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Consumer Perception of Local and Organic Products: Substitution or Complementary Goods?

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Abstract: Many consumers are interested in local products because of the perceived benefits of freshness, stronger taste and higher quality. To consumers the origin attribute represents a strong purchasing criterion. With respect to organic produce, local food products may be perceived either as substitutes or as complementary. A qualitative approach to data collection (focus groups) and to data processing (content analysis) has been used to analyse Italian consumers' perception with respect to local and organic food products. In the framework of the EU project QLIF (FP6-506358) a discussion guide to focus group interview was used in order to identify important purchase criteria, the willingness to pay, as well as the role of organic food products in purchasing criteria. Two animal – yogurt and eggs – and two non animal products – bread and tomatoes – were taken into account. Focus groups interviews indicate that Italian consumers place much importance on the local origin of food products, especially if fresh consumed. The origin with its implication of seasonality, territoriality and localness are among the major motivating and trust factors, however not always linked to organic food products. The lack of availability of local and organic food products together with retailing issues are taken into consideration. Differentiation throughout animal and non-animal products and between processed food products and commodities is analysed. Organic seems to suffer in global markets, localness may suggest a solution. The research provides insights on substitution and complementary marketing strategies.

Keywords: Local Products, Organic Food, Food Quality and Safety, Proximity, Focus Groups, Cultural Preferences

Introduction

MANY CONSUMERS ARE interested in local foods because of the perceived benefits of freshness, stronger taste and higher quality (Pirog, 2004; Bodini, 2004). Regional products seem to enclose more “emotional quality” than products of other or unknown origin. By labelling them with their origin, products are positioned emotionally like brands. When consumers perceive regional quality labels, the origin is sometimes more important than any other quality cue (Alvensleben, 2000). Furthermore, local production entails a feeling of security and belonging to the local area and its traditions (Bodini, 2004). According to the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, short distances allow consumers to fulfil not only (physiological) nutritional needs (on the base level of the pyramid), but also hierarchically higher needs, such as nutritional concerns (about chemical residues), transparency (traceability and origin), and political ideals (buying national products, non-polluting production) (Stefani, 1995).

Previous research has revealed that consumers are generally positive about locally produced food. For example, consumers feel that by buying local produce they are purchasing more authentic and higher quality (Boyle, 2003; Lee, 2000) products, as well

as fresher (La Trobe, 2001), more nutritious, tastier and safer (Seyfang, 2004).

Rural sociologists suggest that consumers choosing local food look for a relationship with farmers and food producers, based on reciprocity, trust and shared values (Hinrichs *et al.*, 1998; Hinrichs, 2000). According to them, some key dimensions characterise the a local food system, such as the degree to which it is ecologically sustainable, economically sustaining, participatory, healthful, diverse and culturally meaningful. In this study we try to identify how cultural meanings and participatory issues are related to local or organic food products. Furthermore, the attempt of this survey is to see whether the “local” *may* be associated with these preferred dimensions of the food system, and when the “local” is not *necessarily* associated with them.

Localness and distance issues, in some cases are also important because consumers are concerned about environmental and energy impacts of long transportation (Kloppenborg *et al.*, 1996).

Consumers believe that organic food products represent high levels of quality and safety. However these are often overshadowed by the environmental damage caused by long distance transport (food miles). Furthermore, highly processed and packaged organic foodstuffs have an additional adverse environmental impact (Church, 2005). All these issues



rise a barrier to consumers purchases with respect to organic, whereas the same issues may rise as strong motivation for preferring local food products.

Many consumers assign different characteristics or qualities to the local food system. The challenge emerged from this survey is to specify as much as possible what distinguishes the term local and organic with respect to food quality perception. In the present study we are especially interested in generic local food. This is why the analysis does not refer to consumer perception with respect to specific PDO and PGI products. In other words we approach consumer attitude towards local productions in general trying to understand what desired attributes food consumers link to local (and eventually organic) food.

