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Marketing regional foods in the UK: an exploratory consumer study

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Contribution appeared in Arfini, F. and Mora, C. (Eds.) (1997) “*Typical and Traditional Products: Rural Effect and Agro-Industrial Problems*”, proceedings of the 52nd EAAE Seminar, pp. 257 – 270

June 19-21, 1997

Parma, Italy



**UNIVERSITA' DEGLI
STUDI DI PARMA**

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ABSTRACT

The UK food industry has undergone tremendous change over recent decades. Both the competitive positionings of small producers and the developments in EU policy are founded on the premise that consumers attach value to place of origin when purchasing foods. Issues such as: how consumers perceive added-value; the role of place of origin in that perception; the distinction made between different production locales; and characterisations of the link between place and food, are largely unexplored. Without this knowledge, food producers seeking competitive advantages and policy-makers interested in rural economies cannot make informed strategic decisions regarding production and marketing operations.

The study provides an initial step towards a better understanding of consumer perceptions of place and food, and identifies areas for further investigation. In addition to being of relevance to policy decisions, the study also gives practical indicators to small food producers for the development of marketing strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The food industry in the UK has undergone dramatic change over the last few decades, a phenomenon which has been named "the consumption revolution" [1]. Fragmentation of demand has been coupled with concentration in supply, so that the majority of food expenditure is now channelled through five major supermarket groups [2]. This has posed threats to the small agrifood producer, who is typically unable to meet the volume and consistency of supply requirements of the large retailers. However, opportunities have also arisen: many small producers have successfully targeted niche markets, often through direct

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marketing or distribution through independent outlets. Their offerings commonly carry the typical characteristics of niche products, in that they possess added value, are differentiated from competitive offerings and charge a premium price. With such characteristics it is possible for small producers to succeed within a highly competitive environment [3]. However, recent opportunities have also arisen in the food multiple sector, as supermarket groups show an increasing interest in stocking speciality and value-added food products. This interest stems in part from a desire to improve product range and enhance consumer choice. However, it could also be viewed as a response to public criticisms of the negative social and environmental effects of concentration in food distribution: in particular, the development of centralised distribution systems which mitigate against the use of smaller, local suppliers by food multiple chains. Some supermarket groups in the UK are now attempting to improve links with such suppliers, by, for example, devolving decision-making power to store managers, improving purchasing technology and creating opportunities for buyers and producers to meet and discuss one another's needs [4].

One type of value-added product which shows particular potential in relation to these issues is the type which is associated with, or a speciality of, a particular geographic area. Indeed, place or region of origin has now been officially recognised as a key characteristic of agrifood products: following the introduction of EU regulation 2081/92 "on the protection of geographical indications and designations of origin for agricultural products and foodstuffs", producers can now communicate place of origin as a positive attribute of their offering [5]. The designation effectively acts as a patent, preventing other producers from labelling their products in the same way, thereby lending uniqueness and further added value to the designated products, and allowing the producer to charge a premium price. The legislation may also be viewed in a wider context, as a means of enhancing the output of primarily small producers to help sustain the economies of disadvantaged rural areas [6]. This view is supported by the fact that the first challenge to the legislation have come from large-scale Danish, French and German feta cheese manufacturers, who are currently fighting the Commission's decision that EU feta cheese producers outside Greece no longer can produce feta cheese under that name [7].

The increasing interest of the food multiples, in tandem with the EU legislation described above, appears to give small agrifood producers ample opportunity to market their offerings on the basis of regional speciality. However, for the initiatives of either the policy-makers or food industry operators to be successful, they must be based on the ability to meet *end* customer needs. Place-identified food offerings from small producers will only succeed if end consumers are willing to purchase them. This involves two premises: first, that consumers identify with the concept of regionality in foods, and second that they are attracted to particular regional food offerings packaged, promoted and labelled as such by producers. Although anecdotal evidence points towards underlying public interest in regional foods, the basic premise that consumers identify with regionality in foods lacks solid empirical support. Exploratory research is needed to gauge levels of basic awareness and understanding of regional foods amongst consumers. Without this, food producers cannot make informed strategic decisions regarding production and marketing options. Furthermore, in terms of the

second premise, it is also desirable to gain more detailed information on the perceptions and preferences of consumers in relation to particular regional food products. This kind of detailed knowledge is needed to inform regional food producers on decisions regarding their marketing mix. In particular, research is needed on alternative forms of symbolism, packaging and labelling. This paper describes an exploratory study of consumer attitudes to regional foods in the UK, which attempted to investigate to both sets of issue. The next section gives a brief review of existing literature relating to consumer perceptions and understandings of foods and place.

2. CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF FOODS AND PLACES

Investigation and analysis of food purchase and consumption is well-documented within the discipline of consumer behaviour. Studies in this area tend to stress the complexity of factors which drive food-related tastes and preferences, and some authors have proposed models which attempt to categorise and integrate these factors and so offer insights into the formation of food preferences and choices. Shepherd [8] provides a review of such models, from Yudkin [9], which lists physical, social and physiological factors, to Booth and Shepherd [10] which summarises the processes influencing, and resulting from food acceptance, and lists factors relating to the food, the individual and the environment. However, none of these models incorporate a consideration of the role of place in food, and consumer perceptions of this attribute.

It may be noted that, by their very nature, food products have a land-based geographical origin [11], which would suggest that people readily make strong associations between certain foods and geographical locations. On the other hand, the process of "delocalisation" of the food system in the twentieth century, as described by Montanari [12], has weakened the traditional territorial and symbolic links between foods and places. The inference is that the concept of regionality in foods may no longer be important or attractive to the modern food consumer, who is faced with such a wide array of exotic and international products all year round. Thus it may be that in the mind of the consumer, specific names, production methods or presentational forms of particular foods are no longer associated with the geographic areas from which they originate. An opposing view is taken by Driver [13] however, who describes a resurgence in the interest in traditional regional dishes in the UK, which perhaps reflects the symbolic importance that particular foods have in our lives and culture. These debates highlight the need for empirical investigation of people's perceptions and understandings of regionality in food.

Linked to this debate of the perceived meaning of regionality in foods is the concept of authenticity. If regional foods are linked in some way to "origins" and "tradition", it implies that producers of regional foods are involved in providing and communicating intangible attributes of heritage, tradition and authenticity in their product offerings. These require careful management, particularly in view of authors such as MacCannell [14], Hughes [15] and Urry [16], who, in relation primarily to tourist experiences, point out the difficulty in defining

what is authentic, and in communicating this to an increasingly sophisticated and diverse audience of consumers. In relation to regional foods, information is needed on consumer perceptions of appropriate attributes of products, which are the most attractive and why.

3. METHODS

In terms of methodology, a more detailed description is given by Tregear *et al* [17]. The information needs of the research required a method of data generation that would be rich, contextual and detailed[18]. Qualitative research methods provide techniques for such generation. In particular, exploratory focus group discussions, defined as "carefully planned discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment"[19], were identified as the most valid method of collecting attitudinal data from consumers. The research was designed according to a standard procedure[20]: the fieldwork consisted of eight focus groups of consumers conducted over a period of three months, with a total sample of 58 participants of mixed gender, aged between 18 and 75 and from a wide geographical spread in England. The group profiles varied by age, gender, socio-economic categorisation and urban/rural dwelling, to encompass a wide spread of opinion. Each group was conducted through the use of a discussion topic guide following an established "funnel" procedure [19]: this began with preliminary discussion relating to the definition of, and meanings attached to a regional food, and continued with more particular discussion of purchase and consumption behaviour. The discussions concluded with participants being shown five product prompts which served to gauge and verify discussant conceptualisations of regional foods. The discussions, each lasting approximately one and a half hours, were audio-taped and fully transcribed for use in analysis, and all the participants were given an incentive payment for their time and contribution.

Analysis of the data followed a grounded theory approach [21]. On completion of each group, notes were made on the discussion content, the group dynamics in terms of the 'mood' of the group, and focus group development where changes to the topic guide and discussion format were recommended. This preliminary analysis helped frame the concepts and categories used during the first analytical stages of data coding and indexing. The full systematic analysis of the transcript data was conducted using the computer package QSR NUD.IST (non-numerical unstructured data indexing searching and theorising), which provides a platform to systematically and rigorously explore and analyse the data and ideas[22]. The results of this analytical procedure are given in the following section.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Definition of a regional food

The research sought to investigate consumer awareness and recognition of place-identified, or regional foods. Respondents were asked initially to give their definition and understanding

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of a regional food. This inspired a variety of descriptions and observations, discussed under the following themed headings.

