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FOOD PREFERENCES IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

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There are competing arguments regarding the impact of globalization on consumer food preferences. These range from a tendency to standardize taste driven by market forces to a demand for broad choice being dictated by consumers' assessments of risk associated with foods. With growing mobility of workers of all kinds, the population in some locations, such as major cities and industrial zones, are becoming more heterogeneous in terms of nationality and culture. This article contributes to the discussion with a focus on the distribution of cuisine preferences within an international community in one of Europe's major cities using data derived from a research project carried out in 1999. The authors suggest that globalization can also lead to the development of a broadened, educated taste for national, regional and specialist products and cuisine that balances the food industry's drive to standardize taste. Agricultura 2: 16-18 (2003)

Key words: globalization of agriculture; household economics; food preferences; trends, standardization of taste

INTRODUCTION

With the growing mobility of workers of all kinds, the populations in some locations, such as Europe's major cities and industrial zones, are becoming more heterogeneous in terms of nationality and culture. The globalization of the "agro-food system", which is mainly driven by strategies of global sourcing and flexible accumulation by transnational companies, standardizes inputs, production technologies, and the outputs of agriculture and the food industries in many product classes (Bonanno et al. 1994). This is supported by an increasing standardization of packaging and quantities as a result of regulation at international and national levels. This development could lead to the assumption that both tastes and diets will become standardized in the global village of the future. This might be especially true for processed, ready-to-heat meals. Many arguments have been made in that direction. For example, North America has been seen as a precursor of changes in Western European food purchasing patterns (Connor 1994). Furthermore, a growing convergence between food consumption patterns in European countries has been found on the basis of statistical analysis of internationally available data (Hermann and Röder 1995).

There are also opposing views. First of all, new social movements are crucial actors that influence strategies of nation states and companies (see Beck's Risk Society: Beck 1992; Buttel 1994), e.g. consumers questioning food safety and driving a tendency towards health food or organic food consumption in the developed nations. Furthermore, as a countervailing pressure to globalization, one can observe worldwide movements working towards a localization or relocalization of food production, empowering local knowledge, local diversity and local production systems that provide specifically regional products (e.g. Van der Ploeg 1992; Vogel 2000). This is particularly furthered by the emergence of local farm cooperatives selling from farmers' own shops in the neighbourhood of the farms or delivering directly to consumer households.

The influence of these developments — either the globalization/standardization process or the localization process — on the development of farming households is a major topic of debate within studies of the economics and sociology of rural development. The way these households will be shaped does not only depend on the growing internationalization of economics and politics, but also on the development of consumers' food preferences related to food safety and health.

This paper expands more specifically on consumers' food and cuisine preferences. The present authors felt it to be of interest to discover whether, in a very broadly international community, any degree of commonality in cuisine preferences could be discovered. This formed part of a more general study which also considered what product classes were felt to be particularly important as part of a supermarket's assortment of wares.

The data presented here derive from a research project carried out in 1999, in close cooperation with the management of a supermarket serving an international community in one of Europe's major cities. This report gives results which the authors believe could be of interest in the discussion relating to the development of food preferences and the resulting debate on future trends in the food production sector.

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MATERIAL AND METHODS

A postal survey of members of an international consumer group registered at their local supermarket was undertaken. Individually addressed questionnaires were sent to all listed customers, a total of over 5500 individuals or families. Response rate was a useful 36.9%. 126 nationalities were represented, with local inhabitants representing around 23.9% of the total.

Respondents were grouped by specific customer subsets, and these were then used for comparative analyses, i.e. the responses to the various questions were checked to see if important differences in food preferences could be recognised within the subsets. The subsets used included socioeconomic status, nationality and number in household.

RESULTS

Respondents were asked to indicate their preferences for certain types of foods or a particular cuisine, they being free to offer up to three choices. The results for first preference and for all preferences (i.e. 1st to 3rd) pooled are shown in Table 1. Only 170 of the 2062 respondents did not indicate any preference.

The principal interest shown was for Italian cuisine, both in the first and the pooled preferences. 18.1% of the sample gave it as their first preference. In the pooled result, it was mentioned by a surprising 51% of all respondents! Next came French cuisine, mentioned by some 33% of all respondents. These patterns are not related to the number of persons of those nationalities in the community, i.e. the number possibly reflecting Italian or French origins was 1.5% and 3.4%, respectively. The preference for the “local cuisine” was around 1% first choice, even though the local subpopulation made up 23.9% of the total.

Table 1: Responses by cuisine or food preferences

Preference	By first preference		All preferences pooled	
	Frequency	% of respondents	Frequency	% of respondents
African	15	0.7	23	1.1
Asian	27	1.3	75	3.6
Austrian	22	1.1	42	2.0
British	167	8.1	337	16.3
Chinese	129	6.3	416	20.2
European	21	1.0	40	1.9
French	261	**12.7**	673	**32.6**
Halal	47	2.3	85	4.1
Health food	103	5.0	472	22.9
Indian	32	1.6	80	3.9
Italian	373	**18.1**	1051	**51.0**
Japanese	59	2.9	183	8.9
Kosher	11	0.5	20	1.0
Mexican	66	3.2	309	15.0
Middle Eastern	90	4.4	407	19.7
North American	243	11.8	404	19.6
Spanish	16	0.8	29	1.4
Vegetarian	102	4.9	404	19.6
Other [a]	108	5.2		
None indicated	170	8.2	170	8.2
Totals	2062	*100*	5220	(253.0)
	= base		total mentions	base: 2062

a. "Other" = food or cuisine with less than 10 mentions (<0.5%) in first preferences; not counted in pooled preferences.

