How consumers perceive and evaluate sensory characteristics of organic food

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Background

➤ Sensory characteristics of organic food may serve as an important buying motive or barrier (Oughton and Ritson 2007, Zanoli et al. 2004)
➤ Lack of knowledge on how consumers perceive and evaluate organic food
➤ Sensory marketing becomes more relevant
Objectives

➢ To explore consumer sensory perceptions and attitudes of organic products as well as their experiences and expectations
➢ To explore sensory marketing opportunities of organic products
Methodology

Qualitative approach: Focus groups
- September 2009 – February 2010 in six European countries
- 4-5 focus groups per country: 28 focus groups in total
- 5-11 consumers per group
- Two target groups
  - Heavy users of organic food: frequent consumption of organic food
  - Light users of organic food: occasional consumption of organic food
- Theme analysis
### Results

#### Criteria for evaluating sensory characteristics

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<th>DE</th>
<th>FR</th>
<th>IT</th>
<th>NL</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Appearance</td>
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<td>Texture / mouth feeling</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tbody>
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Relevance: ++ = very relevant; + = relevant; +/- = partly relevant; - = limited relevance; -- = no relevance
Sensory perception model

**Influence factors**

**External factors**
- "When food is produced"
  - Geographical origin
  - Production system
  - Processing methods
- "When food is purchased"
  - POS
  - Positioning
  - Price
  - Communication
- "When food is consumed"
  - Location
  - Context

**Internal factors**
- Eating habits
- Organic food consumption
- Sensory adaptation
- Buying motives
- Attitudes
- Images and associations

**Authenticity**
More mentioned regarding fruit and vegetable:
- Innate taste
- Natural taste
- Healthy taste
- Taste as it used to be in former times
- Variable of taste and appearance

**Sensory perception of organic food**
- Positive perception
  - Organic quality as benchmark (USP)
- Negative perception
  - Non-organic quality as benchmark

**Sensory deficits**
More mentioned regarding side dishes, semi-luxury products:
- Less intensive taste or simply poor taste
- Too strong innate taste
- Visible deficits
Influences on sensory perceptions of organic food

External factors

«When food is produced»
› Geographical origin
› Production system
› Processing method

«When food is purchased»
› POS
› Price

«When food is consumed»
› Location
› Context
Influences on sensory perceptions of organic food

Internal factors

› Eating habits
› Organic food consumption
› Sensory adaptation
› Buying motives
› Images and associations
Positive sensory perceptions

- Particularly mentioned in relation with fruit and vegetable and some processed products
- «Authenticity»: Innate, natural, pure, healthy taste
- Taste as it used to be in former times
- Variable taste and appearance

“The taste (of organic products) is always pure because of the other cultivation. Not rushed with artificial fertilizer. That’s why it is tastier, purer. It has grown by itself.” (NL.H)

“I like buying organic wine from time to time. What I like about it is that I am always surprised what I get. Each bottle, even from the same wine or the same vintage tastes different! It makes me think about the small wineries I have visited in the past.” (FR.L)
Negative sensory perceptions

- More mentioned by light users
- Mainly processed products, especially side dishes or semi-luxury products
- Less intensive taste or simply poor taste
- Too strong innate taste
- Appearance deficits, e.g. spots, colour, texture

“I am used to “white” macaroni and I do not like the wholemeal one.” (PLL)
Product positioning and sensory marketing

- In case of positive sensory perceptions
  - Unique «organic» sensory quality may serve as USP (Unique Selling Proposition) in marketing
  - Sensory marketing should point out authenticity of organic products

- In case of negative sensory perceptions
  - Product improvement strategy
  - Sensory marketing to inform about differences of organic compared to non-organic products
Opportunities for organic sensory marketing

- Sensory marketing / information useful to support buying decision
- Useful to inform about typical sensory properties of organic products due to e.g. old varieties or typical organic varieties, processing techniques, food ingredients, absence of additives
- Sensory marketing should be reliable and objective
Summary & Conclusions

› Consumer sensory perception of organic food is influenced by multiple external and internal factors

› Knowledge of sensory perception on product level is important for product improvement, positioning and marketing

› Sensory marketing important tool to inform consumers about existing sensory differences
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