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Traditional food in Western Balkan countries: consumers' perceptions and habits ¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore consumers' perceptions and habits regarding traditional food in the Western Balkan Countries. In each Western Balkan country, two focus groups were carried-out (total twelve focus groups; eight to ten participants per each – total sample of 104 participants). Results of this study show that consumer motives for the choice of traditional products pertain to higher health, safety, sensory and increasingly also sustainability beliefs and expectation. Results of this study show many similarities in perception as and habits towards traditional food in different WBC. Marketing techniques are critical in conveying authenticity and enhancing the attractiveness of traditional food.

Key words: *Traditional food, consumers' perceptions, Western Balkan countries*

Introduction

There is a trend of consumer interest and demand for traditional products, especially those bearing geographical indication and having specific quality linked their place of origin and unique role. Such products have long history, and are part of traditions of their regions, contributing to their cultural identity and the pride of the local communities (Licitra, 2010; Bessière, 1998, Weichselbaum et al., 2009, Almli, 2012). They also may contribute to the development of rural areas. Western Balkan countries (WBC), i.e. Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, have a strong culinary heritage. Beyond a common food consumption background, each country, or even region, bears

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specific consumption patterns. The aim of this paper is to explore consumers' perceptions and habits regarding traditional food in the WBC¹ with a qualitative approach based on data collection through focus groups discussions.

Background

Traditional products constitute an important element of European culture, identity and heritage, which has been recognised both at scientific (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999; Giraud et al., 2013; Sylvander et al., 2006) and political levels (Estève & al, 2011; Milosević et al, 2011) contributing to the development and sustainability of rural areas, protected them from depopulation, entailing substantial product differentiation, potential for producers and processors (Avermaete et al., 2004; Barjolle, 2015).

Trichopoulou et al. (2007) defined traditional food as being “a food of a specific feature or features, which distinguish it clearly from other similar products of the same category in terms of the use of “traditional ingredients (raw materials or primary products) or “traditional composition” or “traditional type of production and/or processing method”.

Some works about consumers' perceptions of traditional foods have already been done. A “consumer-driven” definition of traditional food has been proposed in the frame of European project TRUEFOOD³: “A traditional food product is [...] *a product frequently consumed or associated with specific celebrations and/or seasons, normally transmitted from one generation to another, made with care in a specific way according to the gastronomic heritage, with little or no processing/manipulation, that is distinguished and known because of its sensory properties and associated to a certain local area, region or country*” (Guerrero, 2009).

³ Traditional United Europe Food (Contract number: FOOD -CT-2006-016264) – is an Integrated Project (IP) financed by the European Commission under the 6th Framework Programme for RTD (2006 – 2010)

Food consumption habits are derived from a series of factors, beginning with the fulfilment of a basic need, all the way to the desire for pleasure, while also taking into account the structure of supply, income level, ostentation or the fact of belonging to a particular culture with its religious or moral characteristics (Jordana, 2000; Maslow, 1998). Nowadays, consumers are increasingly looking for traditional food products. (Adams and Salois, 2010; Jordana, 2010, Banterle et al., 2008; Gellynck i Kühne, 2007), while perceiving them as high quality products with positive health aspects and positive image. (Guerrero et al., 2009; Willet, 2006). However, it is known that consumers from different countries and cultures had, to some extent different image of traditional foods (Guerrero et al., 2009).

Western Balkan countries (the WBC that we have taken into account in that research were: Bosnia–Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) have a long-standing culinary tradition. Despite certain obstacles due to the economic and political transition, the promotion of traditional foods may be a tool for coping with modernisation trends in such transition economies (Estève, 2011). Based on a large survey done in 6 major WBC, Giraud et al. (2013) presented a broad and novel understanding of consumer preferences toward traditional fresh cow cheese in this area, focusing on similarities and differences between countries.

For deepening certain aspects of consumers' attitudes, it is worth investigating the perceptions and habits in relation to traditional food both at domestic and at Balkan levels.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted, utilising focus groups. This is ideally suited for capturing complex meanings and their thematic dimensions (Kipnis et al., 2012). Focus groups can elicit a detailed understanding of how participants conceptualise a product category or brand

(Keller, 2008), and enable participants to compare, contrast and challenge the experiences and perspectives of others (Craig and Douglas, 2001; Wilkinson, 2004).

The structure of the focus groups was underpinned by theoretical sampling (Silverman, 2011).

It was envisaged that the perceptions and habits may vary by countries and age groups (Giurad et al., 2013).

In each Western Balkan country, two focus groups were carried-out (total twelve focus groups; eight to ten participants per each – total sample of 104 participants). Participants were stratified by gender, age, living area (rural or urban).

