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The Role of Sensory Attributes in Marketing Organic Food: Some Findings from a Qualitative Study

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SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

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ECROPOLIS PROJECT

- European project funded by the EU and organic SMEs
- PARTNERS: Universities, Research Centers and organic SMEs from Switzerland, Italy, France, The Netherlands, Poland and Germany
- The overall objective of the project is to <u>provide a platform to exchange sensory information on organic food to the industry as well as to consumers in the European organic market</u>

ECROPOLIS PROJECT (2)

- It will develop the first Organic Sensory Information System (OSIS), where the following information are included
  - sensory profiles of organic food
  - interpretation of data from consumer research
  - clarification of the impact of organic regulations on sensory properties

Qualitative and quantitative consumer research is carried out to foster the development of segment-specific marketing strategies.

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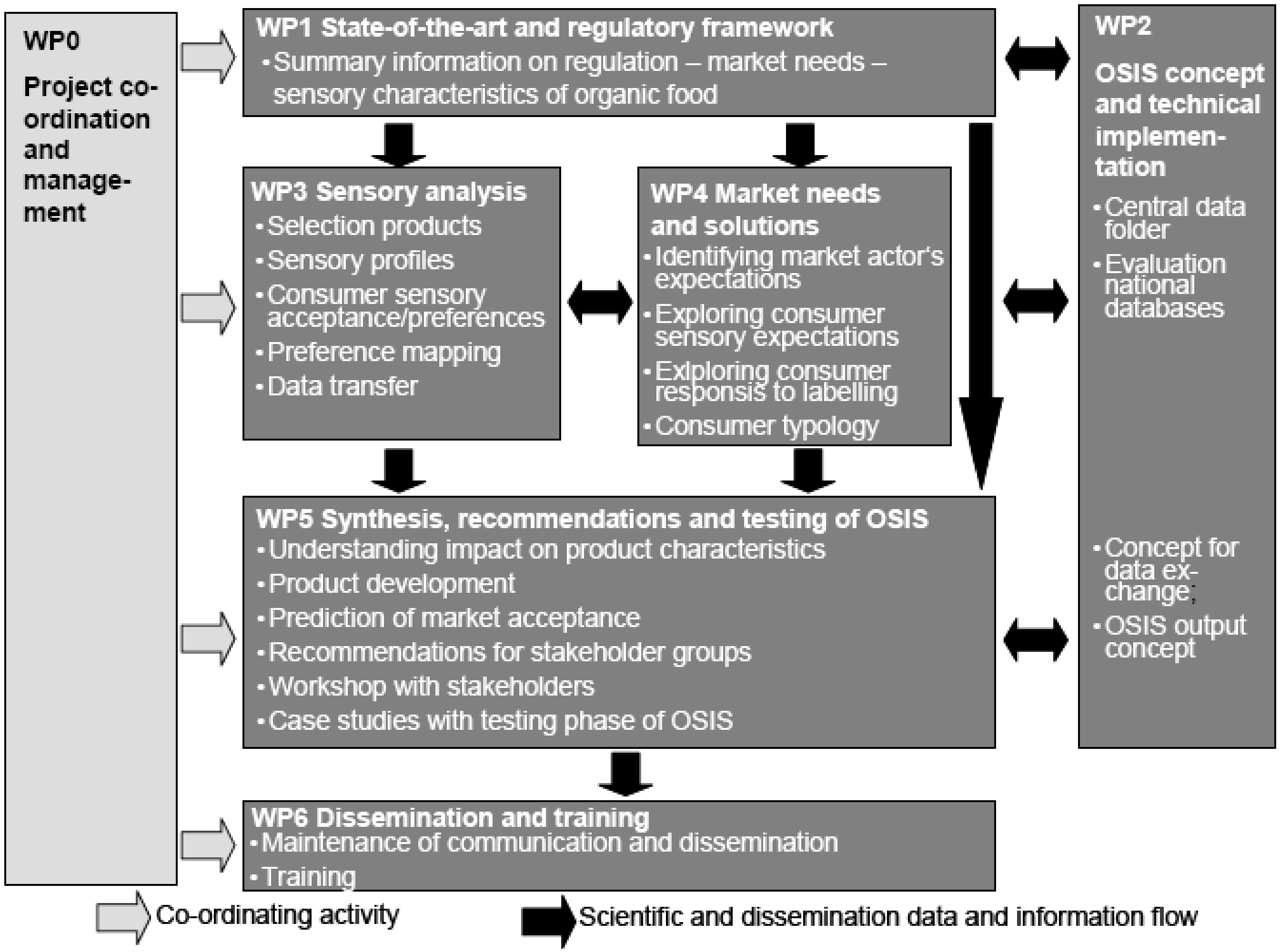

