

A Qualitative Analysis of Sensory Experiences and Expectations in the European Organic Market: Findings from Italian and German Consumers

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Abstract

The organic food market grew steadily during the past decade (Hamm and Gronefeld 2004, Spiller 2006). This increase is accompanied by challenges in market structures, distribution channels as well as differentiation of expectations and buying motives of organic food consumers. On this regard, the “hedonistic” motives for purchasing of organic food, that also include sensory features like taste or appearance, gained importance in comparison to other motivations. Therefore, some scientists pointed out that sensory attributes are important elements that should be taken into account in the marketing strategies by organic food distributors (Brennan and Kuri 2002, Padel and Midmore 2005) than even before. The objective of this paper is to explore sensory experiences, expectations and perceptions of Italian and German organic consumers underlining differences between the two countries when purchasing and eating organic food. Ten focus group interviews composed by 6-10 consumers were performed during 2009 in different locations in Italy and Germany. The focus groups content was transcribed and then analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Results indicated that, although sensory attributes are not the main purchase driver, taste and, especially for Italy, odour are the most important sensory features taken into account by organic consumers especially for the first purchase. However, it seems that the ability to differentiate between various categories of sensory perception is characterized by a low level of development which may limit the set of possibilities when trying to reach consumers by affecting their senses. Furthermore, consumers were able to mention several aspects such as intensity, naturalness and authenticity that they consider to be important when it comes to the sensory properties of organic products. Other findings suggests that sensory perception is a learnable ability which offers an opportunity for the actors of the organic food market to bring their customers closer to their products by a corresponding training of consumers' sensory abilities.

Regarding the concept of standardisation consumers pointed out that sensory properties should not be standardized, especially for heavy users. In both countries, one part of the organic consumers seem to appreciate sensory marketing activities whereas another part apparently does not. For Italian consumers who appreciate sensory marketing, non-subjective as well as subjective marketing information is considered to be suitable, whereas in Germany non-subjective aspects seem to be predominant. Further research may be useful in order to detect the right marketing tools that are able to support a sensory-based strategy of product presentation and positioning.

Keywords: *Organic food, consumers sensory experiences and expectations, Italy, Germany, sensory marketing, focus group.*

1 Introduction

1.1 *Trends in the European organic food market: Germany and Italy*

During last decade European organic food market has grown steadily (Hamm and Gronefeld 2004, Sahota 2009) and changed its original supply chain structure and characteristics. The organic food and drink market was estimated to value approximately 18,400 million Euros in 2009 (De Ruvo 2011), an increase of nearly two billion Euros compared with 2007. Moreover, the organic food market in Europe has grown on average about 10% per year with an average per-capita spending of 27 Euros across all European countries.

In this framework, Germany is still the largest retail market for organic products in Europe in terms of overall productions and imports (Obermowe et al. 2011). The German turnover of organic food products was about 5.8 billion Euros in 2009, while the per capita consumption reached 70.7 Euros (Willer and Kilcher 2011). Apart from a temporary stagnation due to a financial crisis, the development of the German organic food market is characterized by a boom concerning the demand for organic products along with a notable structural change of the distribution channels during recent years in which multiple retailers are gaining a more relevant importance, compared to the specialized organic shops, accounting for more than 50% of organic sales in 2007 (Obermowe et al. 2011). However, the current development shows that specialized organic food stores by trend are able to defend their market (Obermowe et al. 2011).

Italian organic sector also grew considerably in the last decades. Italy's organic market structure is highly fragmented and complex, with many kinds of organic market operators. Despite of the world economic crisis, Italian consumers are increasing their consumption of organic food. Italy is one of the world largest domestic market for organic products, with a turnover of 1,500 million Euros in 2009 (Willer and Kilcher 2011) representing about 3% of the overall Italian food consumption. While Italy is the fourth European country in terms of turnover of organic products after Germany, France and UK (De Ruvo 2011), per capita expenditure is still low (about 25 Euros). With regard to the distribution channels, although organic farms play a very important role in the distribution of organic products, large retailers and specialized organic shops remain the most important distribution channels. However, although Italy is following the European trend whereas large retailers are increasing their importance in organic distribution over other distribution channels (Schaak and Willer 2010; De Ruvo 2011), Italian organic foods are still mainly sold by traditional grocery stores and by specialized retailers (e.g. NaturaSi).

