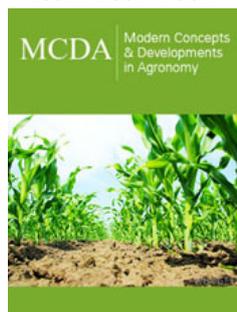


Traditional Foods in Europe: Perceptions & Prospects in the New Business Era

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Abstract

Traditional Foods (T.F) in Europe constitute a minor part of the food chain, with the production and consumption remaining within certain territories. They are healthy, unique innovative products, attractive to the end consumer. COVID-19 will have an impact on the whole process from the field to the consumer concerning issues such as food safety, food security bioactive ingredients, production, processing, distribution. The current article explores the potentials of T.F in the economic era after the pandemic crisis. T.F have the opportunity to grow and expand beyond their local areas in Europe, becoming major part of the food chain for the benefit of regional producers and communities.

Keywords: Pandemic; COVID-19; Traditional foods; Food chains; Agriculture

The European Food & Drink Industry

The European (EU-28) food and drink industry with an annual turnover of €1,1 trillion and €230 billion in value added in 2018, is the largest manufacturing industry in the EU [1]. In half of the EU's 28 Member States, the food and drink industry are the biggest employer within manufacturing employing 4,57 million people. In 2017, extra-EU exports reached €110 billion, with a trade surplus of €35 billion. The household expenditures, the second largest in EU, is in food and drink products reaching 13,8%. The industry includes 294,000 Food and Drink companies operating in the EU-28, with 99,1% of them SMEs, employing 4.57 million people. The European food companies are mostly micro companies by 80%, employing nine people or less. SMEs are limited in their means allocated to market research and to research and development [2].

Europe cannot be regarded as a homogenous food culture. Noticeable differences exist not only at a national level but also at a more regional/local level in terms of food preferences, habits, food related behavior, and attitudes [3]. The existence of cultural variations in food choices throughout Europe has been demonstrated at different levels: the composition of protein diets [4], importance of food risk communication strategies [5], attitudes to food, nutrition and health [6] or food behavior [3]. This variability is even greater when dealing with Traditional Food Products (TFP) and traditional cuisine that are based mainly on the natural resources available in the area.

Traditional Foods (TF) in Europe

Southern European countries have a more traditional food character due to a greater market share of small companies and a better climate, which supports a more widespread availability of traditional food products [7]. The study of traditional foods provides an important insight into dietary patterns and how they have evolved over time. The fact that inhabitants had to adapt to different or adverse climatic conditions determined their dietary patterns, since people developed specific methods of cultivation, processing as well as preservation in order to ensure their self-sufficiency. In this way, dietary patterns have become an integral part of society's collective identity [8]. Traditional foods reflect cultural heritage, history, customs, way of life and even religion, representing key elements of dietary patterns in different countries and thus they are important for accurate calculation of dietary intake of population [9]. They have played a historically important role in traditions of different

cultures and regions contributing to their sense of identity and pride [10]. The European Commission gave the following definition of “traditional” related to foods in 2006: “*Traditional means proven usage in the community market for a time period showing transmission between generations; this time period should be the one generally ascribed as one human generation, at least 25 years*” [11]. Apart from the commercial interests, the definition of the term “traditional” is an important issue addressed through the European Food Information Resource (FIR) FP6 Network of excellence [12]. This is an elaborative definition, which includes statements about traditional ingredients, traditional composition, and traditional type of production and/or processing [9]. In Europe, the only formal definition found for traditional food products comes from the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, that defines TFP as “*Agrifood products whose methods of processing, storage and ripening are consolidated with time according to uniform and constant local use*” [13]. Although these definitions try to capture the different dimensions of the concept of traditional food products, there is still one perspective that is still missing, namely a definition of this concept seen from the consumer’s point of view.

The European Union in order to promote and protect names and quality of TFP defined three schemes of geographical indications and traditional specialties. As early as 1992 [14], the European Union laid down specific rules defining the status under which products are designated as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Traditionally Specific Guaranteed (TSG). This encourages the production of unique foods based on their soil, synthetic and sensory characteristics, as well as their preparation methods. This type of food enjoys a higher value, both in the domestic and international market. The above regulations in 2006 were amended to 510/06 and 509/06, respectively shortly after the Euro FIR London Congress [15,16].

The Traditional Products in the Post COVID-19 Era

As traditional food products are highly valued for their authenticity, their main purpose is to maintain a strong link between customers and traditions and the area of origin [17]. Mainly produced by small industries/producers who use old recipes inherited from their ancestors, must deal with large companies that make traditional products industrially, without full compliance with natural ingredients and traditional recipes [18].

Traditional foods have good perspectives to grow in the future, if at least they would succeed in accomplishing challenges. One of the principal challenges identified is *innovation*, which can roughly be defined as improvements in the ways industries produce and commercialize things [19]. People increasingly display a preference for natural entities which have been produced without human intervention in number of domains, especially food, such as TFP [20]. This preference may be associated with the fact that consumers are increasingly averse to risks induced by food innovation resulting from human intervention [21].

In the new economic era, following the end of the pandemic, the rebirth of borders and limitations to the movement of people,

as well as the consequent sharp slowdown in foreign tourism, will favor ethnocentrism (with the preference given to national foods and traditional foods too). Production chains, which have been lengthened as result of globalization, will shorten again. On the other hand, traditional foods will be negatively affected by the lack of foreign tourism. Because of the additional attention to health care issues, the demand for products that threaten the future of the planet will be reduced, which itself would be a benefit to the consumption of traditional foods [22]. In addition, the crisis unfolded by COVID 19 will provide the impetus to change industrial agriculture for a transition towards agroecologically based food systems, including those of traditional foods [23]. The concept of “foodscapes”, which unite local culture, creativity and food will become relevant in highlighting the importance linkages between novelty, authenticity and locality in food experience provided by traditional foods [24]. There will be a clear shift from location of production for T.F. to a wide and more holistic place and destination production process. Overall, the importance of the role and the meaning of T.F. to the regions of Europe are expected to be emphasized among regional stakeholders (farmers, distributors, residents, local politicians etc.) and reinforced by innovative marketing-related actions. However, these views need to be adapted, and promoted by the local, regional, national authorities on a pan-European scale in order to achieve the prospective and the growth of T.F. in the new economic era.

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