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# **REGIONALITY BEYOND QUALITY: COMPENSATION OF INFERIOR TASTE FOR STRAWBERRIES**

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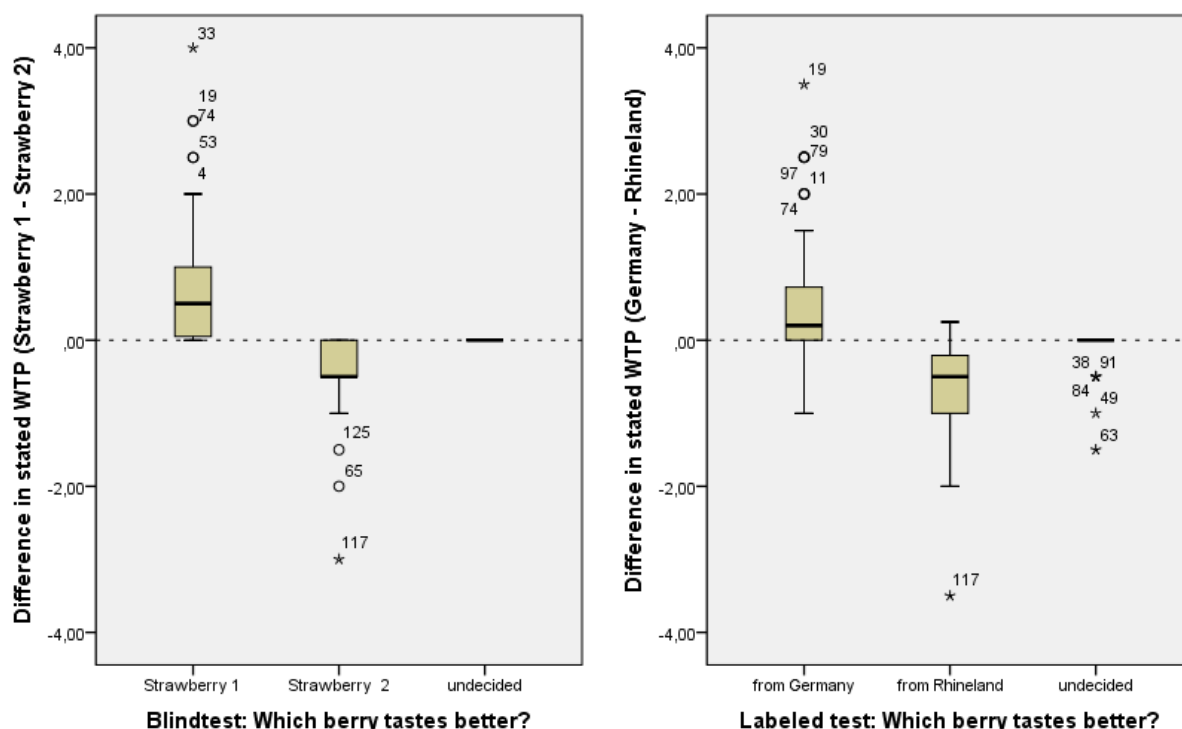
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Regionality as food-product attribute has gained much attention in scientific and market-oriented work on consumer behavior. Various studies indicate that consumers have a preference for regional food and perceive regionality as a quality indicator (PROFETA ET AL. 2014). According to the results of MOSER ET AL. (2011) and ROININEN ET AL. (2006) European consumers perceive regional products to be of better quality e.g. better taste and freshness. Particularly for fruits, superior taste has been stated to be a primary concern for consumers in making food purchase decision (CHAMBERS ET AL. 2007). For strawberries, the interplay between regionality, freshness and expected taste has been related to additional willingness-to-pay of consumers (DARBY ET AL. 2008). Complementary, STEFANI ET AL. (2005) show that Italian consumers perceive the taste of spelt more positively when they learn about its particular local origin. Different authors argue that consumers assign additional value to regional food not only based on quality-related associations but based on (i) emotions (sympathy) and (ii) perceived moral superiority. The first is described as emotional identification with a region and a positive image transfer from a region to a product (VAN ITTERSUM ET AL. 2003). The second is related to environmentally and socially sustainable production practices and the concept of home-bias (ROININEN ET AL. 2006; FERNANDEZ-FERRIN & BANDE-VILELA 2013).

To gain a better understanding of consumers' preferences for regional food, our study compares consumers' WTP for unlabeled versus regionality-labeled food after product tasting and thus, under consideration of taste perception. We chose strawberries as exemplary product and conducted a non-incentive compatible field experiment in Bonn, Germany with 128 participants in September 2014. In a first task participants were asked to taste two strawberries. No information were provided regarding the region of origin of the strawberries. After tasting participants were requested to state which strawberry tastes better and to indicate their WTP for one common box (500g) of the respective strawberries. A second task was different as information on the region of origin were provided - (i) Germany and (ii) Rhineland (the surrounding area of Bonn) - before product tasting. Again, participants were asked to indicate which of the two strawberries tasted better and to state their respective WTP. All strawberries used in the experiment originated from the same field located in Rhineland.

In line with past research, we find that consumers' WTP depends first on taste and second on labeled origin. However, in contrast to other studies we find no positive impact from a narrow regional statement on perceived taste (STEFANI ET AL. 2005). For pairs of unlabeled strawberries, consumers' WTP in our experiment aligns with their taste preferences (see Figure 1). In contrast, for taste comparisons of a German strawberry against a strawberry from Rhineland, this link does not hold to the same extent with weaker alignment of WTP for better or inferior strawberries and tendencies towards higher WTP for the Rhineland label in case of equal taste perception (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Differences in stated WTP grouped by stated taste preference for unlabeled (1 or 2) and labeled (Germany or Rhineland) strawberries.



For strawberries perceived to be of better or equal taste, consumers' WTP is with EUR 2.50 on average only insignificantly higher when a region of origin is labeled than when there is no label (EUR 2.42). This holds without differentiation of the particular statement (Rhineland or Germany). For strawberries with inferior taste, only the regional label 'Rhineland' significantly<sup>1</sup> increases consumers' WTP compared to an unlabeled strawberry (EUR 2.03 versus EUR 1.83). The label 'Germany' in contrast has an insignificant but negative impact on consumers' average WTP with EUR 1.73. This may be indicative of a perceived twofold inferiority for those strawberries by their wider geographical origin and their perceived inferior taste.

Our results indicate that stated origin does not influence perceived taste but may influence consumers' WTP. Thus, consumers are to some extent willing to compromise for taste if they buy regional products. This implies that consumer preferences for regional food products presumably are not only based on quality evaluation but in addition influenced by superior affective or moral valuation of a regional origin.

<sup>1</sup> $\alpha=0.05$

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