The term 'local' is not as much tightly defined as the 'organic' one, nor consumers can engage on a comparable system of regulation and certification to rely on (Weatherell *et al.*, 2003). Hence, contrasts may raise when discussing about the two attributes. In fact either competitive or substitutive strategies may be played on the market. An attempt to identify whether the distance issue is the same for all types of foods (i.e., bread, eggs, dairy, fruits and vegetables) has been pursued. The distance food travels is, per se, important; however the fact that agricultural and food inputs and products have travelled across territorial boundaries (of nations, of states/provinces, of counties or towns) is also relevant to consumers.

Material and Methods

As few previous studies have examined consumer preferences between organic, low input and conventional products, a qualitative focus group approach was adopted here to investigate occasional consumers' food choices. Qualitative methods are particularly useful to deepen understanding of any phenomenon about which there is little knowledge. In the present study they helped to gain additional in-depth information that could be difficult to convey quantitatively. Even if this study dealing with attitudes suffers from small samples and regional biases, the consistency of the results seems to provide a certain validity (Bortof, 2001; Zanolli and Naspetti, 2004). Focus groups interviews help to understand consumers' attitudes towards food choices because they encourage participants to quarrel and explain themselves to each other (Greenbaum, 1998; Krueger, 1998; Frey and Fontana, 1993). In our research framework, they allowed exploring not only what consumers prefer, but also the quality and safety attributes beneath their preferences as well as production and processing techniques for assessing quality and safety of the products.

The objectives of the research, to be achieved by focus group discussions, were the followings:

- How consumers define and construct meanings around the concepts of quality and safety as they relate to organic and low input foods;
- How such concepts and meanings vary for the different commodities (yoghurt, eggs, tomatoes, and bread), and for different types of consumer;
- What kind of mechanics of consumer perception and behaviour for organic and low input foods; and the role of quality and safety characteristics within this.

The focus group discussions focused on perceived quality and safety attributes for buying food. Taking into consideration the gap between the product quality supplied and the product perception/expectation (demand), consumers' needs, attitudes, concerns and perceptions were explored. Both motivations and constraints (barriers) to purchasing organic food products were investigated in order to understand consumers' choices and disappointment criteria. This demand perspective aimed to give insights to the marketing decisions and implementations from the supply side.

Besides, the influence of production and processing techniques on quality and safety of products was also investigated in order to have a deep knowledge of possible incompatible attributes (such as all year long availability and seasonality of food products). According to some authors, there are some "critical technologies" of food production and processing that might be incompatible too (Schmidt *et al.*, 2004). The local origin of the products (regional and national vs. imported products) and the consumers' willingness to pay for local produce were investigated in order to understand how consumers make a hierarchy between attributes and whether they are ready to pay a higher price premium for them. The interactions during the focus groups provided valuable data on the extent of consensus and diversity of opinions among the participants. The localness of the products, as explained below was spontaneously mentioned by Italian consumers and emerged in all participant discourses.

Data Collection

The consumption of two animal – yoghurt and eggs – and two non animal products – bread and tomatoes – was investigated.

During winter 2005, four focus group sessions (FGs) were held in Ancona, Italy. On average eight people participated to each focus group session (with a total amount of 33 participants), 23 of them were female and at least two male consumers per session were present. The involvement in and consumption of organic food quotas were respected according to a recruitment plan agreed within the project partners.

A recruitment scheme was used to select consumers entering supermarkets chains (Coop, Conad, Sma), selling organic products as part of their marketed range. A specific recruitment questionnaire was developed and pre-tested, containing both exclusion and eligibility criteria.

Non-organic users as well as fully committed organic consumers were explicitly excluded; as a result, only self-reported occasional users were selected for group discussions. The choice not to select regular organic consumers was related, on one side, to the fact that this group has been deeply and widely studied (Zanoli, 2004, Torjusen *et al.*, 2004). On the other side, the main assumption of the whole research project was that a relevant future growth of the organic market could be ascribed to either an increase of per capita consumption of occasional consumers or to an increase in the number of these, whose perspectives are less known and studied in European studies.

Two demographic characteristics were used to assure sample heterogeneity: age (50% of consumers from 25 to 45 years old, 50 % consumers from 45 to 65 years old) and gender (at least 2 men per each FGs session). A five point scale was used to measure potential participant involvement in food. Furthermore in each session participants should have declared to buy at least one of the two selected organic product (ex. tomatoes or bread for the group sessions on non animal productions, and yoghurt or eggs for the group sessions on animal productions) in similar percentages (50% each).

