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Dr. Luis Guerrero is responsible for the laboratory of sensory analysis at IRTA (Institute for Food Research and Technology, Catalonia, Spain) since 1989. He has focused his research activity in the standardization of sensory analysis, methodological aspects, statistical analysis and measurement of consumer behaviour in food related issues. In the last years he has been involved in different activities and projects linked to consumer perception of traditional food products and the application of innovations in the traditional food sector. He was also involved in the TRUEFOOD project (6th FP) as responsible for the qualitative activities performed, especially those related to the cross-cultural perception of the concepts "Traditional Food" and "Food Innovation".

INNOVATIONS IN TRADITIONAL FOOD PRODUCTS: ARE THEY FEASIBLE?

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Abstract

Traditional food products (TFP) are an important part of European culture, identity, and heritage. However, producers of TFP still face the challenge to further improve their products by means of different innovations, which will enable them to maintain and expand their market share in a highly competitive global food market. The actual uncertainty is knowing the effect of such innovations on the perceived traditional character and image of these products, which could have a negative impact on their main competitive advantage.

The present research explores the consumer-driven definition for the concept of “traditional food products” and “innovations in TFP by means of different qualitative techniques. In addition, some innovations in TFP are tested regarding consumer expectations and willingness to pay.

The concept of “Traditional” in a food context is made up of ten main dimensions: sensory, health, elaboration, heritage, variety, habit, origin, simplicity, special occasions and marketing. Five dimensions emerged around the concept of innovation: novelty-change, variety, processing-technology, origin-ethnicity and convenience. A manifest incompatibility between the two concepts, “Traditional” and “Innovation” was detected. When innovations are applied to TFP their degree of acceptance is strongly dependent on the product and on the type of innovation. In general, innovations that provide consumers with tangible and relevant benefits without producing substantial changes in the product are well accepted in TFP. However, and although they may be accepted, in some cases these innovations may damage the traditional character of the product.



This study, although qualitative in nature, provides a new and useful perspective on consumer's definition of traditional food products and innovation and touches on some of the possibilities in applying different innovations in TFP. The information obtained from this study may support small-to-medium enterprises in certain decisions regarding communication about TFP and when to adopt of food innovations in their TFP.