

Solutions for improving the Romanian consumers trust in the authenticity of traditional local food

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Abstract: *In Romania, the creation of short food supply chains will provide the opportunity for rural development both in terms of area and people. For farmers, the development of short food supply chains represents one factor of coagulation and stimulation of cooperation, providing new opportunities for development. Consumers are interested in supporting the development of local food chains by consuming the products, but it is difficult in many situations for them to reach the products and producers. This paper presents the results of a study conducted among Romanian consumers in order to quantify their interest in local food and their perception on the traditional food authenticity.*

Key-words: *short food supply chain, traditional local food, marketing research, food authenticity*

1. Introduction

In recent times, short supply chains for food products and local markets represent an alternative to conventional longer food chains where the consumer cannot associate the food to a known producer or a certain area. According to the Rural Development Programmes 2014-2020 (article 2) short supply chain is “a supply chain involving a limited number of economic operators, committed to co-operation, local economic development, and close geographical and social relations between producers and consumers” [5]. The current EU rural development policy 2014-2020 gives more importance than before to short food supply chains. On average, 15% of European Union farms sell more than 50% of their production directly to consumers. Short supply chains include direct sale by producers (farm sales, farmers’ markets, fairs, baskets, community sales point) and sales with at least one intermediary (for example: the Internet, retail sales, shops).

Local agriculture and short food supply chains have economic, social and also cultural benefits for many stakeholders: farmers, consumers and rural areas.

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Local economies also benefit from such supply chains, which have the potential to create new jobs [4], [8].

The appearance of local food in some European countries has the origins in regional “cultural histories and traditional food cultures embodied by particular foods and formulations, or recipes” [7].

An important part of EU consumers is willing to buy local food for different reasons, such as: a better diet for themselves and their families, in order to support local jobs or the environment. The results of an opinion poll conducted in eight EU countries – Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Czech, Spain, Poland and the UK in 2014-2015 show that 73% of respondents consider it too difficult to find information about local food and 67% claimed it is hard to find local food nearby [1].

A recent Eurobarometer survey (2016) found that 4 out of 5 European citizens believe that “strengthening the farmer’s role in the food chain’ is either fairly or very important” [3]. There are already various different projects promoting local food and short supply chains across Europe which include farmers markets, farm-gate sales, box delivery schemes, mobile shops, community-supported agriculture, consumer-producer cooperatives and collective catering and canteens [6].

In Romania, also, the development of short food supply chains may have a considerable potential for rural development both in terms of area and people. To farmer households and semi-subsistence farms, the development of short food supply chains can be a factor of coagulation and stimulation of cooperation, providing new opportunities for development [2].

Taking into consideration these facts, this paper presents the results from a quantitative marketing research conducted in Romania between 2016-2017 in order to identify the consumers’ perception on local food authenticity. In the following sections the research methodology and the main research results are presented. The paper ends with a couple of solutions on strengthening the consumers’ confidence in the authenticity of the local food.

2. Research methodology

The purpose of this study is to identify the needs of Romanian consumers and their consumption behaviour in relation to traditional local food. The present study could represent the first step in advancing projects on the development of short supply chains and promotion activities for different areas in Romania.

The research starts with the hypothesis that the proper promotion and direct contact of potential customers with producers in various situations are the main elements that encourage the consumption of traditional local food.

The research objectives cover the identification of the following aspects:

- The demographic characteristics of the population interested in the consumption of traditional local food (gender, age, income, environment of origin);
- The traditional local food categories preferred by the population;
- The important aspects to consumers in choosing traditional local food;
- The supply sources of local traditional food and the consumption context;
- The confidence of the population in the authenticity of traditional local food.

In order to achieve these objectives, the author used a quantitative marketing research, namely a survey based on questionnaire. The reason for choosing this method is that the survey describes purchasing and consumption behaviours. Moreover, it reveals opinions and attitudes, it aids us to find out the values shared by buyers or consumers.

The data collection period was from 5 to 31 January 2017. The data collection tool is a standard questionnaire consisting of 16 questions.

The data collection was performed online using the Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) method, whereas the questionnaire being is available on the www.surveymonkey.net platform.

The target population for research is between 18-65 years old, Romanians, Internet service users.

The sampling method chosen for this research is known as the snowball method. It consists of including a relatively small number of people as an initial sample. Then, these people offer information about other people who have the same sampling profile as they have.

In order to complete the questionnaire, 535 people were invited to access the link sent via social networks or email. Although the sample respondents agreed in advance to fill in the questionnaire, the final sample consisted of 310 respondents, the response rate being 1.72. The sample was adjusted according to the variables: the respondent's gender and the respondent's age.

The most important research limit is that this sample is not statistically representative and the results cannot be extrapolated to the whole population. Another research limit is to obtain wrong answers because the respondent is not correctly informed about the concept of a traditional product (which may be mistaken for a product obtained after a traditional recipe). Another research limit is related to the wrong answers given by the respondent due to the fact that this is a self-administered questionnaire and the respondent cannot ask for some clarification about the addressed issues.