Participants received a small incentive: a 20-euro voucher to spend in an organic food shop or a bag with some organic products of the same value.

On the basis of the findings of existing literature on consumer attitudes to quality and safety of organic and low input foods (Midmore *et al.*, 2005) a common discussion guide and guidelines were adopted by all the project partners (CH, DE, FR, IT, UK) in order to obtain comparable results for four products categories: yoghurt, eggs, tomatoes, bread (Sylvander and François, 2005).

General guidelines were presented in order to explore which salient concepts and attributes consumers associate to quality and safety of low input food (not necessarily organic). The agreed discussion guide was translated and adapted to singles countries (some small language changes were needed) after a pre-test aimed at reducing repetitions and excessive length of the sessions.

The focus group protocol was built in order to be fairly broad in terms of contents and aims. It was structured into 4 major parts. The first phase focussed on the identification of important criteria taken into consideration when buying food products; the second dealt with the role of organic food products and its

competitors in purchase decisions; the third stressed on the production and processing practices influencing the quality and safety of food products. A willingness to pay question was included at the end of each session, in order to encourage discussion on different attributes raised and to promote comparison among them. Participants were asked to individually draw conceptual maps in order to categorise product attributes in terms of willingness-to-pay a premium. When the exercise was completed, participants were asked to share their results, one at a time; the moderator reported collective results on a flipchart.

At the beginning of each focus group session a questionnaire was submitted in order to collect participants' socio-demographic data (age, number of people in the household, number and age of the children, level of education, actual job/activity).

To ensure consistency, a single moderator conducted all groups. The group discussions were recorded on two tapes and one video-tape; moreover, an assistant was asked to keep a "speaker log" in order to keep track of who said what during the group. Full verbatim transcripts of the discussion were used for data analysis. Each group session lasted approximately two hours.

Qualitative content analysis was done using the software Nvivo5 (QSR, 2005). The coding was carried on using a meta-code book, agreed among all the research partners. The transcripts of the four Italian FGs were coded using over 350 basic codes which were summarised in more general categories using a bottom up approach; some categories were specific to each of the four different products explored.

Results

Consumers mentioned several product attributes concerning either quality or safety of the product under discussion. Among these attributes the origin of food emerged as a leading purchasing criterion. In particular localness was often mentioned. The different meanings participants assign to the local origin of food are presented in what follows.

Local origin or *localness* is a complex attribute embedding – as sub-attributes – concepts as freshness, seasonality, naturalness and territoriality. Local food products are preferred because they are felt to encompass either one or more of these sub-attributes.

On one hand, some respondents associate organic food to local origin: in this case we speak of complementary attributes. On the other hand, other respondents perceive these two attributes as substitutes.

By analysing participants' statements, some key themes were identified as related to the local production issue. Although there are some different results

when considering the four types of products, these patterns are common to all the group sessions.

In all discussions, local origin – as it will become clearer in the following pages – represent a quite strong trust-builder in the mind of the consumer.

In what follows, for ease of exposition, the key issues are presented and grouped according to main themes, as emerged during the coding phase.

Quality and Safety

As it was stressed in previous research (Midmore *et al.*, 2005), Italian consumers show a strong involvement towards food quality. Occasional organic consumers, when thinking about food quality, mainly refer to the sensory perception of product characteristics. Taste, texture, and smell are indeed the most important quality attributes of food products in general. Although different food quality cues are mentioned for the types of foods investigated, all participants spontaneously mentioned taste as the most important food quality characteristic, when they think of ‘good quality’.

After taste, local origin emerges as a relevant quality cue: participants mention freshness, naturalness and seasonality as attributes ascribed to the quality of food product.

Male: “I prefer to buy yoghurt produced in the area close to the city where I live, therefore it is surely fresh”

For non-animal products purchases, the local preference is stronger. Whereas for bread the preference concerns region-specific baking methods, for tomatoes is linked to regions of (Southern) Italy where tomatoes are perceived to get better growing conditions.

Furthermore, participants perceive that local origin guarantees product quality. As a matter of fact, participants feel sure that food purchased at a local producer – e.g. farm shop or farmers’ market - is fresh.