1.2 *Sensory attributes as relevant elements for organic consumer choices*

Taking into consideration the consumer's side, even if "hedonistic" motives for purchasing organic food, such as health, taste and wellness, are not the main buying motivation, they are gaining relevance. Some studies showed that taste and other sensory attributes are important product features for specific consumers segments, who approach pragmatically the purchase of organic food products (Pellegrini and Farinello 2009) and tend to evaluate them according to the same parameters applied to conventional products (Berardini et al. 2006). Other studies revealed that taste and appearance are among the most important criteria in organic food purchase (Roddy et al. 1994, Magnusson et al. 2001, Castellini et al. 2008, Kuhar and Juvančič 2010). These findings were confirmed by Lüth et al. (2005) who reported that consumers are willing to pay higher prices for organic products solely if they feature aspects beyond the fact of being organically produced, such as a unique taste or smell.

Thus sensory attributes are important elements that should be taken into account in the marketing strategies by organic food operators than ever before (Brennan and Kuri 2002, Padel and Midmore 2005). As a consequence, consumers sensory judgments of food product (e.g. taste,

appearance, etc.) is needed to exploit new markets based on preference understanding (Ruan and Zeng 2004).

1.3 *Experiential and sensory marketing*

Nowadays food companies are looking for different options to satisfy consumers expectations. A possible marketing strategy is given by taking into account a new marketing approach on the basis of a paradigm called ‘experiential marketing’. Experiential marketing focuses on letting customers become involved in unforgettable emotional experiences, which reflect the marketing strategies of food companies adopting “sensory marketing” to meet new consumers’ needs and expectations. Sensory marketing could be defined as a group of key levers controlled by food operators (e.g. producers, distributors, etc.) in order to create a specific multi-sensory environment around the product or service by focusing on sale outlet environment or product environment and the communication or features of the product itself (Filser 2003). Sensory marketing could play an important role to create new taste and new experience in order to attract more consumers. Therefore sensory marketing could be an effective tool in gaining sensory consumer insights for marketing strategy of food companies since it influences emotional consumer decision-making by variability of products, concepts, packaging, and marketing mix scenarios to ensure long-lasting success.

In this context and in the organic perspective, organic practitioners are also starting to take into account sensory properties, such as taste, smell, appearance, touch, odour, etc. as important elements to be considered in food product development and marketing communication strategies. Qualitative and quantitative marketing researches are therefore necessary to identify factors that drive consumer liking in order to provide companies the understanding needed to optimize new products and to enhance the profitability of existing ones (Raz et al. 2008).

To our knowledge, only few studies focused specifically on consumers’ sensory experiences and preferences for organic food have been conducted in Italy and Germany (Stolz et al. 2010). Even if sensory features are not prioritized in organic food choices and other issues prevail, such as idealistic and ethical concerns (Meier-Ploeger and Roeger 2004), they seem anyway to be quite relevant for Italian consumers when choosing organic food (Valli and Molinari 2008). In particular, sensory attributes seem to play a role of “detectors” of higher quality products.

Also in Germany there are only a few studies considering consumers’ sensory experiences and preferences with regard to food products in general as well as in particular for organic foods and beverages. In this context the results of the German National Nutrition Survey II¹ show that taste is the most important criterion for the choice of buying a particular food. This aspect was considered important or very important by 97.2% of the people questioned, followed by freshness, minimum durability and healthiness (Max-Rubner-Institute 2008).

In addition to these results the importance of sensory aspects has been repeatedly mentioned in the context of surveys on the buying of organic food. Taste could be identified as the most important criterion for the purchase of organic products in a study by Kuhnert et al (2003) followed by species-appropriate husbandry, health, freshness and ripeness. The majority of the probands in this study said that the taste and appearance of organic products were better than those of conventional foods. Another survey about the reasons for organic consumption showed that

¹ Within the framework of the German National Nutrition Survey II [*Nationale Verzehrsstudie II*], almost 20,000 consumers (aged 14–80 years) were questioned between November 2005 to January 2007 about their nutritional and dietary habits (MAX-RUBNER-INSTITUT: XV, 2ff.)

product taste (46%) was the second most important criterion behind the health aspect (57%) (Dialego 2010). The results of this latter study additionally showed that this aspect had obviously increased in significance since 2005 (40%).

