



Case study: **Vegetables and seedlings from Hăpria**
Always take care of the quality and customer relations

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Vegetables and seedlings from Hăpria

Always take care of the quality and customer relations

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Country	Romania
Region	Alba County
Farmer	Florian
Age	47
Gender	Male
Education	Higher education/ French Philology, Computer Science, Horticulture
Experience	10
Specialisation	Horticulture
No. family members	3

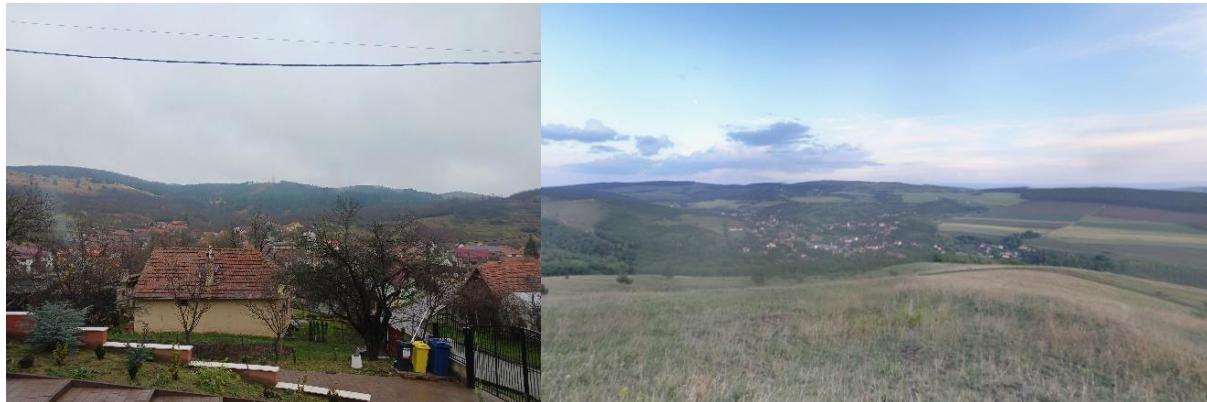
Region

The farm is located in the village of Hăpria, in Alba County, Ciugud Municipality, Romania. The village is small, with a population of just over 500, and is situated 10 km east of the city of Alba Iulia, which has a population of 60,000. Alba Iulia is the capital of the county, historically the most significant region of Transylvania. The city was founded over 1,000 years ago and currently serves as a cultural, religious, and political centre. The village is placed 80 km from the city of Deva (population 50,000), 90 km from Sibiu (population over 130,000), and 100 km from Cluj Napoca (population almost 290,000). The area has a temperate-continental climate with four distinct seasons, marked by hot summers, cold, rainy or snowy winters, and moderate precipitation, typical for much of Romania's varied landscape, though it's in a region with influences from the surrounding plains and hills. The average annual temperature is about 10°C., and the annual rainfall ranges from 800-850 mm. Alba Iulia county features diverse terrain with fertile plains, rolling hills, and significant Carpathian mountain ranges (Apuseni and Parâng), shaped by the Mureş River. Forests constitute just over 40% of the region, with a slightly smaller share occupied by agricultural land, particularly pastures in mountainous areas and arable land in lower areas. Soil quality depends on location; river valleys offer good agricultural favourability (class II for orchards), while others in hilly, coarse-textured areas fall into lower classes (class IV). Soils of classes III and IV predominate in the village.

The region attracts many tourists every year due to its rich history and large number of monuments. Visitors can stroll along the wide, tree-lined streets of the Habsburg citadel, one of the most impressive in Europe, to discover the historical, cultural and architectural places of interest of Alba Iulia: the Roman Catholic Cathedral – the oldest and most valuable monument of architecture in Transylvania, the Batthyaneum Library, the Orthodox Cathedral

Picture 1 Hăpria village and its surroundings

Source: Sebastian Stępień



of the Reunification, the Babilon Building – housing the National Museum of Unification, the Union Hall, the Apor Palace, the Princely Palace, and the University of Alba Iulia. The proximity of local residents and the large number of visitors constitute a potential customer base for the farm.

