European Commission

THE FIFTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME 1998-2002

QUALITY OF LIFE AND MANAGEMENT OF LIVING RESOURCES

"Marketing Sustainable Agriculture: An analysis of the potential role of new food supply chains in sustainable rural development"

SUS-CHAIN

QLK5-CT-2002-01349

Desk study on consumer behaviour towards sustainable food products

National report – Italy

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SUS-CHAIN deliverable no. 9.4

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ITALY

SUS-CHAIN WP3 National Report (deliverable 9.4)

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Table of contents

I. DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABILITY OF FOOD PRODUCTS

Sustainability of food products

A sustainable agro-food system is "one that equitably balances concerns for environmental soundness, economic viability, and social justice among all sectors of society" (Allen 1991, quoted in Hassanein 2003).
In the recent years there has been an acceleration of the trend for differentiation of products on the basis of sustainability criteria. In this process many public, private organisations and NGOs are involved, as food is becoming a central issue in the public debate.
The main sustainable products in Italy, grouped by criteria of differentiation are:

ecological criteria	- organic products - integrated products (products obtained by means of integrated pest control techniques) - GMO-free products
geographical criteria	- typical product: PDO products and PGI products - traditional products - mountain products
ethical criteria	- fair trade products - animal welfare products (products obtained by means of 'animal-friendly' production techniques)

Ecological criteria

Organic products

The word "organic" has a reassuring effect on consumers and the real advantages of organic products are perceived by Italian consumers as linked to safety and nutritional quality. But the findings of ACNielsen's 'Enquiry 17mila study' demonstrate conclusively the quite considerable fall-off in interest. Scepticism about the whole organic food business, in other words the number of people who consider it a mere fashion fad, now stands at 33%, the same figure that applies to those who believe there to be no appreciable difference between regular and organic foodstuff.

Integrated products

Growing importance is being given by producers and institutions (ie. the Regional Government) to this production and cultivation technique. In spite of this, in the sphere of alternative agricultural production and its associated channels, integrated products are seen to be less well known by Italian consumers: the latter have only a vague idea of the significance and even of the existence of integrated products; the typical characteristics of integrated production are not immediately identifiable and recognisable.
From a recent quantitative survey on consumers of integrated products in Italy it appears that 91% do not know these products, 5% know them but do not buy them and only 4% buy them. And it is just exactly this scanty information that has not allowed a clear differentiation with respect to traditional products.
Moreover, these products are fiercely countered by organic farmers and their supporters (green parties, environmental associations) as they are considered to generate confusion among consumers and to make unfair competition for organic products which do not benefit from promotional initiatives.

GMO-free products

Consumers, environmentalist associations and ethical groups feel a strong concern about bio-technologies, but public bodies and farmers Unions also disagree with them. The main concerns are for the safeguard of the 'natural' and, to some extent, specific geneticheritage, for the image of Italian

traditional and typical products and, sometimes, for the consumers' health. Moreover, the small scale model of Italian agriculture does not seem to fit these scale technologies.
Some regional governments, such as *Toscana* ((Tuscany)) and *Emilia Romagna*, have taken a position against the introduction of GMOs. Also some national firms of the agri-food system (like *COOP* for distribution and *Barilla* for production) are advertising their business and securing consumers with GMO-free products.

Geographical criteria

Regional products

Under the label "regional products" we can group quite a large number of products whose commonality is the link of their production process with specific localities. Besides PDO/PGIs, ie. certified typical products, it is possible to include "traditional products", which are products traditionally produced and consumed in specific localities, some of them in danger of extinction, and, as a more specific typology, "mountain products".
In the consumers' eyes, in absence of other methods, the origin of production is a strong signifier of quality. A recent survey, carried out by ISPO, showed that consumers think that in the label the origin of raw material should be indicated (74%). In another survey, carried out by ISMEA, the origin of the products is the most important information that consumers look for (after the price). The strong presence of foreign raw material generates anxiety and uncertainty. Lack of indication of origin raises suspicion.
In general, Italian consumers show a strong link with regional food, perceived as belonging to the cultural heritage of the country and to its rural roots. This general attitude appears more diversified if we consider the different products.

Ethical criteria

Environmental conservation, animal welfare, social equity are new consumers' demands which are strongly (though with different intensity) affecting the debate and the public and private initiatives in production and distribution of food products. Also in this case, several types of actors are interested and directly engaged, such as consumers' associations, environmental organisations, cultural associations, public bodies, some distribution chains (like *COOP*) and, though often in a less active-propulsive way, farmers' Unions.
However, the perceptions of those values by consumers and their implementation in consumption behaviour are still not absolutely generalised (in particular for animal welfare and social equity). The major bottlenecks seem to remain the lack or scarcity of information and, in some cases, the specificity of distribution channels, both of them representing a pre-condition to the change of the decisional mechanism of purchase (i.e. the willingness to pay a premium price or to change place of purchase).