Since sensory properties are a relatively new issue in the organic food market, an exploratory approach is of paramount importance for providing useful insights to design more extensive (quantitative) consumer surveys enabling to segment consumers and helping organic food operators to improve their sensory marketing strategies.

1.4 Objectives

Given the above mentioned background differences between Italian and German organic markets, the aim of this paper is to explore and highlight the differences between the two countries on sensory experiences, expectations and perceptions of organic consumers when purchasing and eating organic food. Since qualitative findings usually cannot be generalized, this study provides insights to design more extensive quantitative consumer surveys aimed at segmenting consumers and helping food producers to improve their marketing strategies in Germany and Italy, which represent, among others, the main European organic markets.

Specific aspects that will be investigated are the following:

- Criteria for evaluation of sensory properties;
- Symbolic meanings and associations that participants relate to sensory characteristics of organic food;
- General aspects of experiences, expectations and preferences for specific sensory properties of organic food;
- Consumers' sensory expectations and preferences related to variability and standardisation of organic food;
- Adaption of organic regulations;
- Consumers' perceptions on sensory food marketing.

2 Methodology

In this study, a qualitative market research approach was chosen on account of the research objective to explore consumers' perceptions and expectations concerning the largely unexplored topic of organic taste. To do this, the qualitative market research method called "focus group discussion" was chosen.

2.1 Focus group discussion – a qualitative market research method

Focus group method is the most common qualitative method used in market research (Hair et al. 2006). Focus group is used in order to explore in-depth topics, which allow the emersion of elements that could be used in further investigations (Molteni and Troilo 2007). The main assumption of focus group is that most of the variables which are relevant for marketing research (such as motivations, opinions, attitudes, preferences, behaviours and associations) originate through social interactions between individuals into a shared context, recreated by the focus group (Molteni and Troilo 2007). The interaction between group members is the distinguishing feature of this technique; focus groups are typically performed during explorative and preliminary research stages, with the aim of letting researchers become familiar with the analysed phenomena and the underlying variables (Corrao 2007).

In practice, groups of 6-12 participants (Kepper 2000) are invited to join and discuss a certain topic under the coordination of a moderator. Usually, a semi-structured qualitative schedule is used in order to structure the focus group and to ensure comparability in the analysis of data (Kepper 2000). Since the aim of the study was to investigate consumers' experiences, perceptions,

associations and attitudes concerning organic sensory features, the focus group method is especially suitable for this investigation.

2.2 Survey design: recruitment, composition of focus group, location and equipment

In each country, 5 focus groups were conducted making a total of 10 focus groups available for the analysis. For each focus group discussion a target number of 5-10 participants to be recruited to join the discussions was defined.

In Germany the recruitment was carried out by the partner themselves while in Italy it was partially done in cooperation with a food retailer. The recruitment was carried out by using a common questionnaire aiming at identifying suitable consumers in order to fulfil the following pre-defined criteria for the focus groups:

- participants should consume organic products. In addition, people were classified in two purchase frequency levels, with the aim of conducting separate focus groups:
 - Heavy users of organic food: frequent consumption of organic food
 - Light users of organic food: occasional consumption of organic food
- Gender: men = 33 %, women = 66 % for each FG
- Age: 18-45 = 50 %, 46-75 = 50 % for each FG.

In most cases the actual focus group composition fulfilled pre-defined socio-demographic and food consumption criteria. In some cases, however, the recruitment quotas differed (Table 1).