4.1.1 "Foods specific to a country, region or area"

For the overwhelming majority of discussants, regional foods were strongly associated with a specific area. Typical comments were: "foods produced from a particular region and labelled as such" and "any sort of local dish". However, the geographical boundaries of the term 'region' varied according to the age profile of the groups. For older discussants (45+ years old), the 'region' was referred to in terms of areas within the UK. For the younger discussants, (particularly 18-35 year olds) 'regional' included non-UK cultures and cuisines such as Indian, Italian and Chinese. In reflecting upon their cosmopolitan outlook, the younger participants suggested that their travel experiences, media influences and the variety of food products that were perhaps unavailable to their parents and preceding generations, gave them this broad perspective. This perspective was borne out further in the examples of regional foods given by discussants: although the most common examples were of historical British foods such as Cornish pasties, Yorkshire pudding and Lancashire hot pot, the younger discussants mentioned certain "ethnic" cuisines as being examples of regional food: "you can go regional with foreign food, if you go to Manchester the big thing today is Balti".

4.1.2 "A flavour of the area"

The association between foods and a particular locale was attributed in part to the climate and geomorphology of that locale. Physical environmental conditions and resources were seen to dictate the crops which would flourish and appear in natural abundance. Regional foods were: "grown and produced in an area"; "a product suited to a climatic area"; "farmed and produced in a region". In addition, the sourcing of indigenous raw materials for regional foods was considered crucial in bestowing unique attributes of a regional food. Discussions relating to the product prompt Wensleydale cheese illustrate this point: "if it's a regional food it should be grown and produced in the area....Wensleydale cheese is made in the local Wensleydale area.....most of the milk comes from the area....I thought this was what gave it its distinctive taste....it's the flavour of the area you are actually buying".

4.1.3 "Poorer people's food"

Regional foods, for the majority of the discussants, were grounded in an historical association with consumers from lower socio-economic and income groupings. These consumers were believed to be reliant upon 'regional foods' because the ingredients were presumed home or locally grown and thus plentiful and relatively inexpensive: "regional food is....basic ingredients, things that were cheap or you even grew yourself". The participants also linked regional foods with particular lifestyles closely associated with various 'traditional'

means of employment. A discussion excerpt reflects upon meals for miners: "regional food....used for a lifestyle that was traditional, like Cornish pasties taken down a mine....meat in one end, jam in the other....a complete meal in a pastry case....and leek puddings....leeks were grown by miners in their allotments and that was another cheap filling dish". Interestingly, discussants perceived that some producers and caterers were reinterpreting this perception of regional food as having 'humble' origins, by promoting their offerings as desirable premium products: "a lot of regional food has grown up with....things that were cheaply available in the area, which so often tends to be gourmet now, but which was originally the poorer people's food".

4.1.4 "Whatever the locals eat"

Spontaneous descriptions of regional foods made reference not only to the indigenous products of an area but also those dishes consumed by inhabitants of that area. Thus the participants identified regional foods as the 'foods that locals eat', older discussants including themselves in that category: "we thought it was what people eat, what we ourselves eat...what the natives eat".

4.1.5 "Old-fashioned food"

Linked to the foods that local people eat was the belief that regional foods were also 'old-fashioned' foods. It was believed that older people prepared and consumed regional foods, because they had the knowledge, skills and time to prepare such products. Equally, the 'younger generation' were understood to have more eclectic food purchasing and consumption patterns. However, the categorisation of regional foods as 'old-fashioned' was not necessarily a negative attribute: "I like a lot of Yorkshire and Lancashire foods, old-fashioned food, it's regional".

4.1.6 "Home-cooked food"

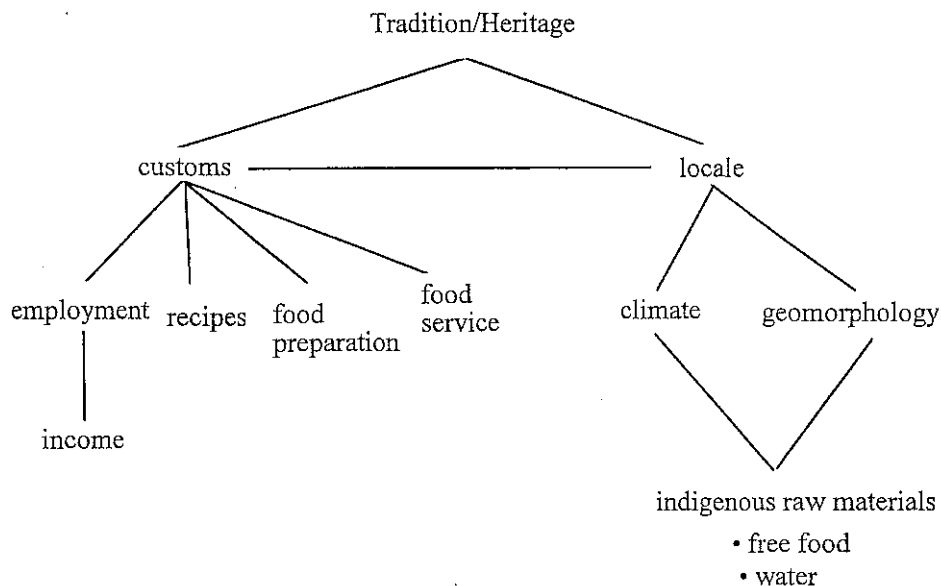
Associations of regional food with an older generation were corroborated by the younger discussants who frequently referred to them as the sort of foods eaten at their parental home: "when we mention regional in Britain we have always mentioned family occasions, Sunday lunch and Christmas dinner"; "regional food is more of a home-cooked thing".