Female: “I buy eggs from the farmer because I am sure they are fresh”

Participants brought to discussion a combined preference for seasonality and geographical origin and seasonality and territoriality. The following statement stresses this viewpoint mentioning that tomatoes should come from the place where they are produced on season.

Female: “It depends, if it’s May, it is better they come from the South, but if it’s August, they better be local”

The following quotations suggest that consumers associate on-season and region-specific agricultural productions together. Hence they place much emphasis on the respect towards land and people, as a result on the ethical dimension of agriculture:

Male: “Seasonality is important. At the same time territoriality is important in Italy. Tomatoes are produced in specific times of the year. If we move to Israel, maybe we’ll have tomatoes on other months of year as well, but it depends on regions and climate. For me it’s wrong to try to produce out of season and seek profit out of it (speculation)”

Male: “I only eat tomatoes in summer...”

Male: “I like seasonal products, because I have figured out that a seasonal product and a greenhouse-grown one taste different. Though apparently the seasonal looks irregular, it’s tastier. Selling products out of season is only a reason to speculate”

In general, when quality is concerned, local and organic appear to be substitute attributes for food products. Local food are perceived as fresher, more natural and more on-season than organic products. However respondents recognise that local and organic products represent the best choice according to different motivations, though not usually easily available in their preferred points of purchase.

Female: “Those conventional have all the same colour, outside and inside...while the organic ones have yellow or redder yolks...Since I don’t know any farmer directly, and so I don’t know how they work, I prefer to buy organic eggs in supermarkets...”

Food safety was not spontaneously mentioned as an important purchase criterion.

Nevertheless the safety issue is raised related to bread (i.e. the origin of flour) and to processing ingredients. In general, in participants’ views, information on origin should be improved, whereas it is suggested that organic is safer than conventional, because it guarantees safety and production soundness – e.g. bread produced without chemical yeast, tomatoes grown without pesticides, yoghurt processed without additives:

Female: “Because they do not declare the origin of flour and this is a demand from consumers”

Female: “GMO is worrying. All flours we have are manipulated, they come from modified seeds. Organic farming should be against such manipulations”

Beside GMOs, participants appear to distrust any form of “man-made” – as opposed to natural - processes.

Usually small-scale and traditional farming systems enhance consumers’ trust. However, in terms of safety, organic appear often a better trust-builder than mere localness. In the case of eggs, consumers feel better guaranteed by supermarkets (mostly selling ‘globalized’ goods) than local farmers:

Female: “Unless you know the farmer very well, at the end it’s safer buying organic eggs in supermarkets”

Female: “At least organic eggs sold in supermarkets are surely organic”

In general, when safety issues are concerned, local and organic appear again to be substitute attributes, though in this case the organic attribute better encompasses the safety concept than localness.

Female (1): “...in terms of quality meant as taste, I don’t know whether there is a big difference between organic and conventional in the end. But if quality is meant as good for health, then organic yoghurt is better for...”

Female (2): “...your personal safety..”

Female (1): “...exactly, yes! Anyway I don’t notice any difference in taste”

Proximity

Local food is meant as close as possible to the consumers, no matter whether it is national or regional. Proximity of consumers and producers (or even processors) generally represents a leading criterion in the investigated food categories purchases. In particular, the social and relational connotation of local products enhances the high quality value and safety of food. As Heinrichs (2000) remarks all kinds of markets, be they bonds markets or farmers markets, are embedded in social relations. Hence, establishing relations with producers and territory is strictly connected to local preference in food provisioning. In fact local food is mainly bought at a local food store (e.g. convenience bakery) or directly from farmers (farm shop or farmer’s markets). In both cases the local point of purchase is meant to be as close as possible.

Relations of proximity, such as e.g. small-scale production and direct contact between producer and consumers, are mentioned as opposite to long-distance relations of large-scale productions. Better taste of the former products is particularly appreciated and in contrast with standardization of taste in ‘globalised’ food.

The proximity to farmers does not involve directly the willingness to support the local economy – as

Chambers and colleagues (2007) show – but it involves quality issues. In fact respondents show positive attitude towards the possibility to visit the farm and directly meet the farmer. This is especially true for unprocessed products – eggs and tomatoes – which are always chosen according to proximity and relational criteria.