Table 1.
Composition of Focus groups in Italy and Germany

Country	FG N°	H= heavy users L= light users	N° consumers	% female	% male	% 18 – 45 years	% 46 – 75 years
Germany	1	L	9	89	11	33	67
	2	L	5	100	0	20	80
	3	L	9	78	22	100	0
	4	H	7	71	29	71	29
	5	H	9	78	22	44	56
		Total		39	82	18	56
Italy	1	L	8	63	38	50	50
	2	H	8	75	25	50	50
	3	H	9	56	44	56	44
	4	L	6	50	50	50	50
	5	L	10	60	40	50	50
		Total		41	61	39	51

The focus group discussions were conducted during autumn 2009. Italian researchers performed 5 focus groups in 5 different cities across Italy (namely Trieste, Genoa, Rome, Bari and Matelica). The locations were chosen with the intent to include large and small cities, spread across the country, and addressing both areas where organic food has already a well-established market and others where it hasn't (Table 2). In Germany focus groups were all held in one location (Göttingen) in or nearby central town areas with a potentially high proportion of organic food consumers (Table 2).

Table 2.

Date and location of the focus group discussions held in autumn 2009

GERMANY		ITALY	
FG-DE1	Oct. 19 th in Göttingen	FG-IT1	Oct. 27 th in Trieste
FG-DE2	Oct. 19 th in Göttingen	FG-IT2	Nov. 10 th in Genoa
FG-DE3	Oct. 20 th in Göttingen	FG-IT3	Nov. 12 th in Rome
FG-DE4	Oct. 20 th in Göttingen	FG-IT4	Nov. 13 th in Bari
FG-DE5	Oct. 21 st in Göttingen	FG-IT5	Nov. 27 th in Matelica

One facilitator and one assistant were present at the FG. Facilitation was done by researchers on the basis of the focus group guidelines, which included relevant technical advice and information about the role of the facilitator. Voice recorders and video recorders were used as documentation tools in both countries.

2.3 Conducting focus group discussions and data analysis

ECROPOLIS researchers prepared a semi-structured qualitative schedule. The aim of the guideline was to provide a structure for the focus group procedure, including a time frame and the formulation of the key questions to be discussed. Focus group discussions were conducted, focusing on the following key questions:

- Which senses are important to you when eating?
- Did you perceive sensory differences to conventional food when eating organic food?
- In which occasions do you prefer organic or conventional products because of their sensory properties?
- Imagine the sensory experience of organic food. What kind of images come to your mind?
- Do you expect organic products to taste similarly to conventional products, or differently?
- Do you remember situations where your buying decision was influenced by sensory information and how?

Data analysis was conducted by using a qualitative content analysis carried out in six steps:

- *Recording*: All focus group interviews were recorded by tape and video recorders in order to provide a basis for transcribing the discussions.
- *Transcription*: Focus group discussions were transcribed by Italian and German researchers. Nonverbal communication was not considered in the transcription process.
- *Coding*: Focus group discussions were coded by each partner. This enabled the discussion to be structured into different themes.
- *Group specific theme analysis*: After coding, an analysis of the specific issues that arose in each focus group was conducted by each partner.
- *Comprehensive theme analysis*: The issue-related results of each focus group interview were compared in each case study country in order to identify differences and similarities between the different groups of occasional and regular buyers of organic food.
- *Cross country analysis*: In a last step, the results of the case study countries were compared in order to summarise the results and to identify differences and similarities between countries and groups.

3 Results

In this section, a summary of the results of focus group discussions is presented. In order to support some considerations, in some cases consumers' statements (or parts of them) are integrally cited in the text, together with the reference to consumers' country of origin (Germany = DE; Italy = IT) and frequency of organic food consumption (light users = L; heavy users = H).

a. *Evaluation of sensory properties and involved senses*

As a first step, consumers were asked to define which senses are relevant for them when eating, in order to judge food. While taste is the most frequently mentioned sensory category, it is interesting to observe that for Italian consumers odour has the same relevance as taste, while for German consumers it is slightly less relevant. Appearance is in general linked to taste by consumers when talking about relevant sensory categories, but especially for German consumers this sense can lead to opposite evaluations of food (bad quality vs. good quality) and in some cases it is excluded when judging organic food. As for additional senses involved in the evaluation of organic food, both German and Italian consumers mentioned "sound".

b. *Symbolic meanings and associations that participants relate to sensory characteristics of organic food*

When asked about symbols and associations related to sensory properties of organic food, both German and Italian consumers described images connected with production methods and nature. Organic food is associated with the idea of peasant, traditional farming, and small farms, which are seen as expression of a natural way of farming (e.g. Tuscany landscapes in Italy) and with former times memories by both German and Italian consumers. It is interesting to note that for Italian consumers, organic food is also connected with personal feelings, such as increase of personal well-being, "rest for the spirit" and no stress situations.