4.2 Tradition and Heritage

As described above, the participants identified many dimensions to the concept of regional food. However, in attempting to build a fuller picture of consumer understanding of regional foods, some common linkages were identified that were made either implicitly or explicitly by

participants when describing regional food. In particular, linkages between the food, the tradition and heritage of a region, and the resident population were noted. Figure 1 depicts these linkages in a schematic form.

Figure 1
Factors Relating to the Tradition and Heritage of Regional Food



4.2.1 Locale

As previous discussion has indicated, regional food was described as food associated with a specific area or locale: the climate and geomorphology of that locale, was seen to determine soil type and fertility, hence giving rise to specific flora and fauna suited to the physical conditions. The use of such indigenous raw materials was believed to be essential in giving regional foods their defining organoleptic characteristics. Yet the use of abundant locally grown or sourced raw materials to produce regional food constituted only part of its definition. Residents' customs and the prevailing socio-economic conditions of the locale were also seen to be important in making a food 'regional'.

4.2.2 Customs

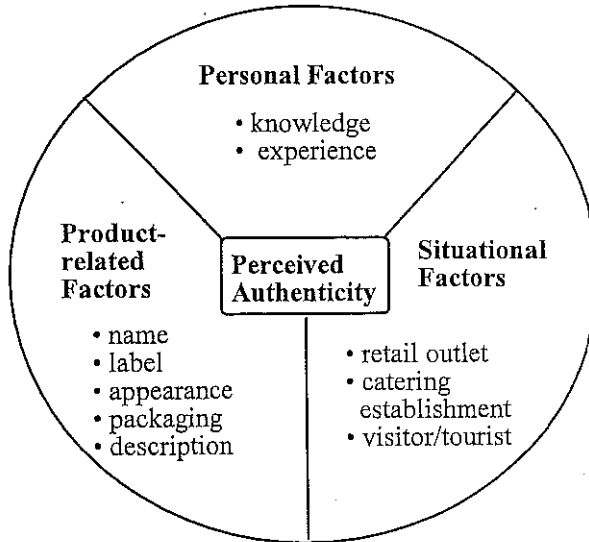
The link between regional food and consumers from lower income groupings has already been made. In addition to this, a number of human factors or 'customs' were seen to contribute to the essence of a regional food, including the use of particular recipe ingredients, methods of cooking, and means of serving or presenting the food. These customs were seen to vary according to geography, and could be unique to an area.

The use of particular recipe ingredients in regional foods was linked to the availability of raw materials, which in turn were linked to climatic and environmental conditions. However, it was recognised that foods from different regions were often very similar in terms of ingredient content, and that any differences could be attributed to minor changes in food preparation or simply variations in regional dialects: "regional food, you call them stottie cakes we call them oven cakes. It's the same thing just a different name"; "[regional food] is the food that is produced locally and that people cook their own way and have different names that they know the different foods by". The special characteristics of regional food were also related to the manner in which the food was served: "[regional food] is also served different. The Yorkshire pudding in Yorkshire you get...as a starter, but down here [Oxford] it is done as an accompaniment to a main meal". Discussants' understanding of regional foods therefore stems from a historical perspective, incorporating both physical and human factors.

