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Exploring origin of food as a source of meanings for Finnish consumers: A qualitative comparison of meanings in Swedish, German and French food

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Introduction

Food and eating are by their nature dynamic phenomena full of changing psychological, social, cultural and economic meanings. One food attribute that contributes to the meanings consumers associate with food is its origin. Meanings consumers attach to food origin are an especially timely topic now when EU has proposed the adoption of “made in EU”-label in the food products category. In Finland, for instance, this has been strongly protested by thousands of consumers who have signed an address objecting the adoption. Finnish consumers have a strong positive attitude towards food of Finnish origin and as a food choice criterion domestic origin has consistently ranked high (Laaksonen & Leipämaa & Marell & Olofsson, 2004).

Past research has shown that origin of food influences consumer decision-making (attitudes, evaluation, willingness to buy, choice) in substantial and complex ways. As regards *attitudes* for example, consumers who are more individualistic have more critical attitude towards domestic products as compared to consumers who are more collectivistic (Gürhan-Canli & Maheswaran, 2000). Second, it has been found that food products are *evaluated* more favorably when a low cultural distance or an interest in foreign cultures prevails as compared to when a high cultural distance or a lack of interest in foreign cultures prevails (Juric & Worsley, 1998). Third, consumers who identify themselves strongly with the region in which a product is manufactured are *willing to pay* significantly more for it (Skuras & Vakrou, 2002). Finally, Granzin & Olsen (1998) demonstrated that *choice* of domestic products is negatively related to consumers’ perceived costs of helping and positively related to internalized responsibility for helping, a feeling of sharing a common fate with fellow citizens, and a social concern for members of society.

Without denying the worth of past country-of-origin research, a novel approach to gain more in-depth understanding about what kind of subjective meanings consumers associate with food of different origins is offered in this study. At the moment, there are surprisingly few country-of-origin studies that have applied qualitative research methodologies or focused on issues beyond cognitive nature. Thus, the present study extends current understanding of the phenomenon and offers some insights for consumer behavior theory-building. The objective of the study is to reveal the contents of meanings consumers attach to food of various origins.

Method, sample, and data

Analyzing subjective meanings necessitates a qualitative approach. A focus-group-interview approach was judged to be an appropriate choice. Three focus group interviews among Finnish consumers were conducted: the first group discussed about the Swedish food, the second group about the German food and the third about the French food. Verlegh & van Ittersum’s (2001) theoretical logic has been used to give direction to the data gathering and analysis. The themes that guided the focus group interviews were formed around the cognitive, affective and normative meaning dimensions. To improve the quality of the data, informants were given an assignment (answering questions that made them think about Sweden/Germany/France and their people, culture, food) that they were to perform prior to the interview. The informants were screened for their food involvement and only those with high involvement levels were recruited. The Finland-Sweden group consisted

of seven informants, the Finland-Germany group of eight and the Finland-France group of three informants. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed.

Findings

The findings show that Finnish consumers attach partly overlapping partly distinct cognitive, affective, and normative meanings to Swedish, German, and French food. Swedish and French foods are perceived healthier than German food. Finnish consumers also think that Swedish and French food is of high quality, safe and pure while in the case of German food consumers were more doubtful. German food was taken to be cheaper as compared to Swedish and French food (which was even considered as overpriced). Finnish consumers feel that the availability and visibility is good for French food, mediocre for German food and poor for Swedish food. By taste, Finnish consumers consider French food as good or excellent, German food as good, and Swedish food as ordinary. German food is associated with tradition while Swedish food is not. Finnish consumers characterize Swedish food as international and uninteresting, German food as simple, down-to-earth, and conservative, and French food as famous and interesting. In Finnish consumers' minds, indulgence and status-seeking are related to French food, but not to Swedish food; in turn, economy and masculinity are related to German food. Food cultures are believed to have strong roots in Germany and France, where food is at its best a form of art. When Finnish consumers buy Swedish, German or French food they do not get bad conscience, even though some ethical concerns surfaced in the case of German food. Finnish consumers did not see reasons to boycott Swedish, German or French food. Interestingly, in the case of Swedish and German food, Finnish consumers more clearly indicated a moral support for Finnish primary producers. This did not emerge in the Finland-France group.

The meanings Finnish consumers attach to food of Swedish, German and French origin can be interpreted also from the viewpoint of food-related value conflicts (see Table 1) that have been recently discussed in food consumption research (see e.g. Luomala & Laaksonen & Leipämaa, 2004). Food-related value conflicts arise when "values are contrasted with each other and juggled according to their significance for a particular food choice" (Furst & Connors & Bisogni & Sobal & Winter-Falk, 1996). For example, the health-indulgence conflict involves a tension between an individual's perceived pressures of favoring the healthy (e.g. low fat yogurt) and the pleasurable in foods and eating (e.g. a butter-baked cream cake).

Table 1. Meanings Finnish consumers attach to food of Swedish, German, and French origin in terms of food-related value conflicts.

TECHNOLOGY	-----GER-----	-----SWE-----	-----FRA-----	-----FIN-----	NATURE
NOVELTY	-----SWE-----	-----FIN-----	-----GER-----	-----FRA-----	TRADITION
HEALTH	-----SWE-----	-----FIN-----	-----GER-----	-----FRA-----	INDULGENCE
ECONOMY	-----GER-----	-----SWE-----	-----FIN-----	-----FRA-----	EXTRAVAGANCY
CONVENIENCE	-----SWE-----	-----GER-----	-----FIN-----	-----FRA-----	CARE

As can be seen from Table 1, Finnish consumers perceive Swedish food as novel, healthy, inexpensive and convenient. In turn, the meaning profile for German food is ambiguous. Perhaps tradition and economy are the meaning categories that are most clearly linked to German food by Finnish consumers. The meaning profile is sharpest for French food; it is believed to be quite natural, highly traditional, pleasurable, luxurious and demanding a lot of effort to prepare. Domestic food is

viewed similar to Swedish food by Finnish consumers, except in terms of naturalness and convenience.