Taking into consideration specific sensory aspects (taste, odour, appearance, etc.) and the related images and symbols, taste appeared to be the easiest sense to connect with associations and images. by consumers it was linked with traditional farming of the grandparents and childhood memories ("*taste of products as it used to be*", DE). Product memories are extremely relevant for consumers, because they represent a sort of personal sensory quality standard to which all their sensory experiences when eating food are compared. Also appearance of unprocessed organic products was mentioned in association with symbols. In particular, German consumers provided positive comments on organic fruits and vegetables' general visual aspect ("*general different appearance*", DE.H; "*different in size and varied*", DE.H; "*should look fresh and natural*", DE.H) and colours ("*ideal world colours*", DE.H; "*bright colours*", "*intense colours*", DE.H; "*light and friendly colours*", DE.H); a slightly negative image arose when German consumers associated unprocessed organic produce with taste and odour ("*always a bit earthy*", DE.H; "*not so intense, rather washed out smell*", DE.L).

c. *Experiences, expectations and preferences for specific sensory properties of organic food*

It was difficult for consumers to focus on their experiences about sensory properties of organic food, because in general they could hardly differentiate between real experience and expectations as well as to make a clear distinction between organic and conventional food. Moreover, in some cases especially in Germany, consumers faced difficulties in giving their contribution to the discussions due to little experience with organic food or with conventional food; some German consumers declared also to pay not too much attention to sensory features of organic food because they have minor relevance. Italian consumers, who seemed a bit more conscious about sensory perceptions and more used to express their sensory experiences, revealed their difficulties in perceiving sensory differences between organic and conventional products when food is

processed, while they affirmed that a difference (if existing) can be better perceived when products are unprocessed:

“[...] basically, I see the difference. I appreciate the difference more in the fresh products. This difference is quite clear”. (IT.H)

Going more in depth and exploring consumers' expectations and experiences towards organic food, it emerged that authenticity is what both Italian and German consumers would like to find in organic products' taste, which should be also more intense and natural. Tasting experiences with organic food (especially with fruits and vegetables) were described by consumers (both Italian and German) by using positive attributes (organic taste as “different”, “stronger”, “more intense”, “authentic”, “natural”, “less watery”). Nevertheless, both in Germany and Italy especially light users tended to mention also negative quality parameters when talking about sensory performance of organic food (e.g. shorter shelf life, DE; visible quality defects, DE). This is maybe explained by the fact that light users are more used to conventional products and compare organic food sensory performance with the conventional counterpart.

Considering the appearance of organic food, consumers affirmed that organic products are generally more heterogeneous and less perfect. However, especially German consumers remarked that these features are used as quality indicators and organic products detectors. Both Italian and German consumers showed to pay attention to organic products' texture and colour performance, the latter being mentioned only by heavy users in both countries. When discussing about sensory experiences, Italian consumers appeared to be more able to provide information on their sensory experiences, using much more sensory characteristics to describe food. This attitude, anyway, differed according to consumers' age: older consumers seemed to pay more attention to sensory and safety attributes of food, while younger participants appeared to be more concerned about environmentally friendly methods, animal welfare, avoidance of dangerous inputs in food production.

d. Non-sensory attributes and their relevance as a buying motive

As already remarked by literature, sensory aspects of organic food, even though playing an important role, are not the main purchase driver, especially for heavy users who are more concerned about other issues (e.g. environment-friendly production methods, animal welfare, ethics etc.), which meet their personal values. In particular, German heavy users appeared to be positively influenced by variety of products, manufacturing processes and the ingredients of organic food:

“[...] I don't eat and buy organic products because their taste differs from conventional products, but because of the production processes on which they are based, i.e. the ingredients, the chemistry, etc.”. (DE.H)

This explains why German heavy users faced difficulties in concentrating on sensory aspects of organic food during focus groups discussions. In Germany, light users also seemed to be influenced in their buying decisions by other factors, such as price, production methods and avoidance of dangerous inputs. Moreover, negative sensory performance of organic products seem to have influence on light users' purchase behaviour, which appears to be in general more pragmatic.

e. *Consumers' sensory expectations and preferences related to variability and standardization of organic food*

Italian participants faced difficulties in interpreting the concept of variability/standardization in the right way, since they linked the concept of standardization only with conventional products while organic food was associated with the concept of variability.

The discussions were run in two directions. How much and in which ways sensory aspects of organic food should differ from conventional food was discussed first. Generally, participants agreed upon the fact that organic food should not be standardized and should differ from conventional in terms of variability and sensory aspects. Hence, the variability of organic products was perceived as important:

"[...] for me it is not acceptable that organic food would be similar to conventional food in terms of sensory attributes". (IT.H)

"They shouldn't have to be or do anything. They should be exactly as they are. And because of this, they probably taste different to conventional." (DE.H)

German and Italian participants referred that organic products should have "strong innate taste" of organic products differing from conventional food. Participants therefore expected organic products to taste "authentic", "natural" have a "more intense taste", "exalt basic ingredients" and "have a particular identity". The lower level of some ingredients/components (e.g. sugar, salt, fats) was mentioned as typical of organic food and responsible for the difference between some organic products and their conventional counterparts in terms of sensory performances. Nonetheless organic products are equally appreciated because they are perceived as more natural and pleasant.

Also appearance and texture of organic food were compared to conventional ones by consumers. As for taste, the shape also should not only differ from conventional products, but was even expected to differ among organic products (IT.L).

"[...] the shape of organic food does not have to be standard. It has to be natural and each food must have different shapes, because it has to depend on the nature." (IT.L)

In the context of appearance of organic products, German light users mentioned that the colour of organic products differs in some cases from equivalent conventional ones. A certain appearance was not only desired for products, but also for the way the products are presented at the point of sale. Italian light users noticed differences in this regard depending on the type of retail, especially in the presentation of products. Some participants preferred to buy in specialized organic food stores, where organic food was presented in the way participants are reminded of the "naturalness" and "simplicity" of food.

"[...] presented with small quantities of soil [...] it is dirty [...] I prefer such shops rather than big retailers, as Conad, where organic products are clean, better packaged [...] well presented as conventional food." (IT.L)

On the other hand, other participants preferred to buy organic products in retail stores, where organic food is presented similarly to conventional food.

"[...] instead, I would not like the organic food dirty with soil. I do not want it!" (IT.L)

Different sensory attributes between organic and conventional products were not always desired by the participants. One heavy user in Italy and one in Germany stressed, for example, that organic food ought to imitate conventional products. According to these participants, the consumer needs time to adapt to the new taste especially when a new product is launched.

“[...] at the beginning, a new organic product should be similar to conventional product, because the consumer has to be accustomed to the new product. So, if it will be different from conventional products, consumers may not recognize it and may reject it.” (IT.H)

With regard to the specific taste of “semi-luxury food” (e.g. tea, chocolate, crisps, wine) it was reported that conventional products of this category taste better than organic ones. Some consumers noted that for certain products there are no organic equivalents to conventional brands on offer, or that no comparison with organic products can be made, due to “familiarity” with the conventional brands or to consolidated “habits”. In this case, a suggestion arose that organic semi-luxury food should imitate the sensory attributes of the conventional benchmark.

Discussion on standardization vs. variability was further delved in by asking consumers if sensory aspects of organic food should or should not be standardised in the way of many conventional food products. Participants perceived sensory attributes of basic ingredients to be the result of organic production and preservation techniques and due to shorter supply chains and sales in season. Italian consumers stated that organic products should not be standardized and should differ among them.

