

# 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, Zanolli et al. 2004)
- › Lack of knowledge on how consumers perceive and evaluate organic food
- › Sensory marketing becomes more relevant



“full and bodied”



“light and fruity”

# 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



Foto: Baumgart 2009

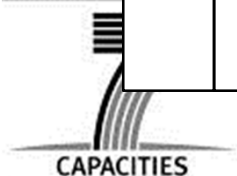
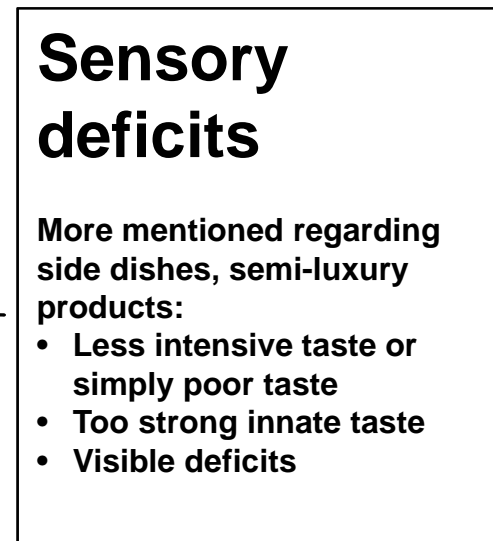
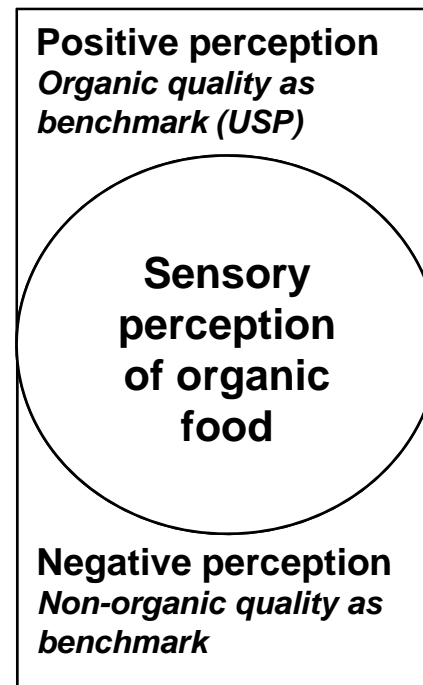
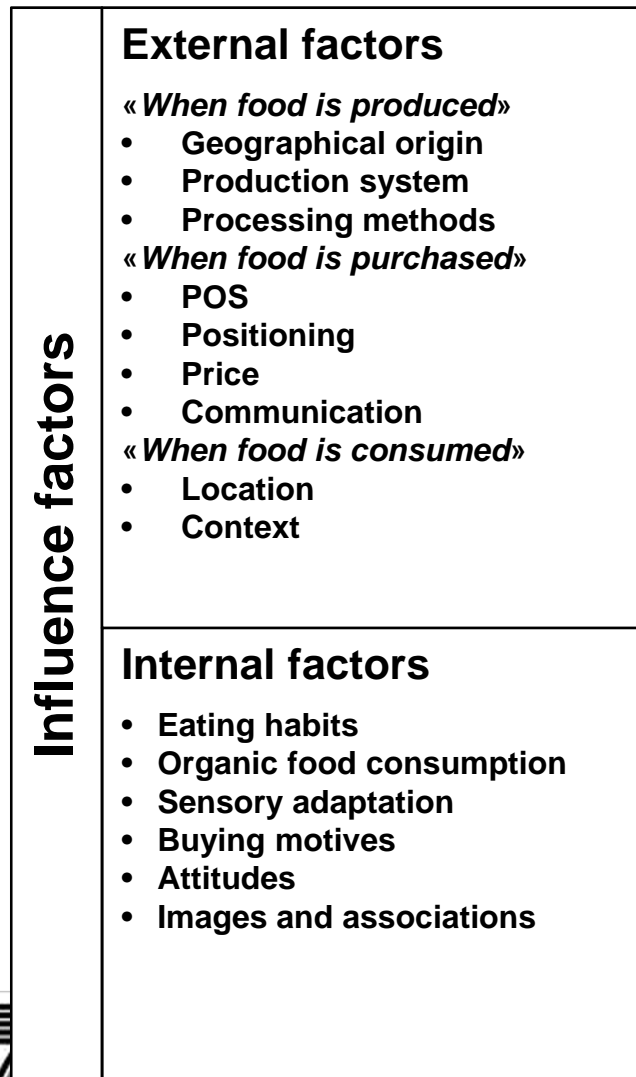
# Results

## Criteria for evaluating sensory characteristics

	DE	FR	IT	NL	PL	CH
Taste	++	++	++	++	++	++
Odour	+	+/-	++	--	+	+
Appearance	+/-	+	-	+/-	+/-	+/-
Texture / mouth feeling	-	++	-	-	+/-	-

Relevance: ++ = very relevant; + = relevant; + / - = partly relevant; - = limited relevance; -- = no relevance

# Sensory perception model



# 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.” (P.L.L)*



# 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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