Female: “I buy eggs from the farmer because I am sure they are fresh”

Female: “It’s another kind of taste compared to those I buy in supermarkets”

When purchasing eggs, participants place local and organic at the same level of importance as quality cues, though organic eggs appear often safer than local farmer’s ones.

Local products, being perceived as relationally closer to consumers, may become substitutes of organic products, especially when these do not bring any perceived extra safety or quality to the products.

National and Cultural Preferences

In general, the majority of participants expressed a clear preference towards purchasing national food products. This preference is particularly important for bread and tomatoes, because of cultural issues.

Even though bread represents a complementary good in the Italian eating habits, much importance is given to its choice and consumers’ purchases are very specific. The range of bread is quite large and varies according to texture (crust and crumb), size, use of natural yeast and flour, use of wooden burning-oven, craft-artisan production. Italian bread can be salted (bread from the South) or unsalted (bread from the Centre, i.e. typically Tuscany). Size can vary from small-pieced (bread rolls in the North of the Italy) to one-kilo loaf (typical of the South).

Hence, for bread purchase, region-specific preference is magnified by the cultural dimension. This product confirms indeed to have a quite high cultural content, especially if linked to specific product origins. Strong commitment in bread was expected, since also previous surveys had stressed this aspect (Midmore *et al.*, 2005).

Participants complain about the taste of organic bread as well as the lack of variety. They refer to organic bread as being made with different cereal flour than conventional one (usually made of soft wheat). They associate organic to wholemeal breads.

The main argument in favour of the national food products is a perceived better quality, intended in terms of freshness and seasonality. Participants prefer national products because the quality is preserved by short supply chains. Especially when discussing about tomatoes, participants stress on naturalness and seasonality as purchase criteria. They believe

both attributes are affected by transportation and distance. Italian tomatoes then travel a shorter distance from the southern regions of the country than from foreign countries.

Female: "If there are not local produce, then I look at geographical origin. Tomatoes should be Sicilian, from the southern regions anyway"
Female: "I trust more Italian products and I prefer them to foreign ones, because they are tastier and fresh because of short transportation"

Tomatoes grown in typical and dedicated regions seem to represent the main preference and reference for this product's purchase. Apulia and Sicily were the most often mentioned. Participants stated that tasty tomatoes are more likely to be grown in the most sunny and favourable climates of the country.

It should be noted that short-travel distances is perceived as a proxy of freshness; Italian occasional consumers do not express concern about the environmental impact of air-freight or long-distance transports (food miles), as regular consumers do (Naspetti *et al.*, 2008).

Local/national preference is also related to seasonality, seen as a quality cue. On-season products are of better taste and texture, in consumers' minds. This viewpoint is so strongly rooted in some participants habits, that some told to have bought tomatoes in summer in southern regions – during holiday occasions – in order to freeze them, thus to can eat them when the product would have been out of season.

Region-specific preference is also mentioned with reference to yoghurt purchases. Participants cite a brand (*Vipiteno*), whose production area and processing plants are located on the Alps, in the North of Italy. Participants tend to associate natural production methods to this brand, because the region (Tyrol) where milk cows graze is particularly devoted to dairy productions and because they believe high mountain areas are unpolluted. They state they like the idea that milk is produced as close as possible to the processing area. Therefore for yoghurt, most people refer to the mountain origin as a proxy of a quality guarantee. But again the sensorial attribute is the quality cue they use, paired with the localness, to infer quality.

Female: "Vipiteno yoghurt tastes more genuine and fresher than others on the shelves"

Given the importance of national and regional origin, participants show disappointment towards the lack of information supplied on the shelves. Their informational need is not met by reading the country of origin on the label. In fact they state they would like to know exactly the region of production, especially

for fresh food products. This point of view is especially strong with respect to imported fresh products. Respondents think that tomatoes should come from Italy (either Southern or Central regions), whereas foreign tomatoes – even the Mediterranean ones like the Spanish ones – are not generally purchased.