4.3 Authenticity

Although a number of factors contributed to the discussants' vision of a regional food, it became apparent that the presence of these factors alone did not make a food 'regional'. A persistent theme implicit throughout the discussions was that of authenticity, highlighted most clearly during the final stages of the focus groups, where discussants were introduced to the set of product prompts. It appeared that the perception of authenticity of the factors defining a regional food underpinned the overall perception of it as truly 'regional'. In turn, it appeared that the perception of authenticity could be affected by a number of factors, including those relating to the individual, the food product itself and situation in which the food is purchased and/or eaten. The relationship between these factors is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Factors Affecting Perceived Authenticity of Regional Foods



4.3.1 Personal Factors

Personal factors affecting the perception of authenticity of foods as regional included the level of knowledge and experience a discussant had of a particular food. For example, the product prompt Newcastle Brown Ale was instantly recognisable and unanimously confirmed as an example of a northern regional product. For most of the discussants, this decision was based upon a general knowledge and/or first hand experience of the product. Newcastle Brown Ale was described as a defining symbol of Newcastle, an intrinsic part of the tradition and culture of the area.

However, the production of food in a specific area is not sufficient in itself to make the product authentic. For example, Phileas Fogg tortilla chips, although recognised by some participants as being made in the north east, lacked aspects of tradition and heritage, and were considered 'Continental, Mexican or Spanish': "just because the factory is in the north, you still would not see it as a northern food".

4.3.2 Product-Related Factors

Factors such as a product's name, its description, appearance, packaging and ingredient information were also viewed as means of judging the authenticity of a regional food. These factors, when combined with discussant's personal knowledge and experience, accentuated acceptance or rejection of a regional food as authentic. For example, a product prompt of Cumberland sausage failed to meet most expectations of the attributes necessary to an authentic regional product. This particular example was described as having an inappropriate texture and colour, included too many additives on the ingredients list and also was not labelled as made in Cumberland. The sausage was hence described as a Cumberland 'style' rather than an authentic product.

4.3.3 Situational Factors

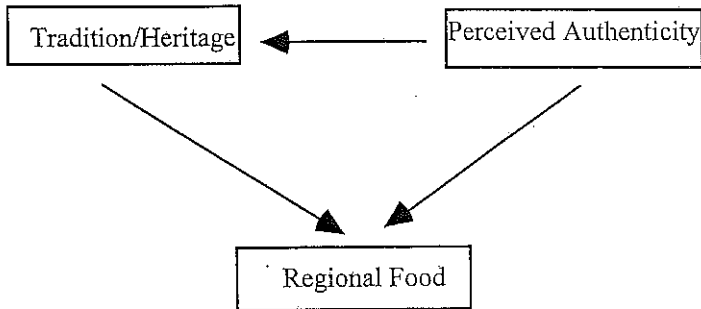
Situational factors, such as the place and context of the purchase or consumption of a regional food, served to enhance or erode perceptions of the authenticity of the regional food. For example, delicatessens or other specialist retail outlets were more readily associated with authentic regional products than supermarkets: "I think for this to be traditional cheese you would have to buy it wrapped in paper from a little shop rather than a supermarket"; "If you buy it loose from the delicatessen where it's cut from the round, it seems like it's more genuine". In the same vein, pubs were also associated with serving authentic regional food. Moreover, as a visitor or tourist to a particular area, it was considered appropriate by most of the discussants to sample the local regional foods in their place of production: "we went out with friends for the day to Bakewell and [went] immediately to this place to have a Bakewell tart, because it was just a thing you did when you went there". There was a perception that a regional food would be more genuine, and of higher quality if purchased in its place of origin.

4.4 The Relationship between Perceived Authenticity, Tradition and Heritage and Regional Food

In the preceding discussion, it has been shown that regional foods were linked to a complex dynamic of human and physical factors which were drawn from understandings of the tradition and heritage of these foods. However, it was found that it is the perception of authenticity of the regional food *and* its tradition and heritage that confirms its status as regional. This relationship is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Relationship between Regional Foods, Tradition and Perceived Authenticity



For a food to be accepted as truly regional therefore, it seems that there must be a perception of authenticity of the intangible tradition and heritage aspects of the food, as well as the physical, tangible attributes of the product itself.

4.5 Purchase and Consumption Behaviour: Regional Food Products and Regional Recipes

One interesting outcome of the discussions was the different characterisations participants gave of regional foods. These can be grouped into two distinct categories: regional food products, and regional recipes. These characterisations were seen to be linked to the purchase and consumption behaviour of regional foods.

