

Finnish consumer's awareness of European Union food quality labels and labels of origin

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Abstract – The European Commission has adopted as a part of its policy on food quality, a scheme program for agricultural food products, wines, and alcoholic beverages. The products, which link the quality to geographical origin and tradition, can also act as drivers for sustainable value chains and territorial development. They also function as quality cues for consumers. As quality system labels are consumer labels, there are grounds to know to what extent consumers are aware of the existence of these labels and understand their meaning.

The aim of the study was to find out the consumer's awareness of the EU food quality labels in Finland. The study was conducted as a face-to-face consumer survey (N=1004). The consumers were given a recognition task to identify three EU quality scheme labels, two national labels of origin, an EU organic label and an invented label of origin as a control. The perception of the national labels and the EU organic label was significantly better than that of the EU quality labels and even the invented "fake" label was better recognized.

Keywords – geographical indication, quality labels, quality schemes, food, tradition

INTRODUCTION

The European Commission has adopted, as a part of its policy on food quality, a scheme program for agricultural food products, wines, and alcoholic beverages. These designations function as quality cues to help consumers in their decision-making. The European Union (EU) quality framework consists of three different labels. Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) refers to products, which are produced, processed, and prepared in a defined geographical area, and the quality of which is essentially due to the geographical environment. Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) protects regional products that have a specific quality, reputation, or other characteristics attributable to that area. Traditional Specialities Guaranteed (TSG) emphasizes the traditional composition and mode of production of products.

So far, the knowledge about the geographical indications in a non-Mediterranean context has been limited and there is a clear difference between northern and southern Europe (Becker, 2009; Teuber, 2011). According to Slade et al. (2019), the effect of GI recognition depends on the terminology used and the information provided for consumers. The typical message for consumers in northern Europe is focused on quality assurance schemes and

organic production, whereas a "terroir" type of message is stressed in southern Europe (Becker, 2009). Finland belongs to the northern cluster, and the number of applications for the EU quality scheme has been modest. Now Finland has 10 agricultural products and foodstuff and two spirits registered when the total number of registered products is over 3500 (eAmbrosia, 2022).

The aim of the study is to find out the consumer's awareness of the EU food quality labels in Finland for the first time to this extent. Two national labels of origin and an EU organic label were included in this study as well. A 'fake' label of origin was used as a control.

METHODS

The study was conducted as a face-to-face consumer survey (N=1004) by a market research company. The Finnish consumers were given a recognition task to identify three EU quality scheme labels, two national labels of origin and an EU organic label. Additionally, one invented "fake" label of origin was presented as a control label.

The answers of the respondents were weighted to correspond to the whole population of Finland according to gender, age, profession, the situation in life, education, primary responsibility for the food purchases, the place of the purchase, region, province, mobile phone use, the size of the household and according to the gross incomes of the household.

The interviews were conducted by 45 interviewers in 82 localities of which 54 were towns and 28 other municipalities. The sample has been weighted to correspond to the target group. The weighted number N corresponds to Finland's 15-79-year-old population as thousands (OSF, 2016).

Statistically significant differences in the perceptions of the labels of origin with different background in terms of potential factors influencing the awareness of labels were identified by using a t-test and a one-way ANOVA. Only statistically significant results were reported.

RESULTS

The home regions of the respondents (N=1004) were the Helsinki metropolitan area (33%), Southern Finland (17%), Western Finland (21%) and Northern/Eastern Finland (32%). The number of females was 55% and males 45%.

The results of the study showed that the perception of the national labels of origin and the EU organic label was significantly ($p > 0.05$) better than

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that of the EU quality labels. Even the invented fake label was better recognized (Table 1.).

Table 1. The Finnish consumer's awareness of the labels of origin (N=1004).

Label	Label recognized, %
Produced in Finland (national label)	94
EU Organic label	62
The best in the province (national label)	36
Fake label	16
TSG	9
PGI	7
PDO	6

The study was conducted as a face-to-face survey. This type of sampling procedure eliminated the opportunity for the respondents to search for the "right" answers. Hence, it can be stated that the results show authentic awareness and recognition of the labels of origin. Also, the study showed that many PDO/PGI/TSG protected brand names were better known in Finland than the EU quality scheme itself.

DISCUSSION

The EU labels PDO, PGI and TSG clearly fail to communicate and signal the origin of the food to the Finnish consumers compared with the other labels.

According to the literature (Aprile et al., 2012; Verbeke et al., 2012; Grunert and Achmann, 2016; Likoudis et al., 2016) the general level of awareness of the EU quality labels seems to be low, and e.g. the EU organic label is better recognized or even considered similar to PDO or PGI (Likoudis et al., 2016). The cross-sectional survey conducted in six European countries by Verbeke et al (2012) showed a higher awareness of PDO (68%) compared to PGI (36,4%) and TSG (25,2%). Hence, the results of this study reflect quite a typical phenomenon.

The results seem to follow another typical pattern, which is the difference in the awareness of these labels between consumers in Northern Europe and Southern Europe due to e.g. a different policy approach (Becker, 2009; Teuber, 2011; Verbeke et al., 2012). However, the Finnish consumers show willingness to be aware of the origin of food because even the fake label of origin was better recognized than PDOs, PGIs and TSGs.

Kizos et al. (2017) found out that cases where the designation process of the product had been successful and the meaning of the label was well communicated to consumers, the self-governance for horizontal and vertical collaboration among the stakeholders was essential and created "a collective ownership of the product and its reputation". So, in order to make these labels visible to consumers, it takes the whole food chain to play the same game.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the study was to find out the consumer's awareness of the EU food quality labels in Finland. The results of the study showed that the perception of the national labels and the EU organic label was

significantly better than that of the EU quality labels. However, willingness to be aware of the origin of the food product existed, because even the fake label of origin was better recognized than PDOs, PGIs and TSGs. More research is needed concerning the impact of targeted promotion campaigns in non-Mediterranean areas, and the impact of the increase of the penetration of the PDO, PGI and TSG on the market.

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