To sum up consumers are not keen on buying foreign food products. Proximity perception appear to be limited to national boundaries: any imported food, no matter how long has travelled, is felt less 'near' than any other Italian food. Therefore, perceived proximity could paradoxically result, for a Milan resident, in considering 'nearer' a tomato travelling from Sicily (about 1000 km) than berries imported from Tyrol, Austria (less than 300 km).

As a result, local or, at least, national food products are generally preferred; localness as a quality cue is a more important purchase criterion than organic production. In fact, when mentioning foreign organic tomatoes - namely from the Netherlands – participants stated they would not buy them, even if organic. Hence local (Italian) tomatoes are recognized as superior quality products. To this respect, organic is complementary to local, but local origin can be a substitute for organic production.

Willingness to Pay

At the end of the focus groups sessions, the willingness to pay (WTP) has been qualitatively investigated, to 'weight' the actual relevance of product attributes mentioned during the sessions. In this way participants were driven to explain their actual preferences and choices. By showing high or small willingness to pay, participants either confirmed or reversed their concerns towards product attributes accordingly.

Generally, given that consumers choose local (near) products because of high quality and freshness, participants confirm their preference stating they would pay a medium price premium for local food. Some respondents take for granted that local foods are cheaper than those imported. In fact they are willing to pay just a small price premium for local food. They believe that small and natural production systems, thus short supply chain, are supposed to be less expensive. Therefore, for instance, eggs from small local producers are supposed to be cheaper. These considerations are also mentioned by Chambers and colleagues (2007).

Seasonality was raised in favour of small willingness to pay for tomatoes. Participants believe that the local ones should not cost too much and that on-season products should not be more expensive than those out-of-seasons. In particular a product-specific attitude can be ascribed to tomatoes. Participants prefer to pay more for tomatoes coming from the

South of the country, than from a local producer. This is explained by two factors: 1. local tomatoes are closer so transport cost should be lower; 2. Southern tomatoes are generally perceived tastier and of higher quality, therefore the WTP is higher. Besides, seasonality plays its own role. In the South, tomatoes ripen earlier than in Ancona (central Italy). Somehow, while consumers attach negative attitudes to off-season foreign imported tomatoes, when the origin is national this attitude is reversed. Local products in glass-houses are seen of lower quality than less local open-field products from Southern Italy. They are, in strict sense, less 'local', but are still perceived as 'near'; the national boundaries, in this case, make the difference in proximity perceptions.

Male: "I'd pay more for a retailer from Brindisi (South of Italy), rather than buying from a local producer who cultivates tomatoes in green-houses."

With respect to bread, participants stated they would pay a high price premium for traditional and artisanal processing methods, aka local bread.

In terms of WTP, major differences may be found comparing animal and non-animal products, while for other aspects the main differential attribute was the level of processing (processed vs. unprocessed food).

While participants are willing to pay higher premiums for *local* vegetable products (bread and tomatoes), when animal products (eggs and yoghurt) are involved a higher WTP is attached to *organic* products.

Discussion: Substitution or Complementary?

As previously reported, local origin appears in some instances a direct substitute to organic origin, while in some others localness and organic are complementary.

When considering quality and safety cues of local and organic food, consumers appear to experience a cognitive overlapping. According to our empirical findings, consumers construct meanings on food quality and safety on both the local origin of the product, and the organic production process.

Occasional organic consumers seem to appreciate local farmers' products, though not necessarily organic, because of a perceived higher quality. They buy local food to have fresher products. In this way the existence of local and organic food, competing on the same quality cue, increases the propensity of customers to switch between the two alternatives in response to relative price changes.

In a recent survey (Naspetti *et al.*, 2008), this pattern was partly observed, for a specific product category, among *regular* organic consumers, too. *Organic* vegetables sold in specialised shops or supermarkets were perceived of lower quality (and higher prices) than *local* conventional vegetables.

Similarly, in our focus group discussion, the key differences in statements regarding local food preferences are found between animal (eggs, yoghurt) and non-animal (bread, tomato) products. On one hand, organic products are those most trusted and preferred when thinking of animal production (probably perceived as less 'near' anyway, due to the agricultural environment of Central Italy). On the other hand, local food products are preferred when thinking of vegetable production (wheat bread and tomatoes).

