



Assessing our taste for typical foods

(TYPIC)

Typicality is part of the Designation of Origin concept developed in the EU and could be a route to regain consumers' trust. The TYPIC project used consumer science and marketing approaches to identify the essential characteristics of typical food products from the consumers' viewpoint, and to determine the factors that motivate their preference for these products. Objective qualities of typical products were assessed by sensory and chemical analysis and related to the consumers' perceived attributes, providing food for thought for strategies to promote typicality along the food chain. The results show clear opportunities for DO foods but the market response is complex and requires producers to do careful market research.

What is typical about 'typicality'?

Labelling guarantees some specific sensory qualities and implies specific properties which may help to reduce consumers' risk perception through clear traceability and authentication of products. The Designation of Origin (DO) system introduced by the EU covers labelling of products with Protected Designations of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indications (PGI) and includes other foodstuffs designated as Traditional Specialities Guaranteed (TSG).

But what aspect of a food's 'typicality', such as its sensory properties (not least taste!), place of origin and labelling, motivate consumer preferences? The TYPIC project sought to measure consumer demand for and acceptability of a range of typical food products. In particular, differences within and between EU countries were assessed and, from this, guidelines for the European food supply chain and quality policy could be developed to produce and authenticate typical food products according to suitable techniques and consumer expectations.

Analysing red wine and ham

The 'typical' foods selected for the project were red wine originating from Germany (principally Dornfelder) and France (mainly Beaujolais), and dry-cured hams originating from Spain (mainly Teruel) and France (from a variety of regions but mainly Bayonne and Auvergne). All were selected on the basis of bearing PDO-PGI labels. Consumer preferences and acceptability for these DO products were measured using a panel of almost 6 900 people, but with a smaller number (620) involved in more intensive testing. In parallel, the products were analysed by a variety of physico-chemical methods to develop a method for 'typicality' assessment or authentication.



DO-labelled food products are most often characterised by specific traits arising from the raw materials and processing methods used. The physico-chemical analysis of the samples shows that typicality traits, appreciated by the consumer, fit with specific sensory profiles, resulting from the identified origin and local know-how. It means that European DO-labelling policy is objectively based and could be legitimised by means of physico-chemical characterisation of the relevant food products.

Consumer behaviour

Consumer purchasing behaviour with respect to DO-labelled food products seems linked first to



Consumer science

familiarity with DO products or labels. The age of the respondents is also an important factor. Variety is another factor acting in favour of purchase of DO products, albeit at a lower level. Beyond the main preference for his/her own region of origin, a small but significant cluster of consumers is clearly open to purchasing "foreign" DO products in each country studied in TYPIC: France, Spain and Germany. These consumers can be seen as connoisseurs. They are willing to taste foreign DO food on the basis of their experience of liking food products coming from their own region. This consumer segment often experiences foreign typical foods during holiday and business trips.

Price is also an important but contradictory factor. Some consumers can be considered as price-sensitive, while others use price as a quality marker. This price disparity leads to a complex use of distribution channels according to brand category, for example, when looking for DO products, most respondents were more prone to go to speciality stores rather than a supermarket.

It appears that consumers are sensitive to marketing factors when purchasing DO products, while tasting responses for DO products do not always seem clearly positive. Whilst PDO-PGI producers, naturally, believe their products to be superior, consumers are more interested in the image of the region of origin, the brand notoriety, and are always subject to price effects. This gap highlights the need for producers to research and understand who their buyers are and what influences their behaviour.

Market opportunity for Europe?

The technology developed in the TYPIC project can be transferred easily to either cooperative societies or industries for rapid evaluation of basic sensory perceptions. The project's findings can help improve the authentication procedures stipulated by food policy authorities in Europe. The results will help the European Commission's understanding of typical food products consumption trends and throw more light on ways of harmonising the disparate regulation between Member States

regarding DO labels and authenticity control of these products.

The findings of the project suggest that the European market and intra-Community trade could benefit from higher consumption of DO-labelled food, by reinforcing and integrating DO-labelling policy. Exports of DO-labelled produce could also be enhanced by efficient promotion and communication of the scheme. Such promotions should focus on the high standard of guaranteed authenticity and target a specific segment in the world-wide food market. DO-labelling policy can present a real opportunity for EU foreign trade in the free global market, if the products are well identified and recognised by consumers.

More information

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Project Essentials

Full Project name:

Typical food products in Europe: Consumer preference and objective assessment

Project Acronym: TYPIC

Project type: Shared-cost project

Theme: Quality of Life

Contract No.: QLK1-CT-2002-02225

Project Start Date: 01/01/2003

Duration: 36 months

Total Budget: € 2 507 210

EC Contribution: € 1 679 890

Project Collaborators:

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