Determinants of the perception of quality for a typical production: the case of *Buffalo Mozzarella Campana* cheese

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Abstract

Consumers attach value to place of origin when purchase food. Although effects of a geographical indication have been found, it is necessary a deeper analysis to clarify how determinants of the image of a geographical area influence the perception and the preference of products.

The purpose of this study is to identify what are the factors influencing the choice and the evaluation by consumers of a typical products made in Campania : the Buffalo Mozzarella Cheese, and their importance on the buying decision. The knowledge of these factors by food producers can represent a useful tool for the development of marketing strategies and for seeking competitive advantage.

Keywords : quality, typical product, Buffalo Mozzarella Cheese

INTRODUCTION

The interest of agrifood supply chain in differentiating food products is growing and at the same time the production of quality products and the valorisation of typical local products is becoming an important development strategy in the agrifood system.

Diversity and specificity of products made in some regions and areas represent not only a cultural, historical and social heritage but elements of competitiveness in a global market, where an important role is played by the evolution trends of food consumption models.

The search for quality is one of the most important consumer trends : in recent years, in fact, consumers tend to attach greater importance to product quality rather than quantity. This phenomenon is generating a growing demand for agricultural products or foodstuffs with an identifiable geographical origin (EU Regulation 2081/92) or produced with a traditional recipe consolidated in time (EU Regulation 2082/92).

The study of valorisation strategy for typical products requires an analysis of the whole agrifood chain and a more in depth analysis on consumers' preferences, their expectations and the factors influencing their behaviour.

THE ITALIAN MOZZARELLA CHEESE MARKET

Dairy products represent an important component of Italian agrifood system generating a turnover of 23,000 billion of liras. During Nineties a growing quota of milk has been processed for fresh cheeses reaching in the 1997 the 30,5% of the whole milk available.

Mozzarella cheeses represent the greatest part of fresh cheese, with an average pro-capita consumption of 3,5 kilos. The greatest part of mozzarella cheese is given by mozzarella produced using cow milk while only a small part is given by buffalo mozzarella cheese.

Due to the recent changes in the sector organisation coupled with a the growing concentration of dairy industry and a more efficient distribution system, cow mozzarella cheese is starting now to have an industrial image.

Cow mozzarella cheese, in fact, is mostly produced by large-medium dairy industries and food multinationals and is sold through hypermarkets and supermarkets instead of traditional retail outlets. Among these, there are *Galbani, KGF, Nestlè, and Pettinicchio* that can guarantee a widespread diffusion of the product, a favourable position on the shelves and a packaging suitable for a longer shelf life. Furthermore, the dimension and the internal organisation of the large food firms allow considerable investiments in advertising and the implementation of a proper marketing strategy able to reach the consumer and to influence consumers' behaviour.

Buffalo mozzarella (BMC) cheese is a fresh, stringy textured cheese. Buffalo mozzarella became widespread throughout the south of Italy from the second half of the eighteenth century, before which it had only be produced in small quantities. It has a porcelaine-white colour and an extremely thin rind and delicate taste. When cut it produces a white watery fluid with the aroma of milk enzimes.

The peculiarity of this cheese is entirely due to the technology used in its traditional preparation : it is produced exclusively from whole buffalo milk, and after drawing and moulding, may also be smoked, but only using natural, traditional procedures.

The production zone is concentrated in seven provinces in Central-South Italy : Caserta and Salerno provinces, and part of Benevento, Naples, Frosinone, Latina and Rome.

According to data provided by the Association for the safeguard of *Mozzarella di Bufala Campana*, referring to 1998, the production of buffalo mozzarella cheese was 165,000 quintals, increasing during the Nineties.

Table 1 : Production in the period 1993-98

Years	N° of associated	Total production (Ql)
1993	21	62,000
1994	88	122,000
1995	96	118,000
1996	97	128,000
1997	97	150,000
1998	98	165,000

Source : Association for the safeguard of Mozzarella di Bufala Campana

There are currently around 400 cheese dairies producing Buffalo Mozzarella Cheese (BMC), mostly characterised by a very small average size. Among them the biggest 25% are associated in Association and they produce almost the 85% of the whole production. The greatest part of cheese dairies, instead, is represented by very small enterprises with few workers and a restricted market, often smaller than municipal area.

The nature and the dimension of these firms do not stimulate the growth of the firm itself and at the same time do not allowed an easy management of the quality brand and the development of a collective marketing strategy. It would require a strong coordination of initiatives to safeguard the quality of the product, to improve supply management and control and to develop a proper communication strategy.