Fair trade

The emergence of a new ethical sensibility in Italy has led to an increase in critical consumers who pay ever more attention at the moment of purchase to the intangible characteristics of the products, involving also the social responsibility on those who produce/distribute. Thus growing attention is given to the economic and social problems of the countries of the South, who provide the raw materials or in which production delocalisation occurs, and to the respect and valorisation of the autochthonous production. To satisfy these requirements the products of *fair and responsible* trade, which leave the narrow channels of alternative trade to enter as part of the supply of the big distribution chains such as Coop and Esselunga, are a perfect example.

Animal welfare

Awareness about this aspect has increased during the '90s and in more recent years; an important factor has been the various scandals involving the meat sector and the consequent debate in the mass media, which in some cases contributed to make the conditions of livestock visible, causing a real shock to public opinion.
However, this attitude has not yet generated a significant new demand, because of the scarsity of information for consumers by producers and distributers. Some initiatives have been taken, especially in the chicken industry, with “free range” labels. After BSE, Coopitalia has revised some of the technical requirements to be accepted under its label, and has strengthened regulations related to animal welfare for pigs, chicken and bovines; but few consumers know of these changes.

II. GENERAL FOOD CONSUMPTION TRENDS

Like most of the other European countries, Italy has reached the phase of repletion in so much as basic food requirements are, for the most part, satisfied and the availability of nutritional elements in general surpasses the physiological needs of the population, to the point of producing widespread phenomena of overfeeding. In this context food consumption does not have the sole role of satisfying nutritional requirements but becomes a complex activity which is the fruit of choices dictated by a multiplicity of factors. Into this qualitative evolution of the models of consumption one has also to add the conditioning deriving from the great changes that have affected society: the generalised entry of women into the workforce, the different organisation of working hours (and often of school hours), the different use of outside-work hours, the reduction of the average size of the family and the increase of single people, etc.
From all of this comes a very diversified demand, related to both the requirements that motivate the choices of consumption and the modalities of consumption, in terms of places, times and moments of consumption: these two components of the evolution of the demand are often interconnected.
The main factors/aspects of changes in food consumption in Italy can be grouped in the following way:

Destructuring of meals, speed, simplification-service

The destructuring of meals is seen in the consolidation of the modalities of eating which are less formal and less tied to the family/domestic context: complete meals tend in fact to be simplified and relegated to one time of the day (if not completely eliminated) and go side by side with other individual shorter moments of eating (snacking), usually outside the family home, in the workplace, schools and at social functions. To this phenomenon can be traced the increase in consumption of food products with a high processing content (*convenience food*) and the explosion of *catering* and *fast foods*.
More generally speaking, the search for a high degree of time-saving processing is a tendency related to the increase in value of domestic work, ascribable, not only to women’s work outside the home, but also to the more general widening of aspirations in the use of time outside work. This tendency is evident in various aspects of the consumption process.
The reduction of the average size of the family and the increase in single people cause the increase in the consumption of food products in smaller packaging.

Globalisation and, at the same time, the safeguarding and appreciation of regional foods

If, on the one hand, globalisation pushes towards a very accentuated homogenisation in life styles and in consumption models, it has also allowed the development of products closely tied to specific territorial contexts and therefore conveyors of related cultural values. Consumers are believed to increasingly seek quality, scarcity and novelty of products, and particularly agricultural products and foodstuffs with an identifiable geographic origin.
Interest in this type of product is shown by more than 50% of the Italian population even if it is seen to be dependent on the offer of an effective value added, that the consumer identify with: qualitative excellence, product specialisation, respect for the original ingredients and tastes. This fact seems to

represent the true turn in the approach to the typical product of the new millennium. That is, a product that not only comes from a determined area and is labelled accordingly but one that also has to satisfy certain fundamental prerequisites, amongst which those of high qualitative level (sensorial), and meet the most sophisticated requirements: originality/diversity and respect for tradition both in terms of taste and "values" (Berni, 2002).

Greater consumer awareness, aimed at health and well-being

The latest available figures (The GpF Food Monitor for spring-summer 2002) suggest that 2002 saw a renewed interest in health issues among Italians, including a generally more favourable attitude towards organic products and greater concern over GM foods. Short-term factors influencing these development are undoubtedly the shock and fear of poisoning which BSE brought in its wake, and the ability of producers to respond to these fears with the generally reassuring guarantee of tighter controls at every stage in the food producing chain.

From such preoccupations comes, on the one hand, growing openness towards functional foods, and on the other, growing attention towards health and herbal products. The greater attention paid to health /diet aspects involves the important factor of increase in income and education level, with a consumer taking more care and being more particular about healthiness characteristics and prepared to pay more for new products that show higher quality and better processing.

The switch to greater health consciousness implies a change in the scale of values associated with the term "health". Health is now a holistic concept, involving all aspect of lifestyle and now has very little in common with the nostalgic getting-back-to-roots approach to wholesomeness in the traditional old-fashioned sense. Health is increasingly associated with well-being, harmony and pleasure.