Figure B.1.3-1: Overview of project work packages

CAPACITIES

European organic market: background

- organic food market growing at an average rate of about 10% per year while the average per-capita expenditure were 27 Euro in year 2006.
- Challenges on market structural assets, distribution channels and differentation of expectations and buying motives of organic food consumers
- 'Hedonistic' motives for purchasing (e.g. health, taste) gained importance over 'Altruistic' motives (e.g. animal welfare)
- Importance of sensory attributes for marketing strategies
- Lack in literature of studies investigating sensory experiences and expectations, which may support organic food industry practitioners designing their marketing actions

CAPACITIES

Slide 5

AE1 ? era scritto structures, cosa intendevi esattamente?
AgEcon, 10/13/2010

Italian organic market: background

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- sixth European country in terms of per capita organic food consumption (per capita expenditure of 32 Euro).
- organic food represent 3% of the overall Italian food expenditure.
- Main organic food distributors: wholesalers and specialized organic shops, large retailers.
- While in Europe large retailers play a key role in the distribution of organic products, in Italy the market share of large retailers is still quite low (39% in 2005), but growing.
- Esselunga is reported as the leading retailer in the Italian organic food distribution

AE2

CAPACITIES

Slide 6

AE2 Possibile che abbiamo questo dato così vecchio?

Posso provare a chiedere a Carnemolla di FederBIO/PROBER, se ha dati più recenti.
AgEcon, 10/13/2010

Italian market background

- **Sensory preferences**
  - **Several initiatives addressed sensory aspects of Italian food:**

Objective and output

- **OBJECTIVE: exploring in-depth sensory experiences, expectations and preferences of consumers when purchasing and eating organic food**
- **OUTPUT: providing some key information which may make researchers able to address further research and may provide useful recommendations to food operators practitioners in marketing organic food**