In 1993 was founded the Association for the safeguard of *Mozzarella di Bufala Campana*, for the promotion of this product. The Association monitors the production and marketing of BMC and promotes the use of the protected brand name in compliance with the production rules for PDO products.

Based on structural and strategic differences the associated can be distinguished in six groups of firms : large-medium cooperatives, small cooperatives, large-medium firms, small firms, farms with cheese dairies, artisan firms.

Table 2 : Group of firms

Kind of firms	Characteristics
Large-medium cooperatives	High-medium income Wide range of products (Mozzarella cheese, Ricotta cheese, Scamorza and Caciocavallo Cheese) High control on raw material and on production process Presence on foreign market Structure of organisation based on functional areas Connection with distribution chain
Small cooperatives	Reduced production Focus on Buffalo mozzarella Cheese Regional and provincial market They sell through wholesaler and sale shop in the farm
Large-medium firms	Flexibility Wide range of products High competition for raw material Pluri-regional market Diversification of distribution channel
Small firms	Familiar management Artisan production Focus on Buffalo Mozzarella Cheese and ricotta cheese Low diversification of distribution channel Local market Good image on the local market
Farms with cheese dairies	Low production Low standardisation of production
Artisan firms	High competitiveness for raw material Low standardisation of production Local market

The different nature, strategy and organisation of these firms do not make easy to develop a common marketing strategy at firm level and a sufficient communication activity promoting a widespread reputation for these products among consumers. Furthermore, the lack of coordination among producers together with the recent evolution of the distribution system can represent an obstacle for the diffusion of the knowledge and the appreciation of the product by consumers.

DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS FOR BUFFALO MOZZARELLA CHEESE

For a long time the competitive environment for buffalo mozzarella cheese has been an obstacle to its diffusion on a national scale : the strong fragmentation of suppliers coupled with an high competition with cow mozzarella cheese have relegated the consumption of buffalo mozzarella cheese to the local market.

In recent years the renewed interest for typical food product, the EU certification, the defence and promotion by the Association for the safeguard of the product are contributing to the diffusion of this genuine and traditional product that now is starting to receive much more attention.

Recent consumer trends mainly with respect to the evolution of consumers' preference joint with an increasing demand for products produced by traditional methods, which are believed to be capable of producing more genuine products, are representing new starting points for a revival of MBC.

The higher price with respect to the major substitute product (cow mozzarella cheese) and the shorter shelf life are becoming less important competitive factors : consumers tend to appreciate typical food products, clearly differentiate from industrial products, and at the same time they are willing to pay more for them.

It means that the competitive pressure by cow mozzarella cheese is starting to become less important. The two products are much more perceived as different by consumers and in the future the two markets will be indipendent especially because the two products will answer to different needs.

A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES

As previously said, Buffalo Mozzarella Cheese needs a proper marketing strategy. For this purpose, the first step should be a huge investigation on the knowledge of the product and on determinants of consumers' preferences.

On the basis of a research commissioned by the Association for the safeguard of *Mozzarella di Bufala Campana* to Eurisko on 1997, in order to gain information about the level of knowledge of the product and the buying behaviour of consumers some interesting results emerged.

The research was based on a sample of 1000 persons distributed in all regions.

The knowledge of the region of origin (production areas) for buffalo mozzarella cheese is quite high : more than 45% of respondents were aware about the EU recognition and the 70% had knowledge about production areas. These results are higher in Central Italy, in the big city and among the more educated people.

At the same time when respondents were asked about their knowledge of the origin of cow mozzarella cheese and other mozzarella cheeses stand out a great confusion : 31% of respondents tend to consider cow mozzarella cheese as a typical product and indicate central and south Italy as region of origin.

It means that the two products are not clearly differentiate and the association for the safeguard of the product cannot neglect this aspect in carrying out a new marketing strategy for BMC on a regional basis.

EU denomination of origin (DOP and DOC) in cheese sector is known by the 69% of respondents : the best known label for cheeses is *Parmigiano Reggiano* (92%), followed by "*Grana Padano*" (80%). The label *Mozzarella di Bufala Campana* presents a lower level of knowledge by respondents (33%) and it is strictly dependent on the region of origin of consumers : 21,6% of respondents from south against the 10,8% from north west know the label *Mozzarella di bufala campana.*

On demand side, mozzarella cheese is the most consumed fresh cheese. The frequency and the occasions of consumption show great differences among BMC and the other mozzarella cheeses.

BMC is consumed less often than others : 1,3 against 1,9 times for week of other mozzarella cheeses, but it is preferred as main dish for lunch and dinner. Rarely it is used as ingredient to prepare other recipes.

