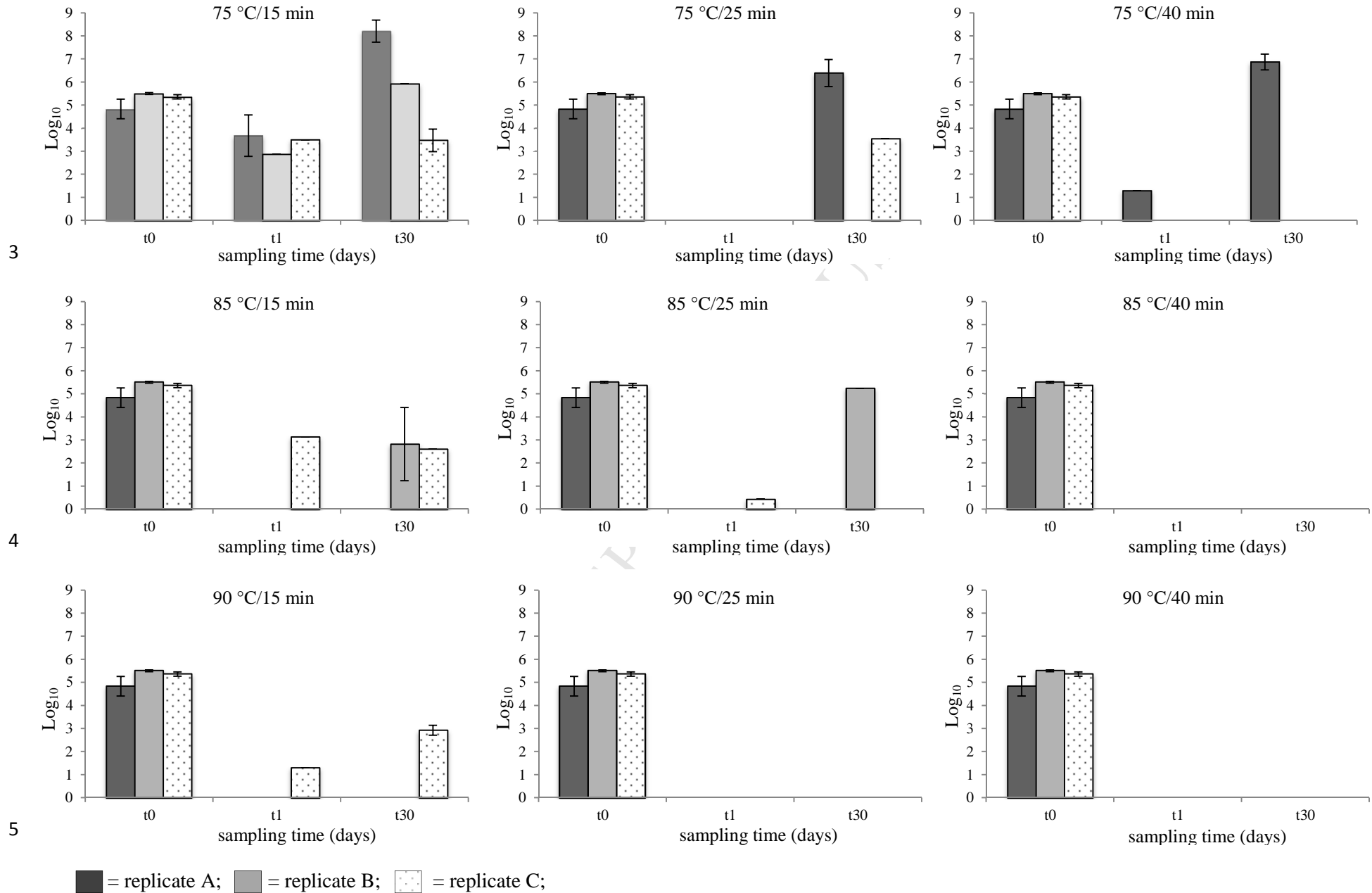
60 Each data point is the mean of three samples. For each parameter means in the same column on the same testing time ( $T_1$  or  $T_{30}$ ) with different capital letter are  
 61 significantly different ( $P < 0.05$ ).

62 Table 7. Mean values and standard deviations of sensory differences among the control (SEc) and the  
63 samples heat treated (SEt).