Farm history, resources, technology and production of the farm

Mr. Florian was born and raised in the countryside, hence his love of nature and the land. However, it wasn't the same countryside where he currently works. After graduating from high school, he decided to pursue higher education. He graduated with two degrees: Romanian-French Philology and Computer Science. After graduation, he settled in the city and began working as a university teacher, teaching Romanian and French. He also lectured and worked as a computer scientist. After more than 10 years, he experienced burnout and grew tired of city life, full of people, noise, and a fast-paced atmosphere. At the age of 37, he decided to return to the countryside. He claims that it wasn't a sudden decision, it had been developing for many years. For Florian, a passion for plants and vegetables was innate. As he explains, "I grew up in the countryside, and plants were a hobby for me, and gradually I began to enjoy them more and more. It wasn't a sudden change; I was always drawn to nature. I gained a lot of experience working with plants, not from books." Fortunately, five years earlier, Mr. Florian's parents had purchased a house in the countryside of Hăpria, where he moved in and lives to this day. From the very beginning, the plan was to focus on growing vegetables and herbs. The objective criterion for choosing this specialization was the fact that the property only has a garden, but no agricultural land. Three greenhouses were built within the garden, totalling 400 square meters. The remaining, outdoor area is used for personal use by Mr. Florian and his parents.

Three people live on the farm: Mr. Florian and his parents, but he is the only one involved in growing vegetables. He claims his parents are elderly and he wouldn't feel comfortable with them helping with the work. Furthermore, given the volume of production, there's no need to increase labour input. It's worth noting that Mr. Florian is not a farmer in the statutory sense, and his property is not formally a farm. However, to sell food, he had to obtain the appropriate permit from the local authorities. Despite not having a professional agricultural degree, Florian possesses agrotechnical knowledge, acquired through his horticultural studies, which he began around the same time he moved to the countryside and started his business.

The farm's production assets include three greenhouses and equipment: a heating system, a ventilation system, and an irrigation system. Two of the greenhouses were built by the producer himself at the beginning of the operation, while the third was purchased six years later. This was the largest investment to date (over €5,000). No mechanized systems or modern technologies are used in cultivation; Mr. Florian relies on traditional methods and manual labour. He claims that such work brings him pleasure and relaxation. In the future, there are plans to install a more efficient heating system to reduce operating costs and avoid losses caused by spring frosts.

Picture 2 – Green houses in the Hăpria farm

Source: Sebastian Stępień.



After launching his business, Florian began growing strawberries and then annual flowers. His ideas evolved, and the farm now specializes in growing seedlings, which account for approximately 70% of total sales. The main plants for seedlings are tomatoes (approximately 75% of seedlings), peppers, cucumbers, and eggplants. Herbs (including mint, lavender, sage, and rosemary) make up 20% of production, with the remaining 10% being fresh vegetables. This specialization in seedling cultivation stems from the high demand for these products, a niche market in the region, and Florian's expertise in this field. Seedlings are grown from March to May, and sales begin from April to July. Herbs and fresh vegetables are sold during the summer season, from June to August. One of the unique products Florian sells is the world's hottest pepper—the Carolina Reaper. Because it originally comes from Mexico, its cultivation requires greenhouse conditions.

Picture 3 – Examples of products sold on the farm (herbs and seedlings)



Reasons for integrating in the Short Food Supply Chain

From the beginning of his business, Florian sold his products exclusively through short supply chains. He realized that, at a low production scale, selling through intermediaries would be completely unprofitable due to the margins drawn down the supply chain. He also learned about the economic benefits of short supply chains while studying horticulture. However, his choice of this form of sales was also determined by personal reasons. Mr. Florian sells high-quality plants, without the use of chemical plant protection products and minimizing the use of fertilizers. He claims that only through personal contact with customers can he convey this information and promote his products. Selling such products gives him satisfaction, knowing he offers healthy food. This is especially true since the seedlings and vegetables offered are not certified organic. Florian does not apply for this certification because, he says, he sees no point in it. Such certification is expensive and requires bureaucracy, paperwork, and in return, the certifying institution does not conduct adequate inspections. He has repeatedly seen organic farming certificates awarded without soil analysis or product testing, based on the

principle of "fill out the paperwork, pay, and get a certificate." Mr. Florian prefers to operate honestly, always ensuring the high quality of the products he offers.

Figure 1 – Business model Canvas

Source: Author

Key Partners	Key Activities	Value Propositions	Customer Relationships	Customer Segments
Friends representing a similar business profile Marketplace managers Seed suppliers	Seedlings cultivation and selling Fresh vegetables cultivation and selling Herbs cultivation and selling	Vegetable Farm Hăpria takes care of the highest standard of products sold and building lasting relationships with customers based on trust, in accordance with the principles of respect for the natural environment and customer health	Building a base of regular customers Maintaining loyal customers Direct contact during sales on the farm and at the marketplace Relationships based on trust and honesty	<u>Frequency:</u> Regular (75%) Non – regular (25%) <u>Residential status:</u> Local residents – Alba Iulia and surroundings (85%) Residents from outside the area (10%) Seasonal, summer tourists, visitors (5%)
	Key Resources Plot of land Fixed capital (green houses, machinery, tools, car) Human resources (own work input) The farmer knowledge, know-how and invention		Channels Seedling - sale from the farm: 100% Herbs – sale from the farm: 30%, marketplace: 70% Fresh vegetables – sale from the farm: 30%, marketplace: 70% Communication with customers: Direct contact between the customer and the producer on the farm and at the marketplace Telephone contacts Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp) Participation in events, workshops Online platform	