In Germany, the discussion differed significantly between heavy and light users. Whereas light users tried to talk about this topic based on examples and concrete products, heavy users discussed the question in a more general way. Furthermore, they did not discuss this topic with the same intensity as the light users because for them it seemed to be very clear that organic products do not need to have the level of standardisation that is typical for conventional food products.

f. Consumers’ expectations on sensory food marketing

Participants in the focus groups were asked to express their experiences and expectations concerning sensory marketing. Participants faced difficulties in giving related answers as they mainly referred to expectations about sensory information, rather than to experiences.

Generally, participants tended to reflect on various claims found on a food package label.

They referred to several reasons why in their opinion sensory information is, or might be, useful. Sensory information can be helpful for people who are buying organic products for the first time. Furthermore, it could be associated with information on processing techniques and ingredients, in order to let consumers be aware about sensory performance of food (e.g.: particular taste due to the use of natural/non natural additives, or possible modification of sensory characteristics over time): .

“[...] there are for instance organic potato chips which are claimed ‘Without flavour enhancer’. [...]That might in fact an interesting experience to eat potato chips without glutamate” (DE:H)

“[...] to report on the label the sentence ‘The product will modify its smell and aroma over time’ would increase my trust in the organic food.” (IT.L)

Italian and German participants expressed particular preferences and expectations towards sensory information that should be reported on the label (e.g. indication of the levels of acidity, types of odours, levels of firmness and texture). In addition, for the Italian participants it appears that colours, images, symbols, keywords, sound/noises, the material of the label could be associated with certain sensory attributes and may increase the probability of purchase. Participants therefore mainly focused on suggestions and possible ways to increase consumer trust through specific information on labels. The colour of a label was mentioned as a valuable sensory attribute for Italian consumers which could help to associate certain food qualities, together with images of nature or people represented on packaging labels:

"[...] in my opinion the colour of the label is very important. A colour could be, for instance, associated with a particular odour. For example, a warm colour, such as orange, gives me the idea that a product has a high quality and that it is organic! On the other hand, cold colours, such as for instance pale blue or green, may suggest the presence of additives or preservatives in food." (IT.L)

"[...] a picture of a grass lawn where adults and kids are walking in between trees, or a dad and a mum with kids who walk in the nature or a mum with her kid harvesting peaches or apples." (IT.L)

Italian participants believed that messages promising certain sensory attributes may attract consumers.

"[...] the proof of natural odour. An example of advertising is: 'if you (consumer) purchase this organic product you will discover the true taste of this food.'" (IT.L)

Sounds/Noises of organic agriculture could be used as a marketing instrument at supermarkets. Italian participants believed that this may increase consumers' trust.

"[...] it is important to highlight that organic food is produced by nature. Maybe to reproduce the sounds, for instance, of the soil ploughed by a tractor it could increase the consumer trust." (IT.L)

In Germany, only one of the participants mentioned a similar opinion when discussing important sensory information presented on the packaging of products.

Italian consumers finally suggested that sensory information should be very immediate and simple messaging.

"[...] retailers should promote their products in a very immediate and simple way. For instance, "biscuits more crispy and full-flavoured." (IT.H)

In Germany participants appreciated information about the impact of storage on sensory quality of products.

"[...] in case of apples I would appreciate if they would be claimed to be suitable for storage." (DE.L)

These statements show that both subjective and non-subjective marketing information are appreciated by Italian participants and both styles of information are believed to enhance consumer trust in organic products. By contrast German results indicate a preference for non-subjective marketing information, which is foremost seen as a suitable tool to overcome consumers' inhibitions with regard to sensory quality of organic products

g. Consumers that did not appreciate sensory marketing

The majority of German participants did not see much point in sensory marketing, and stated that they found information such as nutritional content, origin and ingredients more valuable and more relevant for purchase decisions. Furthermore, most of German interviewees didn't consider sensory information to be necessary and are of the opinion that other aspects are more relevant and should be stressed by marketing activities.

"[...] I also have to mention that I don't attach great importance to something like that except for wine, because I read the list of ingredients that is printed on packaging." (DE.L)

On the other hand, Italian consumers argued that habits seemed to have a strong influence on consumers' choices. Some Italian participants also highly disapproved sensory marketing and indicated that promotional information does not have an influence on their buying decision.