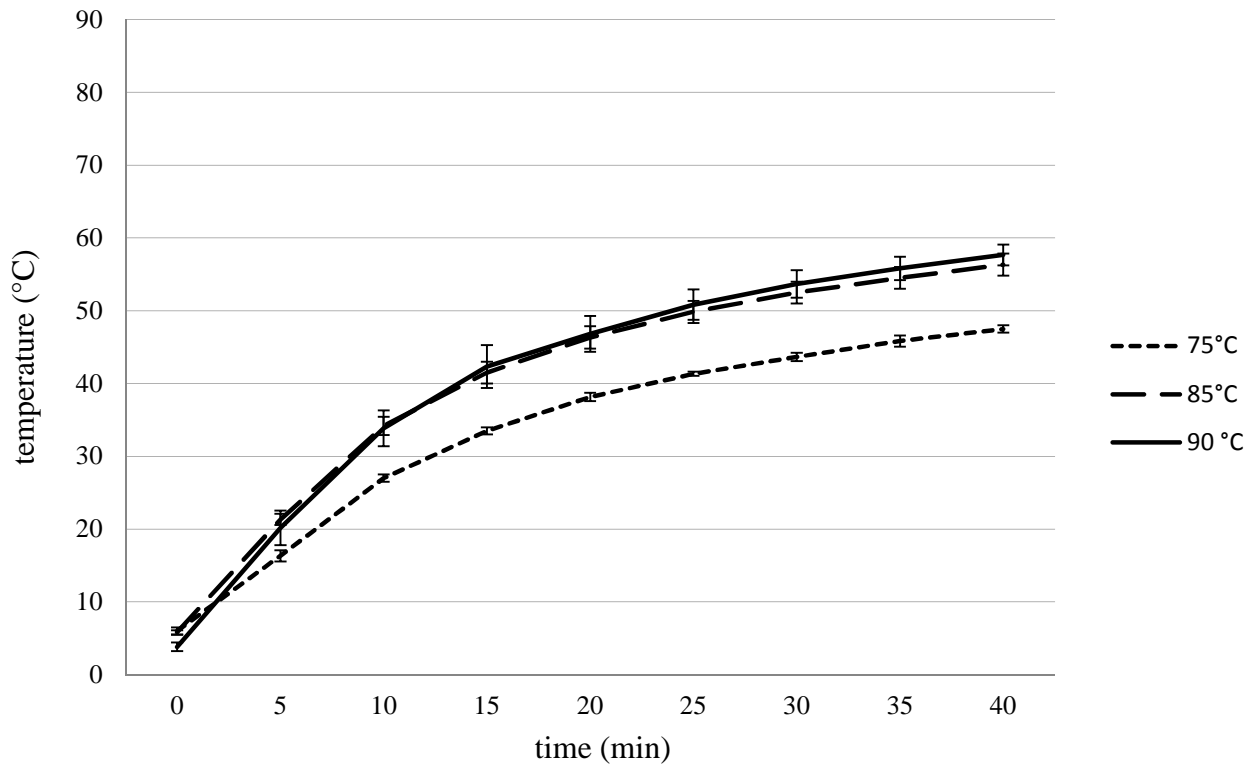
Temperature-time condition	Differences
Blind samples	2.3 <sup>a*</sup> ± 1.5
75 °C x 15 min	3.4 <sup>ab</sup> ± 2.3
75 °C x 40 min	3.8 <sup>b</sup> ± 2.0
85 °C x 25 min	4.1 <sup>b</sup> ± 2.4
90 °C x 15 min	3.6 <sup>b</sup> ± 2.3
90 °C x 40 min	3.9 <sup>b</sup> ± 2.5

64 Mean values with different superscript letters are significantly different among samples.\* ( $P \leq 0.05$ ).

- 1 **Figure 1.** Reduction in *L. monocytogenes* counts ( $\log_{10}$  cfu  $\text{g}^{-1}$ ) of artificially contaminated Ricotta salata wheels ( $T_0$ ) analyzed 24 h ( $T_1$ ) and 30
- 2 days ( $T_{30}$ ) after waterbath heat treatment with 9 temperature-time combinations.



6 **Figure 2.** Temperatures recorded 1.5 cm below ricotta salata surface during water bath heat treatment



7

8 Each data point is the mean of temperatures recorder in the three replicates (batch A, B and C).

**Highlights**

1. Post-lethality treatment on *L. monocytogenes* was assessed in ricotta salata.
2. A reduction of  $5 \log_{10}$  cfu  $\text{g}^{-1}$  in *L. monocytogenes* count was validated.
3. No effect of treatments on sensory properties was observed.