Table 1 Profile of participants per country

	Slovenia	Montenegro	Bosnia	Serbia	Macedonia	Croatia	Total
Number of participants	18	16	20	18	16	16	104
Gender							
Male	6	8	8	9	6	9	46
Female	12	8	12	9	10	7	58
Age							
18-34	5	5	6	7	4	6	33
35-55	3	6	9	7	10	4	39
More than 55	9	5	5	4	2	6	31
Number of persons in the household							
1	1	0	0	2	0	0	3
2	7	3	4	3	3	8	28
3-4	6	9	14	11	13	6	59
More than 4	3	4	2	2	0	2	13
Occupation							
Active	7	13	11	10	16	12	69
Inactive	0	0	5	3	0	1	9
Retired	8	3	4	1	0	1	17
Student	2	0	0	4	0	2	8
Household monthly income							
<1000 €	3	12	16	3	5	11	50
1000-2000 €	9	4	4	9	6	4	36
2001-3000 €	2	0	-	3	4	1	10
> 3000 €	2	0	-	3	1	0	6
Living area							
Rural	4	1	2	8	4	8	27
Urban	13	15	18	10	12	8	76
In charge of food shopping							

Always	9	5	0	9	12	8	43
Very often	3	4	15	9	-	1	32
Sometimes	2	5	5	0	-	4	16
Rarely	2	2	0	0	-	1	5
Never	1	0	0	0	4	2	7

Focus groups were led by trained researchers, conducting the participants following precise guidelines. The guidelines were first produced in English, tested, and then back-translated into national languages. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants were balanced across all countries. Because there is no generally accepted definition of traditional food, moderators provoked the discussion by physically showing country specific dishes, traditional products as well as “industrial” food products.

Instructions were to have eight different products or dishes: 3 “traditional” products of the region or the country, 1 traditional dish, 3 “industrial” products and 1 “industrial” dish, tinned, not “traditional”.

Results

Perception of traditional food

Traditional food is a frequently discussed topic by everyone in WBC: consumers are concerned and interested. However, there is no commonly precise view of what traditional food really is. As a result of the focus groups, most of the respondents perceive “traditional food” as a large variety of different products, including dishes. Interestingly, they were indicating that “traditional dishes” are most frequently consumed “at home”. Familiarity seems to be a major attribute of what is considered to be “traditional”. Some products/dishes were commonly recognised as traditional in several countries while others were perceived as traditional specifically in one country.

Table 2 Countries in which the most common traditional foods were listed by focus group participants

Product	Spontaneously listed by focus group participants	Number of different countries
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Beans	BiH, Cr, Mk, Mne, Se, Sl	6
Cheese (special types, sheep, goat...)	BiH, Cr, Mk, Mne, Se	5
Soups and stews	BiH, Cr, Mk, Se, Sl	5
Gruels	BiH, Mne, Se, Sl	4
Ham (dry, sometimes smoked)	BiH, Cr, Mne	3
Honey	BiH, Mk	2
Gibanica	Se, Sl	2
Ajvar	Se, Mk	2
Olive oil	Cr	1
Sausages (dry, smoked)	Cr	1

The different attributes associated to traditional food are the following:

- Familiarity: according to focus groups, traditional food is homemade, not made industrially. Consumers like cooking traditional dishes for them and for their family.
- History: traditional food has to be prepared according to specific recipe, used since many years. Generally, traditional food was made by grandparents. Young respondents reported emotional connection to industrial brands that they perceived as traditional because they are related to their childhood. Contrary to urban respondents, participants from smaller towns and rural areas did not perceive industrially made dishes as traditional food. Traditional food must not be recent. They trust in traditional food because the product or dish is present since many years and have a good reputation.
- Festivity: traditional food is perceived as festive food, especially consumed during holidays or for celebrations as Christmas or Easter.
- Origin: the region in which the product is produced must be specific. The product or dish is made in a certain part of the country and has to be made out of products which are specific for this region. According to consumers, traditional food must be domestic. It must be a condition of production of traditional food. It may be a specific

climate where the products are made and grown, reliable ingredients used in the process of production, the usage of old sorts of fruit and vegetables.

- Artisan: traditional food is not considered industrial. According to consumers, it is necessary that traditional food must not be produced in big quantities.
- Trust and personal networks: consumers often refer to reliable relations with farmers or sellers of traditional food. They often buy traditional food directly at producers.
- Taste: traditional food should be tastier than other food. The taste should be recognized and specific.
- Health: there is a paradox about the perception of traditional food as healthy. Traditional food is considered healthy due to natural ingredients, healthy environment, homemade but it may be considered unhealthy due to the presence of too much salt and too fat. For example in Serbia, traditional food is perceived to be of high caloric value, containing too much fat as a particularly unhealthy nutrient and not very much diversified due to limited number of traditional dishes consumed on regular basis. Health aspects must be a barrier to the consumption of traditional food.
- Natural content: The environment is perceived as natural, without additives and preservatives. Traditional food has to be made out of raw materials which has been grown in this region and should not be imported.

