



OSLO METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY  
CONSUMPTION RESEARCH SIFO

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## DO FOOD QUALITY SCHEMES INFLUENCE CONSUMERS' FOOD CHOICES?

### Introduction

A qualitative study conducted within the framework of the H2020 project **Strength2Food**, under the coordination of Virginie Amilien and Gun Roos from Consumption Research Norway at OsloMet, adds to the understanding of European consumers' food practices concerning food quality schemes (FQS) and sustainable food chains.

This study is part of a deeper analysis aimed at providing a thorough understanding regarding *consumers' knowledge, perception, confidence and valuation of EU/national/regional food quality labels and sustainable food chains* as well as their food practices and purchasing behaviour with respect to products promoted by those schemes, across different consumer groups, food cultures and geographical settings.

### The study

The study is based on qualitative research and extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in *six families across seven European countries* (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Serbia and the UK), with an aim to observe households' food practices across different seasons, and better understand if, and how, everyday food practices are connected with FQS and sustainable food chains. Special emphasis is placed on better understanding of gaps between consumers' stated valuation of products promoted via EU food sustainability labels and their actual food practices including planning, purchasing, using, cooking, eating and disposal. Informants were recruited through *two types of invitations*: those interested in FQS and those interested in food more generally, taking into account both rural or urban places of living. Different recruitment strategies were used across countries, e.g. participants were contacted directly when visiting

shops, via local organizations, flyers, posters, internet and social media, articles in local newspapers, personal networks and acquaintances (snowball sampling), etc.

For the purpose of the study, *four different categories of FQS were recognised*:

- GIs and traditional products– Geographical origin and tradition quality labels: PDO, PGI or TSG;
- Local or regional product - Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC);
- National or regional quality schemes;
- Others, such as organic, fair trade and other ethical standards, or health/food safety schemes.

### Informants' perceptions, understanding and knowledge of FQS

The informants' awareness of FQS was generally low. Although most informants recognised organic labels, especially the national ones, they had *little knowledge about the European geographical indication and traditional speciality schemes* (PDO, PGI and TSG), and did not seem familiar with the design of these labels. Supermarkets' own logos or specific organic brands were more familiar and closer to consumers compared to FQS from assured national and EU schemes.

Informants were positive towards SFSC and local food, mainly because of their support to local producers and the local economy, as well as their respect for the environment. A hierarchy can be seen in the participants' perceptions. *First, local foods and SFSC (especially direct sales and home-grown products), then organic foods, and last origin and tradition labels (PDO, PGI)*. For example, in France organic foods purchased via SFSC (direct sales from small producers) were perceived as the best practice. The research also highlighted how, besides environmental, social, health and taste issues, there are financial constraints and food habits that influence consumer purchase decisions on their daily routines.

### Informants' practices

Many informants used a *shopping list* that they wrote prior to shopping, and some planned a weekly menu.



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When purchasing food they mostly focused on product appearance, reputation and familiarity of the producer or specific brand, and nutritional content rather than FQS.

*Price and geographical proximity* were recognised as most important criteria in most families. When buying local or organic food products, participants did not pay special attention to the official FQS, but referred to the private labels provided by retailers and food companies. The family structure also influenced shopping practices, both in terms of form and content.

Most households recognised that their *food habits are driven by convenience and time*. Because of this, food preparation and everyday food consumption differed substantially between the participating households. Some households relied mainly on home-made food, others on ready-to-eat options. Most participants mixed the two alternatives, by cooking quick meals on a weekly basis and using more time for leisure.

*Cooking and buying local products were often considered as quality time by the participants, as opposed to purchasing food in a supermarket*. This emphasized the importance of tradition and the “family food” dimension. While sharing and tradition are immaterial factors embodied in the quality dimension of food practices, food quality may cover more concrete forms, such as freshness or organic.

Attention to food waste was observed during the fieldwork, and informants discussed techniques for reducing this, by good planning and storing foods. Overall, *participants found it more difficult to throw away FQS products, which have a higher moral and economic value, than regular food*.