Regional food products were characterised as those made by 'experts' that possibly involved some form of light processing that could not be replicated in the home. They were perceived as specialist, low-volume, high value and hand-crafted products, usually charging a premium price. The types of retail outlet from which such products could be purchased reinforced this specialist characterisation. For example, delicatessens or other small independent, specialist food stores, were frequently mentioned as potential purchase outlets for regional food products, the degree of personal service associated with these outlets also enhancing perceptions of authenticity. Whilst the discussants recognised that supermarkets offered regional food products, they were not viewed as offering such a wide range. One exception to the latter was the supermarket use of temporary, often country specific, promotions such as an 'Italian week', which were apparently designed to draw attention to a variety of products from a particular country of origin.

Regional recipes or dishes were distinguished by their form of preparation, being characterised primarily as 'home-made'. These dishes, described as filling and stodgy, but also warming and wholesome, were perceived to take time, skill and knowledge to prepare. In

discussing their own culinary habits, some discussants had made modifications to regional recipes in light of advice on healthy eating, for example using fat-trimmed meat in their recipes. However, if regional recipes were not produced at home, pubs were viewed as the main place to purchase and consume regional dishes, where local chefs were believed to be producing local dishes: "pubs are good for regional foods...regional beers to go with them". Restaurants were also mentioned as places to sample local dishes. However, the choice of catering outlet was dependent upon other factors such as meal occasion and required degree of formality. Pubs in particular were identified with lunch-time meals, and restaurants with special occasion evening meals.

Ready-made meals from supermarkets, espousing some form of regionality, were regarded as lacking the authenticity of the foods purchased and consumed in specific areas, which were seen as 'a bit special': "I always try to taste the regional food wherever I go...you expect them to be genuine, and not a copy". It was expected that regional recipes or dishes supplied in catering outlets should be cheaper than non-regional dishes because the ingredients were believed to be locally sourced. It was, however, recognised that this occurred rarely.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Consumer Recognition and Understanding of Regional Foods

Research sought to investigate awareness and recognition of regional foods amongst consumers. In broad terms, the findings seem to support the premise behind policy initiatives such as EU regulation 2081/92, that individuals do recognise geographical distinction in foods. In terms of further understanding of these differences and how they have come about, a number of characteristics appear to be involved: regional foods were seen to be a product of both physical and human-related factors, which are related to the individual's perception of the tradition and heritage of the food. In terms of marketing strategies for regional food producers, the implication is that producers need to be knowledgeable of the factors relating to the tradition and heritage of their particular foodstuffs. A solid foundation of knowledge could provide the basis from which to launch a promotional campaign. However, the implications of the research for producers of 'new' or 're-invented' regional food products (which do not have a defined heritage) are less certain. Communication of authenticity would still be an issue of consideration for these types of producer.

5.2 Factors Influencing the Acceptance and Attractiveness of Regional Food Products

The research also sought to identify particular attributes of products which would attract consumers and trigger purchase. It was found that the perception of authenticity of a food's regional characteristics is instrumental to an individual's acceptance and liking for a product: that is, for many consumers, an authentic product is an attractive product. Authenticity can be

derived from intangible 'heritage and tradition' aspects of a food product, communicated through symbolism and/or labelling information on the packaging, as much as from the physical characteristics of the product itself, such as ingredients. With this in mind, it would appear that regional foods are well-suited to promotional images and messages which draw upon aspects of heritage and tradition. Such activities alone are insufficient however: they need to be combined with a consideration of the product's physical characteristics, and how these meet with consumer expectations. In addition, the research findings have shown that both the tangible and intangible attributes of a regional food, and consumer perceptions of them, can be influenced by the consumer's own levels of knowledge and experience of a product, and by the environment in which the food is purchased or consumed. Producers need to take account of all these factors for the particular circumstances of their own products, when making decisions on their marketing mixes.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it appears that consumers do identify with the concept of regionality in foods. This lends weight to the underlying premise of policy initiatives such as EU regulation 2081/92, and poses opportunities for producers following a strategy of differentiation on a regional basis. However, in terms of formulating a marketing mix, it seems that a number of factors need to be taken into account. First, the product's physical characteristics should meet with consumer expectations of authenticity, in terms of ingredients, texture and appearance. Secondly, the imagery and symbolism attached to the product needs to be considered. As findings suggest that understandings of tradition and heritage are closely linked to regional foods, these could form sound bases on which to build promotional activities. Finally, the place in which the product is purchased or consumed needs to be considered: authentic products are more readily associated with small, specialist outlets such as delicatessens in the case of shops, and pubs in the case of catering outlets. However, underpinning all of these considerations is the need for producers of regional foods to know, and to continue to obtain information on, their customers, their expectations, and the factors influencing their behaviour.

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