

Everyday food practices: GI products, sustainable consumption and health

Amilien Virginie*¹ and Gun Roos¹, Beatrice Biasini², Matthieu Duboys de Labarre³, Barbara Tocco⁴ and Aaron Torok⁵

¹ Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway, ² University of Parma, Italy³ CESAER UMR1041, INRAE, Institut Agro, Université Bourgogne Franche-Comté, ⁴ National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE), Newcastle University, UK and ⁵ Corvinus University of Budapest
are accessible, affordable, safe and equitable; and are culturally acceptable" (FAO-WHO, 2019)

Keywords – GI, consumption, health, food culture, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Geographical indications and healthy food might sound contradictory for some people, as consuming traditional food does not necessarily fulfill the dietary guidelines. The potential for GIs to contribute to a healthier diet was however highlighted at a recent FAO seminar, with academic consensus from different scientific backgrounds (FAO, 2021). Furthermore, some nutritionists focusing on gut functions and how to improve intestinal flora, give advice to cook from scratch and use organic food and GIs products they consider better than conventional ones thanks to their potential bio-active compounds and often a lower presence of potentially harmful pesticide residues.

The main objective in this paper is to share insights from fieldwork on everyday eating practices and food consumption and reflect upon the way GIs and quality food labelling can potentially contribute to healthier foodways or if products with these labels are perceived as having better nutritional values than standard food products. We offer some background and main concepts before we take a closer look at GIs and traditional food in everyday eating with focus on qualitative consumer research. We present some results from the Strength2Food (S2F) project and consider the potential of GIs for promoting a healthier and more balanced diet.

Before reporting what consumers - who were informants in the project - think, or not, about the link between GIs and health, an introduction about a healthy food, its meaning, general understanding and the ongoing strategies from stakeholders is provided.

CONCEPTS AND CONTEXTUALISATION

The *Farm to Fork strategy* aims "to empower consumers to make informed, healthy and sustainable food choices" and the Commission proposes mandatory front-of-pack (FOP) nutrition labelling. (European Commission 2020). But what do we mean by "healthy and sustainable food choices"?

Following the definition of Sustainable Healthy Diets by FAO-WHO, it concerns dietary patterns that promote all dimensions of individuals' health and wellbeing. It is worth noting that it does not only mean eating well, i.e., having a balanced and diversified diet preventing all forms of malnutrition, but it undergoes a holistic perspective of physical, mental, and social wellbeing, where present and future people have the possibility to take care of their own bodies and mental health by moving regularly, avoiding stress etc.; it also includes what we can call sustainable consumption, expressed through those words "dietary patterns that have low environmental pressure and impact;

A closer look at all dimensions of *individuals' health and wellbeing and sustainable consumption* through the prism of consumer practices can be very enriching. We propose here to understand healthy choices through the gaze of consumer practices, meaning that we do not only take attitudes and perceptions into consideration, but practices and words in situation. In other words, we refer to what our informants say about health or sustainability (a word they rarely use, although many of the practices are stimulated by what we would call a sustainable dietary behaviour). Health is not so often an attribute of literature on GI products. Nevertheless, according to Feldmann and Hamm (2015), the expected or perceived superior quality of such products is frequently linked to freshness, healthiness, and wholesomeness. Consumers also expressed greater trust in local food products, as local food are perceived as safer and easier to trace back. More altruistic attitudes towards local food deal with support of the local economy as well as environmental friendliness of the production and transportation processes. However, a growing number of life cycle assessment studies have shown that local or domestic production does not necessarily have advantages over imports from an environmental point of view (Nemecek et al., 2016). Schmitt et al. (2017) found that the strength of local products was mainly in health and socio-economic dimensions, especially in the link with the territory such as biodiversity, animal welfare, governance or resilience.

METHOD

To be able to better understand the use or non-use of GIs and other Food Quality Schemes as local or organic food, we had an ethnographic approach based on observation and direct participation in everyday life/food practices. In addition, semi-structured interviews, dialogic conversation with households and desk research were used. Ethnographic observations of the use of GIs, FQS, local and organic food were performed in six families in seven EU countries. Each household was visited three times during different seasons. The researchers gathered data on household food practices to shed light on the participants' interest for and use of FQS. Fieldwork implied participant observation in planning, purchasing and using/cooking/eating practices together with the household.

MAJOR FINDINGS

One of the major findings is that GIs products are not a visible part of everyday food practices. They are mostly important in special occasions, where health is not a central issue. Many informants showed a great interest in health, quoting organic or trust to the producer, but without any special recognition of GIs as healthier. For example **Organic food** was often associated to health, environmental and/or social aspects. For some participants, the health benefits associated

with the absence of pesticides was a main reason for buying organic food:

"I think it grows with less pesticides, or without. Then I think it's healthier somehow and you don't have to wash it so much." (Germany)

"To me the most important thing is that the food is not sprayed [...] I do not want to expose my children to chemicals." (Norway)

"According to me organic products are more controlled; less chemical products are used during the cultivation" (Italy)

The avoidance of antibiotics and GMO were other important health-related benefits associated with organic production, as mentioned by some participants, but not while speaking of GIs. In the case of Italy, where no specific national organic label exists on the market, participants are generally aware of the EU-leaf label. Due to the superficial knowledge of what organic means, most consumers generally associate this to healthier than conventional products:

"Usually, if I see the green label, I play it safe...if I don't know the producers, that label can make the difference" (Italy).