3. Results and discussions

From all respondents, 69% have tried at least one type of traditional local food. The share of people who have not tried such products so far is still very significant,

accounting for about one third of the total population (31%).

Regarding people who consumed traditional local products, it can be seen from the following graph that the percentage of men exceeds the percentage of women in 3 of the 5 age categories: 18-25 years, 26-35 years and 56-65 years. It is highlighted that the percentage of women exceeds the percentage of men aged 26-35 and 46-55 years.

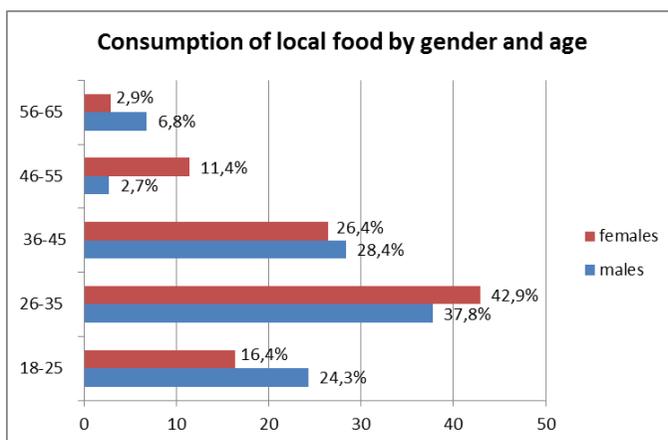


Fig.1. Comparison between males and females who consumed local food by age

The following chart shows the categories of traditional foods consumed so far by the respondents. Thus, it may be observed that milk and milk products represent the category consumed by an overwhelming majority of respondents (94.5%).

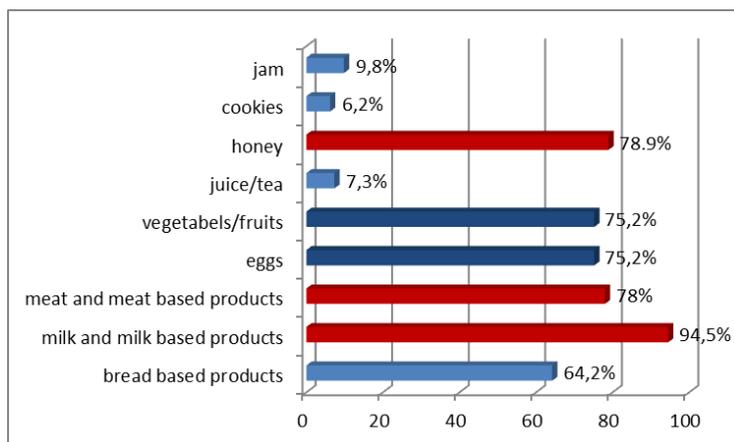


Fig.2. Categories of local food consumed by respondents

Respondents who have consumed traditional food ranked the most important aspects they keep in mind when choosing this type of products.

The results appear in the following chart. Ranking is based on the average of each item. The first place is occupied by the element with the lowest average, and the last place is occupied by the highest average item.

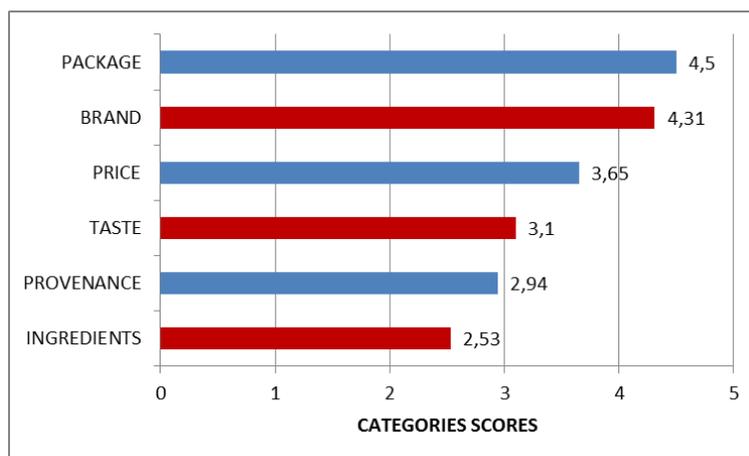


Fig.3. *Ranking for selection criteria used for local food*

According to the previous chart, the importance of the selection criteria is the following: 1st Place - Product Content; 2nd place - The origin of the product; 3rd place - Product taste; 4th place - Product price; 5th place - Brand of the product; 6th place - Product packaging

On the basis of the results, we can conclude that respondents are primarily interested in the quality of traditional foods, their organoleptic characteristics and the way and place they are made in.

The main acquisition source for traditional local food mentioned by most respondents (63.2%) was the producer himself. In more than half of the cases (53.8%), consumers bought these products from traditional fairs. Also, a high percentage of respondents (47.2%) bought traditional food from agri-food markets (Fig.4).