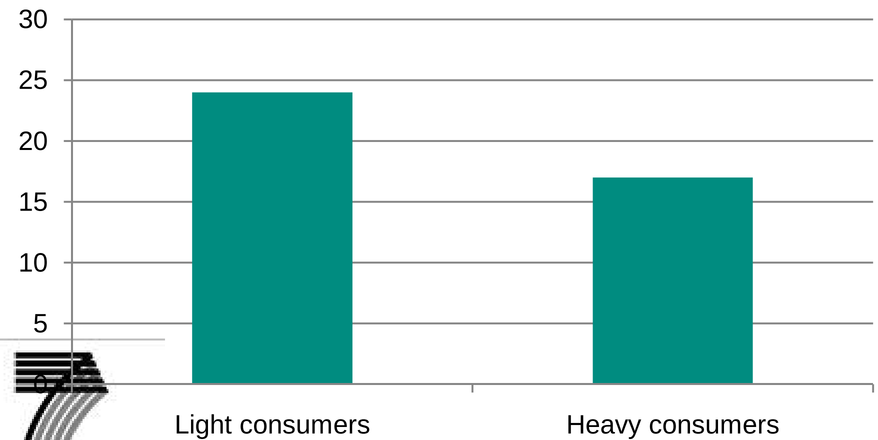
Methodology: Focus groups

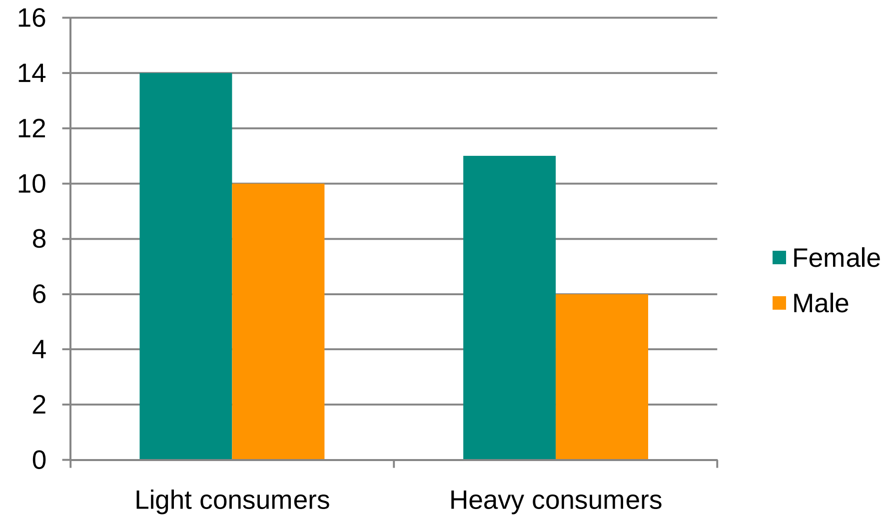
- Qualitative research method: FOCUS GROUP
- Semi-structured interview guideline
- LOCATION: five towns of different size across Italy
- In collaboration with:
  - Coop Italia (the Italian leader large scale retail),
  - University of Bari,
  - CIAS (Italian Center of Sensoı Analysis)

Methodology: Focus groups (2)

- Altogether 41 consumers partecipated in the 5 Focus Groups
- Quota for sample selection were set considering heavy and light users, gender and age brackets.
- About 1 hour per group interview
- Video and audio recording
- Transcription
- Content analysis

SAMPLE





RESULTS: meaning of the term “organic food”

- **Consumers may associate ‘organic food’ with a set of desired features of food such as freshness, naturalness, etc.**
- **Consumers may not refer to “organic” thinking just to the method of production**
- **Consumers may associate ‘organic food’ to niche products, artisanal, ‘home made’ foods, etc., which are not necessarily “certified organic”**

RESULTS: importance of attributes for “organic food”

- **Sensory and safety attributes seem to be particularly relevant in consumer choice to elder consumers**
- **When purchasing organic food, many young consumers claim to pay special attention to environmental protection, animal welfare, absence of chemical preservaties or additives rather than other attributes**

RESULTS: importance of attributes for “organic food” (2)

- Childhood memories seem to serve for some elder consumers as a “*personal sensory-quality term of reference*”, suggesting that education and training on food taste may play a role on shifting preferences
- When talking about purchasing and eating organic food, sensory attributes are still usually mentioned after other attributes, such as environmental protection, animal welfare, absence of additives, etc.

RESULTS: similarity/difference between organic and conventional food

- **Usually consumers agree that organic food should be diversified within the category and they should be different from conventional foods in terms of shape, odour, colour, shape, taste, texture**
- **Standardization is usually not welcome, except in few cases, e.g., when organic foods are compared with primary brands**
- **Sensory quality expectations about organic food in comparison with conventional food is sometimes "better" (bundled) sometimes "worse" (trade-off).**

RESULTS: sensory attributes that matter when…

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- PURCHASING ORGANIC FOOD:
  - appearance and
  - odour
- EATINGING ORGANIC FOOD:
  - taste and
  - odour

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RESULTS: complexity of description of sensory esperience and expectations

- Consumers are usually unable to verbally describe sensory experiences and preferences
- Sensory perception is a complex issue to be analyzed
- Different patterns exist in perceiving sensory differences between organic and conventional food
- Sensory perception may be linked to frequency of consumptions, personal values, conscious and reflexive consumption lifestyle, etc.

RESULTS: importance of information for buying decisions

- **Information about ingredients, additives and origin of products are the most relevant to many consumers**
- **Sensory-related information seem to play a crucial role when consumers are choosing which product to buy for the first time**
- **Sensory marketing may increase awareness**
- **Training consumers may enhance conscious consumption of organic food**

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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- **Research on organic consumers segmentation based on preferences for sensory characteristics to better targeting sensory marketing actions is needed**
  - **Elicitation of consumer willingness to pay (WTP) for organic food claiming particular sensory attributes**
  - **Effects of information about ingredients, method of productions, nutritional components that are linked to sensory attributes**

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CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS (2)

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- Studies on labels reporting using colours, images, keywords or symbols that consumers usually associate to organic food are recommended
- The use of experiential marketing tools may stimulate the interests in organic food sensory features, such as for instance
  - reproducing sounds and noises associated to organic production methods, as well as
  - tastings, contests, games and
  - oral advices at the point of sales on how to prepare and consume organic food

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