Moreover, the scale of production and social issues, also relevant for many GIS, were also discussed when talking about organic food. For example, the difference between artisanal and industrial production, as well as better animal welfare conditions were specifically mentioned. Both health and global environmental concerns came up when discussing organic food:

"- Yes, healthier. It is more a matter of... being better for health. Yes, the impact on the planet, yes, it is not... - Not necessarily in relation to ourselves." (France, H3)

Buying organic food comes with a feeling of doing the "right thing" for health, while buying GIs was more linked to supporting producers or traditional culture.

Our fieldwork underlined the importance of **trust** for local food products and quality food. Close relationship between people and food and between consumers and producers is central for the appreciation of the product as well as a pillar for trusting GIs. When used and known, GIs are products consumers feel at ease with, and can awake "Emotional Practices" (Pétursson, 2018). Although several informants underline that GIs are small scale production, and therefore can have a healthier value, we have to underline that GIs are not necessarily produced on a small scale. But regarding small scale products, GIs can emphasize the intimacy between local place and local people who can meet, while for large scale products a similar relationship can be expressed but at a virtual level – hyperreal – (Amilien et al., 2007).

THE CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF HEALTH

One of the most important issue in observing GIs in food practices in different EU countries, was that the consumers do not have nor the same reference to health, neither the same expectations, depending on the cultural frame. The same raw milk cheese can inspire either love or fear. Therefore, how to speak of health and GIs through a regular logo shared by all European countries or worldwide is challenging.

Nevertheless, advised consumers, who were well informed about food quality schemes and health diet, often had the same approach of healthy food wherever they lived. So we found similar logics according to social position (committed consumers) that can be as strong as, or stronger than, cultural differences.

CONCLUSION

Our informants showed a great interest in health but no special recognition of GIs as healthier. However, generally, GIs are not a visible part of everyday food practices. On the one hand, the close relationship with producers and products are central for the appreciation of the product and for trust. On the other hand focus on pesticides and chemicals in food products was common and organic food items were generally perceived as healthy/ier options, while not much recognition of GIs as better in this field was observed. Although we found that the perception of health is both linked to a cultural culinary grammar and similarities linked to social position (a global health culture), we need to acknowledge differences from culture to culture (as well as from product to product) and self perception and emphasize the weight of the cultural adaptation work (Hegnes, 2012). Before communicating on a potential healthier value of GIs, there is obviously a necessity to (re)define, or adjust, concepts of "health" / "healthier diet" in a quality frame.

We see a further need for dedicated human intervention studies specifically investigating the effect of GIs on health are needed to prove such relationship, and for to exploring how cultural references may have impact on consumer behavior and see how this could be a mechanism to encourage healthy diets (or not).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The work has been carried out as part of the S2F project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. We would like to thank all other partners for their enthusiasm and serious participation in fieldwork: V. Haugrønning; P. Wavresky; K. Meyer and J. Simons; P. Csillag; M. La Spina, F. Arfini and D. Menozzi; J. Filipovic, G. Ognjanov, S. Veljkovic and V. Kuc.

REFERENCES

- Amilien, V., Fort, F., Ferras, N., 2007. Hyper-real territories and urban markets. Changing conventions for local food - case studies from France and Norway. *Anthropology of Food*, 12.
- European Commission, G.D., 2020. Farm to Fork strategy - For a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system. European Union, European Union.
- FAO, 2021. The nutrition and health potential of geographical indication foods. FAO.
- Feldmann, C., Hamm, U., 2015. Consumers' perceptions and preferences for local food: A review. *Food quality and preference* **40**, 152-164.
- Hegnes, A.W., 2012. Introducing and practicing PDO and PGI in Norway. *Anthropology of Food*. Available online at <http://aof.revues.org/7210>.
- Nemecek, T., Jungbluth, N., i Canals, L.M., Schenck, R., 2016. Environmental impacts of food consumption and nutrition: where are we and what is next? *The International Journal of Life Cycle Assessment* **21**, 607-620.
- Pétursson, J.P., 2018. Organic intimacy: emotional practices at an organic store. *Agriculture and Human Values* **35**, 581-594.
- Schmitt, E., Galli, F., Menozzi, D., Maye, D., Touzard, J.-M., Marescotti, A., Six, J., Brunori, G., 2017. Comparing the sustainability of local and global food products in Europe. *Journal of Cleaner Production* **165**, 346-359.