In terms of *quality*, organic (certified) food is less trustworthy than local (conventional) farmers' products. They believe they can better trust local farmers because of the consumers-farmers proximity. Farmers are perceived to be closer to them at two different levels: when considering the (smaller) physical distance and because of a (closer) relationships. Consumers can have their personal experience with the producer and eventually personally verify the way of production. Besides, the chance to interact with food producers, knowing how the crop or animals have been treated, has become a particularly valuable facility, in an increasingly anonymous food system (Halweil, 2002). The distance between the farmer and the consumer becomes smaller by the implementation of a short supply-chain (farmers' shop or farmers market). However, local organic farmers' initiatives are not widespread in Italy (and especially in Marche), though the national government has provided incentives for implementing shorter supply-chains from farm to fork. Currently, one national organic farmers' association has launched a specific programme to develop farmer's markets, farm shops, home-deliveries, and similar initiatives (AIAB, 2007).

In terms of *safety*, especially for products of animal-origin, the organic attribute (being *certified*) embeds a higher trust content. Furthermore, processed foods are those needing, according to consumers' statements, a higher level of 'attention', though consumers' knowledge of processing methods (and risks) is very low. Nevertheless, as we have seen, bread – being perceived as a low processed product and having most ingredients originated from vegetable productions – is preferred in its local version, because of cultural factors, too.

Occasional organic consumers - in marketing terms, *brand switchers* - showing low intrinsic self-relevance for the (organic) product/brand category (Peter *et al.*, 1999) have low loyalty towards (organic) food. Nevertheless, in a post-modern marketing

approach, their consumption patterns have to be explained as means to satisfy, not only their physical personal needs, but also their final ends (values). In the post-modern context, consumers seem interested in satisfying needs that are linked to the social sphere. Constructing social links help consumers in building their individuality (Cova, 1997).

The social and cultural role of consumption seems to explain the consumer search for security and confidence. From a social science perspective, consumers' selection of local and/or organic food is to be seen in a wider symbolic way. Consumers' attitude towards (local/organic) food cannot be perceived as a simple selection of a bundle of attributes (not necessarily tangible). Organic food attributes such as taste, "naturalness", "healthiness", etc. are culturally-mediated concepts, and respondents appear to attach cultural meanings and personal feelings to such concepts.

Organic consumption, in consumer discourses, is often a mean to healthy eating in order to live better (quality of life) and/or to take care of family. Local food purchases, although perceived high in quality content, are probably based on a different cultural and traditional background. Local food is also a way to escape mass consumption and the globalised business market, and to tie up the social (relational) dimension of purchases (Seyfang, 2004).

These different perceptions of local and organic food products delineate the existence of quite different cognitive and affective antecedents of attitudes for the two products categories. Occasional organic consumers sense local food products mainly as substitutes of organic products; nevertheless, the boundaries between the two are not always understandable and unambiguous.

According to the existing literature (Chambers *et al.*, 2007; Padel, 2006; Weatherell *et al.*, 2003), local food purchases rely on a series of quality determinants, usually related to environment pollution (industrial area *vs.* uncontaminated mountains). Italian consumers, according to our findings, exhibit local food preferences for reasons unrelated to environmental issues such as food miles (i.e. concerns for energy use and pollution of long-distance transportation). However, for Italian occasional consumers, environmental values do not appear to be among the leading motives to purchase organic food (Naspetti and Zanoli, 2008).

Consumers perceive that the most compelling arguments in favour of local food can be better ascribed to quality and to some relational and emotional factors. Among the socio-cultural determinants, artisanal and traditional production and processing methods can be mentioned; among the emotional

aspects, national/regional preference and credence that a specific origin (e.g. Southern Italy) is a quality guarantee for certain products. On the other side, organic food is generally perceived as safer, given is somewhat guaranteed by an inspection and certification system. However, given the little knowledge consumers have on these technicalities, the organic guarantee is often perceived more *distant* than any sort of personal verification that consumers *feel* they can exert¹ on local food production.

On the contrary, organic foods, in marketing terms, are conceptualised as 'credence' goods (Peter *et al.*, 1999). This means that, by definition, consumer *cannot* personally verify that organic products are effectively so; they can only trust the organic label.