Mentioned by some 20% of all respondents were: Chinese (20.2%), Middle Eastern (19.7%) and North American (19.6%), as well as health food (22.9%) and vegetarian (19.6%). Around 15% of respondents mentioned British (16.3%) and Mexican (15.0%). All other mentions lay below 10%; indeed, apart from Japanese (8.9%), all lay below 5%. These data serve as very useful pointers regarding customer preferences in respect of food-product variety in an international community.

The following table relates the first mentioned preference for cuisine type (only mentions >100 recognized) to the nationality of consumers and to the representation of this nationality in the sample. The aim of this comparison is to see how the preference is represented within the corresponding nationality subset, and how the respective nationals contribute percentage-wise to the overall representation of their national cuisine preferences.

As the table shows, the highest preference for "home cuisine" can be found within the Italian subgroup of the sample set, followed by the French. North Americans and British prefer their own cuisine most at a level of 50%. The preferences for Chinese food clearly stem from persons of other nations, as only 1 of the 10 Chinese in the sample chose Chinese food as first preference. The high preference for Italian cuisine in fact stems from persons of other nationalities, true also to a lesser extent for French cuisine. Although around 50% of the preferences for North American and British come from "home" mentions, it is remarkable that these cuisines attracted more than 100 and 80 mentions, respectively, from persons of other nationalities out of the sample of 2062.

As far as cross-tabulation with socio-economic characteristics of consumers is concerned, it made no difference to cuisine preferences whether consumers shopped for small or large households. There was however a difference in preference between socioeconomically-different status groups. The statistically significant difference (Pearson chi-squared test, *p=0.000*) we can report here is that the preference for French cuisine grows with the socio-economic status of the respondents, being highest in the highest income class of professionals.

DISCUSSION

First of all, it should be recognized that this international sample population has a particular attribute — its diversity. It tends to be very open-minded with respect to other cultures and to new impressions. Such communities are increasingly being found in most major European cities. As far as the tastes for cuisine types is concerned, we can observe a diffusion of certain preferences through nationalities — as the sample presented shows. This might not be true for all places, especially for those which are physically remote, but it is certainly true for major European cities. As far as the diffusion of tastes is understood as a diffusion through social strata, we must confess that the data might confirm Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the role of tastes. Following Bourdieu (1977, 1984), the high preference for French cuisine in the sample must be viewed in the light of the good economic base of the households in this global village we studied. Could the development of such income- and status-dependent preferences

Table 2: Distribution of first preference and corresponding nationality in the sample, and share of first preferences deriving from related nationals

Preference[a]	% of 1st preference in the sample[b]	% of 1st preference in the corresponding nationality group	% of corresponding nationality in the sample[c]	Contribution of "home-cuisine" mentions within the corresponding preference (%)
Italian	**18.1**	**93.3**	1.5	7.5[d]
French	**12.7**	**78.9**	3.4	21.5
North American	11.8	57.2	10.1	49.0
British	8.1	59.3	6.8	49.7
Chinese	6.3	10.0	0.5	0.8

a. Preferences are ordered by frequency.
b. Preferences with a frequency >100 are considered; health food (frequency: 103) is not considered in this comparison.
c. Sample size: 2062 (every interviewee mentioned a first cuisine preference).
d. E.g.: Although 93.3% of the Italians gave their cuisine as first preference, they contribute only 7.5% of the first preference mentions for Italian cuisine.

suggest a hypothesis that tastes might even serve to define borders between social positions in a mixed-nationality community? Could taste be seen as forming part of the "cultural capital" of different social groups?

At first sight, based on the data in Table 1, it appears that the globalization of taste explains the results for cuisine preferences (e.g. the distribution of Italian or North American). However, closer inspection, and the realization that a taste for French cuisine is not easily satisfied by processed foods, suggest that shoppers' buying and cuisine preferences were driven by liking for the "taste" or "concept", rather than purely an interest in convenience food. This is also borne out by the relatively high ratings for health and vegetarian foods.

CONCLUSION

Many European regions — not only French and Italian — produce food that can supply products for specific cuisine preferences. As the European integration process is ongoing, new regions, too, will be participating in this development — i.e. promoting an educated liking for their "national" products (e.g. Slovenia in promoting their high quality wines, as well as their air-dried ham and other specialities). The relative importance of health and vegetarian foods in the pool of preferences also suggests Buttel's (1994) and Beck's (1992) theses — that food safety and risks associated with industrial-scale agriculture and highly processed foods — play a significant role in the development of consumer preferences.

It appears, therefore, that the future for farming in rural regions with traditional, small-scale agriculture lies in deliberately seeking to promote attractive elements of national or regional foods and cuisine and, importantly, providing EU-certified supplies of organic and health foods for the European market. Both strategies could offer farmers a better chance to stay in business. In this regard, the remarkable development of organic farming in Austria in recent years, with its cooperation between the farmers as a counterweight to the power of the food-retailing sector, is of particular interest.

Thus, with the growing market for and consumers' interest in regional, organic and health foods in Europe, new strategies of cooperation within the farming sector as well as farmers finding good and "fair" partners in the food-supply chain are clearly two of the key factors for success in this market. In support of this, the authors conclude that the results of this study strongly support the view that "globalization" develops a broadened, educated taste for national, regional and specialist products as a counter to the food industry's pressure to standardize taste.

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