The consumer preferences related to the places of purchase of traditional food according to the net family monthly income and their residence place were analyzed.

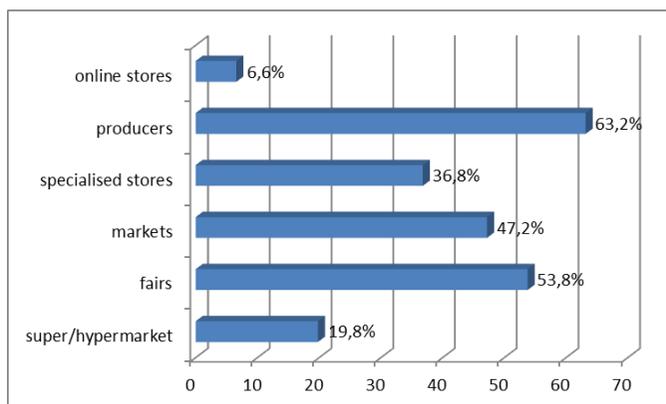


Fig.4. *Main sources of acquisition of local food*

▪ **In the case of urban respondents**

People with very low income of up to 1500 lei usually buy traditional food from agri-food markets (31.3%). A significant percentage of people with incomes above 1501 lei prefer, first of all, to approach the producer and to buy these products. But as income increases, the second option is different. For people in the income category 1501-2500 lei, the second option is represented by the agro-food markets. For people whose net income exceeds 2501 lei, the second option is the fairs.

▪ **In the case of rural respondents**

The results are somewhat predictable because most of the respondents, regardless of their net monthly income, buy traditional food directly from the producers.

Regarding the measurement of the confidence in the information on the traditional local food labels, the following chart shows that about half of the respondents (52.3%) awarded value 3 to this aspect.

A percentage of 22.4% of respondents do not trust the labels at all or hardly at all. On the other hand, 25.2% of respondents say they trust or highly trust the content of traditional food labels.

The average value for label confidence is 3.02. Bearing in mind that the value is roughly equal to 3 and that it is considered to represent the middle of the scale, it can be concluded that the general tendency is for people to have somewhat of a confidence in the information on traditional local food labels.

The most important way to increase confidence in the authenticity of traditional foods is more intense promotion, as mentioned by 63.9% of respondents.

More than half of the respondents (57.4%) consider that the visits organized at the place of production of these product categories are also indicated. Also, an important percentage - 47.2% - requires the presence of more detailed and clear information on the traditional food labels.

The following graph illustrates other methods of increasing consumer confidence in traditional foods: sales in specialized stores (25.9%), informative shows where products are presented (21.3%) and expert advice (19.4%).

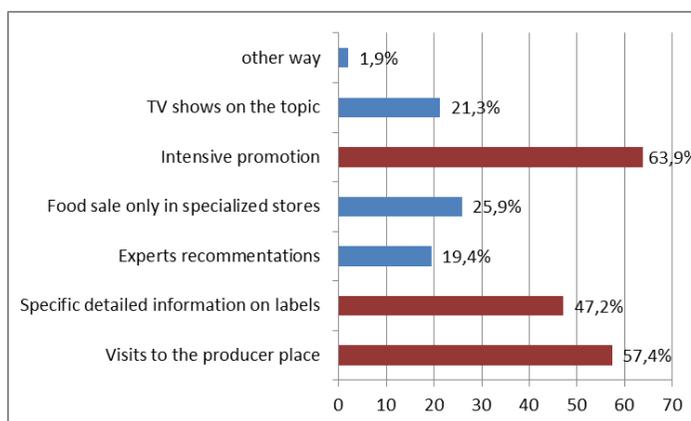


Fig.5. *Ways of increasing consumers' trust in local food labels*

According to the chart above, the respondents also mentioned other ways to increase confidence in traditional foods: recommendation of products by satisfied customers who have tested them; real producers should assume the identity of the food; entry of products into well known chain stores and their sale at special stands; making a long-term social campaign and encouraging people to buy local products; frequent organizing of traditional local food fairs and the existence of tasting events for the promotion of these products.

4. Conclusions

A percentage of 69% of the total respondents consumed until now at least one type of traditional local food. Respondents are very interested in the quality of traditional foods. They mention on the first 3 places as importance: the content of their products, their origin and their taste. Milk and milk products are the categories of products consumed by the overwhelming majority of respondents. The following two categories preferred by respondents are honey and meat based products. The most important sources for buying traditional local food are the producers and the traditional trade fairs.

Generally, people have some confidence in the information on traditional local food labels. Because the label is an important source of information about the product, the author recommends producers to pay more attention to labeling. The

information on the labels needs to be clear, accurate and detailed and the visual presentation have to highlight the fact that the products are traditional and they follow procedures. The label must become an element of identity and personalization of the traditional product and of the provenance area. Also, the author recommends the organization of informing campaigns and education campaigns for misinformed consumers regarding the process of obtaining traditional local food.

6. References

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