Cost Structure	Revenue Streams
<p>Plants cultivation – 90%, including:</p> <p>seeds – 25%</p> <p>heating (wood) – 25%</p> <p>soil – 25%</p> <p>fertilisers, manure – 5%</p> <p>watering – 5%</p> <p>-tools – 5%</p> <p>Selling costs – 10%, including:</p> <p>-fuel – 5%</p> <p>-rent for a stall at the marketplace – 5%</p>	<p>Sale of seedlings – 70%</p> <p>Sale of herbs – 20%</p> <p>Sale of fresh vegetables – 10%</p>

Specific way the Farm Engages in the Short Food Supply Chain: Customer segments, channels and customer relationships

The value proposition of the farm from Hăpria is built on the foundation of traditional food, attention to its quality and health benefits, and a love of nature and the land. Florian's motto is expressed in the following sentence: "I grow plants naturally, without chemical additives, and I don't force plants to grow. I grow them with great love, care, and responsibility for people and nature." An example of this approach is the use of ladybugs to control aphids. One of the most important motivators is the fact that Mr. Florian's daughter is also passionate about plants.

The farm utilizes two main distribution channels. The first is sales directly from the farm, which accounts for 100% of its seedlings and 30% of herbs and vegetables. The second is through a marketplace, which accounts for 70% of herbs and vegetables. The market is located approximately 10 km from his home in Alba Iulia. During the June-August season, Mr. Florian sells herbs and vegetables there twice a week. A rental fee is charged for the stand, even for months when he doesn't sell. This ensures a guaranteed sales location. Several times a year, Florian participates in local events and festivals promoting traditional, organic food. During these events, he personally organizes workshops on healthy eating. This is the third (albeit less significant) sales channel for his products (mainly herbs) and also a way to promote his plants.

Picture 4 – Products offered in the Marketplace
Source: Sebastian Stępień and <https://ziarulunirea.ro>



After 10 years of operation, the farm has a loyal customer base of approximately 75%. These include both on-site visitors and buyers on the marketplace. 90% of these are residents of Alba Iulia and the surrounding area. 25% of customers are irregular, primarily from outside the region, seasonal visitors, tourists, and so on. Maintaining and even expanding the loyal customer base is a key element of the sales strategy. Therefore, the producer is committed to building lasting relationships based on reliable deliveries and trust. This trust stems primarily from the quality of the products offered. Florian never allows himself to deliver goods that he

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considers substandard or of lower quality. When such goods appear during the production process, they are used for the farm's own needs to avoid food waste. According to Florian, maintaining standards and not deceiving customers is paramount. This will ensure they return for the same products.

A key element of customer communication is the producer's direct contact, both on the farm and in the marketplace. Florian also utilizes telephone contact for ordering, social media (Facebook, Instagram) for ordering and promotion, and the aforementioned participation in local events. Besides, the farm's products are presented on an online platform offering traditional food. In addition to customers, the producer strives to maintain lasting relationships with suppliers who guarantee high-quality seed. This ensures the finished product is of high quality and consistent. The third group of partners consists of friends who run similar businesses. Sharing interests and experiences with these individuals allows him to build his own operational strategy. Florian, however, does not maintain lasting contact with local authorities because, as he says, he sees no potential in it. As he is not formally a farmer, he is unable to apply for support; all current expenses and investments are financed from sales revenue.

In terms of pricing strategy, the prices of the products offered are approximately 30-50% higher than "regular" products sold in discount stores and supermarkets, but in return, high quality, healthfulness, and taste are guaranteed. As Florian says, "customers pay more because they feel the quality and taste. And they return despite the higher prices." The higher price is also necessary to ensure profitability, as traditional farming methods, without the use of chemical additives, are less efficient (yields are up to 50% lower). Ultimately, the producer achieves an income that allows him to live a relatively stable life, although he admits it's less than he earned as a university teacher or computer scientist. Living in the countryside compensates for this drop in income, and the costs of living on a farm in the countryside are lower than in the city. Florian's motto is a quiet, unhurried life, doing what he loves. Although there are certain barriers, such as limited land supply, unpredictable weather conditions, and technical difficulties, the benefits of owning his own business are the impetus to continue his endeavours. This is expressed in the owner's statement: "This is my good style of living."

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