"[...] advertisement does not influence me really much! Maybe because I have been vegetarian for ten years. I tried various types of nutrition. I disapprove of all these promotion activities, advertising, marketing [...]. If I really like a product, I buy and taste it! I do not need advertising! I am not attracted by new products."(IT.L)

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

The main objective of this paper was to investigate sensory experiences, expectations and perceptions of German and Italian organic consumers when purchasing and eating organic food. Given the qualitative nature of the research, the results cannot be generalized to all Italian and German organic consumers. However, some interesting findings could be highlighted and used as input for further research.

Concerning consumers' awareness of relevant senses when eating or drinking, results show for both Italy and Germany that taste and odour are the most important ones, whereas other sensory features are not in the core of their sensory perception. That shows that all in all, at least at a cognitive level, the ability to differentiate between various categories of sensory perception is characterized by a low level of development. For a sensory-based marketing of organic products this result leads to a limited set of possibilities when trying to reach consumers by affecting their senses.

With regard to symbolic meanings and associations that participants relate to sensory characteristics of organic food products, basically Italian and German consumers seem to have a similar general image of organic products. In this context, positive associations with nature, a romantic concept of living in the countryside, which is oftentimes linked with pleasant personal experiences and memories are mentioned. For actors of the organic food sector, this result offers a promising opportunity to link the presentation of sensory product quality with the mentioned symbolic characteristics and associations.

Furthermore, results underline the already mentioned difficulties consumers have when discussing about their sensory perceptions. Especially for German consumers, talking with peers about different sensory experiences and expectations could be identified as a challenging task. Nevertheless, given some assistance in finding an adequate description, participants in Italy and Germany were able to mention several aspects such as intensity, naturalness and authenticity that they consider to be important when it comes to the sensory properties of organic products.. This finding suggests that sensory perception is a learnable ability which offers an opportunity for the actors of the organic food market to bring their customers closer to their products by a corresponding training of consumers' sensory abilities.

Another interesting finding being discussed within this paper is that basically the organic consumers we interviewed do not consider taste as the main reason for buying organic products. However, the importance that is ascribed to sensory aspects may differ depending on the organic consumption intensity and other food and lifestyle related variables of a certain consumer. Against this background further research is needed to enable actors of the organic food supply chain to get an overview about the target group-specific needs for a sensory-based marketing concept. In this context, the quantitative consumer survey that has also been conducted in the framework of the ECROPOLIS project offers a promising approach (Obermowe et al. 2011). Confronted with the question if sensory properties of organic products should be rather standardized or variable, consumers oftentimes linked organic products with the concept of variability, whereas especially Italian consumers mentioned standardization as a typical characteristic of conventional

counterparts. However, depending on the product and the respective customer group, in some cases more standardized sensory properties of organic products are seen as an advantage and especially preferred by light users in both countries. This finding suggests that a successful positioning of organic products within the food market may depend on the product group, the existence of strong competitors that are formative for a certain product standard as well as the sensory experiences and expectations of the targeted customer group. In this area, further research is needed in order to enable organic actors to judge the relevant aspects when trying to market a product on a certain market.

In both countries, one part of the organic consumers seem to appreciate sensory marketing activities whereas another part apparently does not. For consumers who appreciate sensory marketing, non-subjective as well as subjective marketing information is considered to be suitable, whereas in Germany non-subjective aspects seem to be predominant. For marketing of organic products this finding suggests that for the Italian organic market a combined strategy that integrates a striking presentation of sensory aspects as well as objective information about product quality and its impact on sensory quality maybe could be a valuable marketing strategy for organic operators. Instead, for Germany only objective information about product quality and its impact on sensory quality seems to be necessary for sensory marketing. Due to this situation, further research may be useful in order to detect the right marketing tools that are able to support a sensory-based strategy of product presentation and positioning. For the residual group identified in both countries that does not evaluate sensory marketing as a useful tool, it seems to be probable that they cannot be effectively affected by addressing their senses but by using other than sensory aspects within a holistic marketing concept for organic products.

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