If you add that occasional organic consumers often seem to confuse local farmers' products with organic products, it is now clear that discriminating between substitution or complementarily effects between the two categories becomes a fuzzier task.

To sum up, the more information and relational experiences consumers acquire regarding local production and processing methods (and sometimes the farmers), the more likely they are to trust and to feel safe about food.

When local food is chosen, throughout a large variety of the terms 'local' - regional, national or "close specific products", i.e. season - the cultural and social boundaries of the foodshed enlarges. Social interactions during food provisioning, no matter if local or organic, are of growing importance. Sometimes, especially when products have a strong cultural value (bread and tomatoes) inside a community or an area, a sort of incompatibility can be highlighted, and local food is the winner.

When switching to some processed or animal products - which consumers feel more 'distant' and less easily personally verifiable - a third-party guarantee enters into account and organic food is selected.

Given our finding, it is quite clear that combining organic with local could result in a winning marketing strategy; but this strategy, of course, cannot be economically pursued for all products.

Conclusion

Among the group of the Italian occasional organic consumers interviewed, local food products are often seen as better quality and more familiar ('nearer') products than organic ones. As a consequence, organic food is sometimes perceived as a more distant and globalised alternative.

¹ For consumer confidence, it is enough that this verification is only potentially possible, since, in most cases, they will never exert their right to verify local products (e.g. by visiting the farmer's fields or barns).

The higher proximity attached to local food, given the low level of awareness of Italian occasional consumers regarding the environmental implications of globalised food production (Naspetti and Zanoli, 2008), seems to be mostly unrelated to the so called 'food mileage' issues.

The quite recent increase in the availability of organic food in conventional point of sale (i.e. supermarkets), though generally appreciated by consumers, has increased the perceived distance between them and the (organic) product (Naspetti *et al.*, 2008). Consumers become insecure (Morris, 2008). According to our results, consumers show some difficulties in assigning to organic products that broad relationship-oriented focus they usually link to local farmers and processors. Somehow, organic productions risk to be perceived as more similar and closer to conventional ones than those of local origin. Relationships create interconnections between consumers and producers and help both sides to become aware of their counterpart needs and problems, and, as a consequence, to try to solve them. In the words of Helena Norberg-Hodge (2008) – pioneer of the International Local Food Movement - eating and buying locally enlarges the sense of community and give a sense of wellbeing.

In Italy the Slow food movement – founded by Carlo Petrini – tries to support local food networks by promoting and constructing "alternative meanings for quality". It is a resistance movement committed in rejecting the standardisation and opposing to fast food as well as in changing the conventional food production and distribution system (Brunori, 2007).

Locally grown food is appealing to consumers also because it embodies a "wonderful" story. Buying locally, more than buying organic, means knowing the farmer selling the produce or the baker making local bread. Knowing their stories and building relationships with them is an important aspect in enjoying the meals (Morris, 2008). The case of bread is an example: even when there is no real difference in the receipt – but, eventually, in the use of (organic) ingredients – consumers perceive there is less culture content in organic bread than traditional local bread.

By analysing discourses of a small group of Italian occasional organic consumers, we have uncovered the principal benefits linked to the use of local food and sometimes the attributes consumers relate to these products.

The explorative methodology employed (focus groups) does not allow to fully investigate the connections between product attributes and consumers goals. When speaking about local productions, a value based approach should be applied to investigate customer motivations and barriers to buy local (organic) food. More empirical research on local food perception is needed to further our understanding on the complementarity and substitution effects between organic and local food. What is still missing is a full understanding of the different values associated to different local dimensions: proximity, localness, seasonality, etc.

Several researchers (Crouch, 1992; Dahlberg, 1993; DeLind, 1994; Feenstra, 1997; Kloppenburg *et al.*, 1996) explicitly or implicitly assert the desirability of local or regional food systems. Initiatives such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), farmers markets, and small-scale processing are cited as sprouting forms of alternative food systems. Nevertheless, no study exist on possible common needs and requirements of farmers/producers and consumers. Local food suppliers should be studied in connection with consumers to have deeper knowledge of different perceptions of local (and eventually organic) products characteristics.

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