Then, the great part of respondent buy buffalo mozzarella cheese more in specialised cheese shops than supermarkets and hypermarkets. Vice versa for other mozzarella cheeses.

To investigate the image of buffalo mozzarella cheese, the importance of the EU label and the attributes influencing buying behaviour, a survey among producers and sellers of mozzarella cheese and experts of mozzarella cheese sector was carried out. These results together with the results of Eurisko research represent only the first step to test if the regional image adds to the product perception of consumers and subsequently if there are the conditions for brand extension strategies.

The attributes selected by consumers to describe buffalo mozzarella cheese and cow mozzarella cheeses are weighted based on agree/not agree scale. In the following table are represented the percentage of agreement (Table 3).

These results are mostly confirmed by interviews with experts. Consumers are able to easily differentiate between different mozzarella cheeses. To Buffalo Mozzarella cheese is recognised a higher added value due to the traditional production method which give it a very special taste. Other mozzarella cheeses are probably preferred for the lightness and a delicate tastes that everybody like.

Table 3: Percentage of agreement

Attributes	Buffalo mozzarella Cheese	Cow mozzarella cheese
Unique and unmistakable taste	74%	9%
Special taste	72%	12%
High price	72%	4%
Typical product of a region of origin	65%	10%
High quality	60%	10%
"True" mozzarella cheese	55%	21%
Traditional cheese	47%	27%
natural and genuine product	44%	12%
Preferred mozzarella cheese	37%	45%
Light cheese	21%	47%
Industrial cheese	10%	51%

Source : Eurisko 1997

To investigate the importance of EU label in buying decision, producers and sellers have been asked to fill in a questionnaire. Two areas were chosen for the survey. Aversa, a city near Caserta that can be considered one of the most traditional areas for the production of buffalo mozzarella cheese and Naples

In Aversa the consumption of BMC is very common : mozzarella cheese with DOP label is present in every cheese shop. Usually producers sell directly to cheese shops. They sell a wide range of cheese products, but buffalo mozzarella cheese is the most important. The larger shops can sell 20-25 Kilos of buffalo mozzarella cheese per day. Even if a great part of respondents recognised the importance of DOP label, consumers did not pay attention to the label. They are very familiar with the product and are confident in their own capabilities to buy a genuine product, independently by the DOP indication.

In Naples, the consumption of Buffalo mozzarella cheese is lower. Even the larger cheese shops sell no more than 5-7 kilos per day. They buy cheese through wholesalers more than directly by producers. The range of products includes more than 25 cheeses. In these shop great importance is given to DOP label, and it is quite easy to differentiate cheeses of different quality. Consumers are aware about the differences and they ask directly for the labelled product.

Several significant issues were highlighted by the survey. Consumers buying behaviour is influenced by several factors :

1. Personal factors, in terms of knowledge and experience with the product, ethnocentrism, demographic variables.
2. Product related factors, such as product's name, appearance, product's physical characteristics, ingredients information, packaging, labelling.
3. Situational factors such as the place of the purchase (supermarket, specialised retail outlet).

Consumers perceive buffalo mozzarella cheese as a typical product. The most relevant attribute recognised to the product is the unique and special taste.

The region of origin seems to be another important evaluative element in buying behaviour. Among plenty of product attributes also the region of origin has an impact on the perceived product quality and therefore on the buying decisions of consumers. The influence of the region of origin is perceived essentially along two dimensions : the traditional know-how in processing milk and the influence of the environment on genuineness and naturalness of the product.

EU indication and label are important as well, but in this case the experience with the product can reduce their importance on buying decision.

Situational factors and especially the places in which food is purchased or consumed are relevant to influence the perception of product quality. For buffalo mozzarella cheese specialistic retail outlets offers greater guarantee to consumers than supermarkets.

Producers have to consider all these factors when making decisions on their marketing mix.

CONCLUSION

This study is only a first attempt to identify what are the attributes highly recognised by consumers for an Italian typical product : buffalo mozzarella cheese.

These preliminary results represent the first step for further analysis, that using other variables, can be able to better explain the importance of each factor on buying decisions.

The use of the region of origin can represent a useful marketing tool, and give to producers new opportunities to follow a differentiation strategy on a regional basis.

However, it seems clear that a favourable image of typical local product alone is not sufficient to assure an improvement in producers' position.

A valorisation strategy should concern not only the quality of products but also the producers' organising capacities.

The great fragmentation of suppliers in this market creates difficulties in the preparation of marketing strategy, therefore they should try to strengthen the coordination among them and in the chain, from farmers to consumers.

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