Attitudes and Habits of consumers of traditional food

The majority of Balkan consumers eat at home and like cooking.

During the work, some of them eat out during lunch break. Only a few people eat at restaurant, generally due to a lack of money and for some of them due to a lack of habits.

When they eat out, it may be due to a festive situation like a birthday. We also noticed that consumers living in rural area never or hardly ever eat at restaurant.

In all countries, most participants are involved in the preparation of the meal and like eating. The women are often more involved in preparing food than men. In Bosnia and Serbia, the “Health” dimension appears at the beginning of the discussion. Bosnian consumers want to cook themselves in order to check the quality of their food. In Serbia, consumers practice or try to practice a healthy diet. This perception of healthy food seems to be mainly related to homemade food rather than fast food, processed food or cold meals like sandwiches as well as eating meals at particular times of the day, together with other members of the family. Some participants of focus groups have their own garden, so they grow fruits and vegetables. A few of them breed also animals for milk or meat. The purchasing places for food are supermarkets, mini markets, green markets and less often specialized shops as butchers or directly to farmers. In Slovenia, some who buy at farmers market consider that prices are too high.

Discussion and Conclusion

Traditional food is a frequently discussed topic in WBC. However, like in other EU countries there is no commonly precise view of what traditional food really is (Verbeke, 2012). Most of the respondents perceive “traditional food” as a large variety of different products, including dishes that are most frequently consumed at home. Some products/dishes were commonly recognised as traditional in several countries while others were perceived as traditional specifically in one country. Young respondents reported emotional connection to industrial brands that they perceived as traditional because they are related to their childhood. Contrary to urban respondents, participants from smaller towns and rural areas did not perceive industrially made dishes as traditional food. Several distinct concepts of traditional food were recognized: homemade food, food opposite to industrial products/dishes, food with a specific recipe used for many years, locally produced/grown food, and food stimulating emotions (connected to the childhood).

Consumers in WBC consider traditional food products to be of high quality, natural and healthy. Consumer motives in for the choice of quality products pertain to higher health, safety, sensory and increasingly also sustainability beliefs and expectation, like in other EU countries (Verbeke, 2013). The finding is also in line with Traegar, Kuznesof and Moxey (1998) who stated that consumers perceive and value regionality in some foodstuffs. This suggests that offering protected status to foods with a demonstrably local identity may be an appropriate mechanism for adding value to such foods, thereby aiding local economies. Geographical indication would help to protect and improve the local production at the same. Geographical labelled products may appeal more to particular market segments, e.g. consumer with a stronger interest in high-quality, high-priced foods, specific socio-demographic groups, or residents of the region of provenance of the considered foods (Verbeke, 2013).

Despite strong motives, several real or perceived barriers persist, such as price, availability or uncertainty with respect to the true production method or product character. Such barriers may prevent consistent association of positive attitudes with choice and eating behaviour (Verbeke, 2013). Low-medium income consumers in WBC are more price sensitive, and the same occurs with younger consumers in EU countries (less than 36 years old) (Resano, Sanjuan and Albisu, 2012).

Traditional food's points of purchase are mainly: open or farmers' markets, direct sales from producers and supermarkets. Farmers' markets and direct sale are preferred due to the perceived freshness of products, quality and regional origin. Marketing techniques are critical therefore in conveying authenticity and enhancing the attractiveness of traditional food

(Traegar, Kuznesof and Moxey, 1998). Communication campaigns aimed not only at increasing the awareness but also evoking meaningful associations with the Quality Certification dimensions (authenticity, tradition, quality, safety, taste and social projection) may help to develop a predisposition in favour of the EU Quality Certification. Accordingly, these tools will be successful in shaping preferences and stimulating the final purchase (Resano, Sanjuan and Albisu, 2012).

The context of traditional food consumption varies among urban/rural areas. While talking about consumption of traditional food, rural participants refer to it as more of an everyday consumption whereas urban participants as Sunday's consumption or related to gathering (family, friends), as well as for special events, celebration. Participants report to engage into preparation of traditional food during holidays, because it requires more time. Origin as well as traditional recipes have been found as important elements of traditional food as in other studies (Cerjak, et al. 2014). In addition, the results replicated previous findings (Cerjak et al., 2014, Guerrero et al., 2009; Willet, 2006) that traditional food in WBC is perceived as trustful, healthy and natural with doubts of some consumers regarding health aspect of such food due to a high content of salt and fat.

Results of this study show many similarities in perception as well as habits and attitudes towards traditional food in different WBC. That implies that similar marketing and communication strategies could be used in all studied WBC in order to market traditional food in these countries.

In order to assure consumers about authenticity of traditional products it is recommended to introduce some Quality Assurance Schemes (Arfini et. al., 2007) that would be accepted by producers and recognised by consumers.

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