### Trust and distrust in FQS and SFSC

Trust in sustainable food chains and food quality schemes varied between the informants.

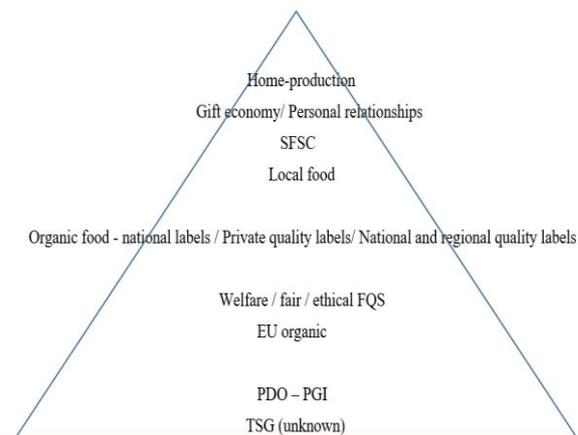
Informants tended to trust local products more than products with FQS. *Foods from SFSC were trusted because their origin is known*. In particular, those living in rural areas, as well as households involved in community-supported agriculture initiatives (e.g., the

Italian solidarity purchasing groups), underlined the importance of direct knowledge of the producer to establish a solid trust relationship.

Organic food was often discussed because of its positive or negative aspects: *higher prices compared to conventional products*, but overall better for personal health and the environment.

Participants did not express neither high levels of trust nor interest towards PDO, PGI and TSG, mostly because they did not know what the labels really meant and who are the actors responsible for these certifications. However, some well-known PDO products, such as Parma ham, were highly trusted.

Figure 1: Pyramid of trust based on the ethnographic fieldwork in seven European countries



### Conclusions

Although the number of households is small (forty studied families across seven countries) to reach generalizable conclusions representative of different geographical regions in Europe, *FQS are definitely little integrated as part of consumers’ food practices*. Despite the extensive involvement of researchers in this study (one year spent with the same household via repeated visits in three different seasons) focusing on FQS, consumers’ interest and knowledge about FQS did not majorly change: at the end of the study, consumers still showed little awareness, knowledge and general interest in GIs. The informants buy Parmigiano



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Reggiano, Manchego or Comté cheese because they know these products, and not because of the FQS behind these.

Although the meaning of the certification and the FQS was little known in general, *most participants asked for better and more reliable information about origin, animal welfare and/or composition of food products.*

Plastic and packaging was a major common issue for food sustainability in the studied households. *Aversion to packaging and excessive plastic on food products* was expressed by many, with almost all informants across the seven countries indicating that they would prefer to buy unpackaged food.

Direct relationship with, and knowledge of, the local retailer and producer are at the base of (informal) trust. Based on informants' perceptions and practices, it was possible to identify a trust hierarchy regarding food products and labels. The combination of interpersonal relationships with organic production was seen as positive, but knowing personally the producer was perceived as more important than the organic attributes *per se*. Regarding the organic certification, the national organic labels were well-known among the informants and often used as purchasing guides. Then followed Fairtrade, PDO and PGI labels. The TSG label did not seem to be known at all.

Thus, *trust was built primarily through personal relations and, second, through labels, when the former was not available.*

### Lessons learnt directly from the informants

To overcome the limited awareness about FQS and related practices, the informants requested promotional and information campaigns from public authorities. Special courses or topics to be included in formal education were also suggested.

The informants expected the government to protect their rights and control production practices, via improved communication of food claims and food labels.

However, they seemed aware that authorities have limited power. They suggested that the national government could play a role in promoting food sustainability, by taking actions aimed at enhancing producers' bargaining power within the large distribution channels, and better support small local food production.

Moreover, they suggested that *the government should increase the controls* on production practices and *promote educational programs on the food system* and dynamics behind food production and procurement.

In this respect, *public procurement policies should promote the supply of local, seasonal and organic products*, as much as possible.

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