Hedonism and well-being

Another important tendency is that of hedonism, the search for subjective well-being. According to Fabris (2003), this trend seems even today, at the start of the new millennium, still in expansion: the quest for immediate gratification, pleasant sensations, physical satisfaction, states of "bodily happiness", a "good life" by now constitutes the concealed, but also constant, structure of the orientation of activities of ever-growing segments of the population; it reflects also the need of the individual to achieve, through food consumption, a desire for identification and personal inspiration. These reasons influence the whole sphere of food consumption and other.

Desire to try new foods and culturalize consumption

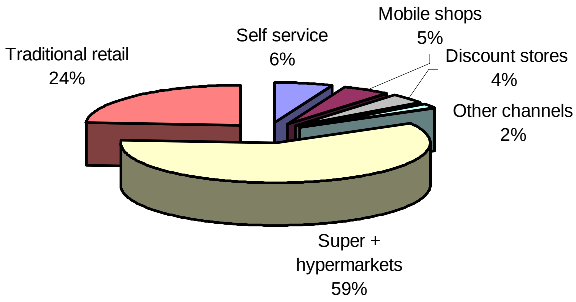
In the Italians'shopping bag the typical is exploding, the organic continues to grow and the ethnic is beginning to appear. All this because the consumer has an ever greater desire to try out new foods, because he is more careful and better informed, because he wants genuine and quality products, because he is looking in the food not only for "tangible" contents but also those able to satisfy requirements of a cultural character (a desire to get to know the different food traditions of his own Country and of other countries, to the point of accepting completely different customs and styles, Consonni, 2002). In short, while the weight of the shopping basket on monthly expenditure of the Italian family is diminishing (from 19.1% in 1999 to 18.6% in 2000), the culture of consumption is increasing (Maccaferri, 2002).

Sucess of 'modern' distribution

Also in Italy in the last few decades the traditional-type distribution, characterized by small sales points, has been progressively substituted in consumer purchase behaviour by the "modern" type of distribution, ie. self service and strongly orientated towards the offer of a wide range of products, food and otherwise, as well as services.

The consumer, modifying his function of utility due to great transformations in society (changes in eating habits and reduction in time dedicated to the preparation of food), has clearly influenced the establishment of this channel as the preferred channel for the commercialisation of food products.

Diagram: Domestic food expenditure per distribution channel (%)



Source: processed data from the ISMEA-ACNielsen families Panel (2001)

III. CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTS

1. Consumers of sustainable food products

1.1 Consumers' values, needs and motivations

Food safety

A study by Ipsos-Eplorer, using more than 1000 interviews on a sample representative for age and social class, had as its starting point the unusual question: "If you could meet the representatives of important firms, what would you ask them?" The topics suggested by the interviewers (pollution, social responsibility, difference in price between similar products, honesty in advertising communications) attracted more or less the same interest. Except for two: the subject of safety, mentioned by a good 40% of the sample, and freedom in the choice of purchase, which instead seemed to worry only 10% of the Italians. The preoccupation was greater in the South, in the little towns and amongst the lower socioeconomic classes and concerned food products above all: more than 76% of those who put safety first were thinking of the food industry (Bacchini, 2003). In general, food safety has become a major concern among consumers after the food crises during the '80s and the '90s.

The consumer's need for reassurance and his search for brands and products that offer him a pact of trust is the red line that permits one to understand the recent fondness for the organic product that, once catering strictly for ideological and niche consumption, tied to an alternative life style, far from consumer logistics and in fact antagonistic towards them, is today widespread throughout the population, with a strong attenuation of its more radical traits. The organic product has lost in values-ideological connotation but gained in pragmatism. In this context, the need for greater reassurance, above all as regards baby food, is a mode of entry into the family for the organic product (Magelli, 2002)

Even the success that regional products are having at the moment can be seen, from this aspect, as another adaptation strategy initiated by the consumer in the fragmented food panorama at the present day. At first sight it may seem a strategy that is contrary to the quest for quality and reassurance under the protective umbrella of the big industrial brand, but a closer look reveals it, in fact, to be complementary. The regionality character becomes, in the consumer's experience, a distinctive signal that confers added value to the product, in as much as the geographical delimitation and the adhesion to production protocol (more or less formally codified in disciplinary measures), of the traditional/typical product itself, translate into synonyms of greater quality guarantees: the product is seen as subject to greater controls and produced respecting and in continuity with traditional foods. The "typical/traditional" characteristic acts therefore as indication of up-grading with regard to production method in the broadest sense and, exactly for this reason, becomes an element of reassurance for the consumer (Magelli, 2002).

Healthiness

All recent studies suggest that aspects linked to health and well-being occupy a central position in purchasing of sustainable product. With regard specifically to organic products, the main reasons for purchasing them are related to health (Pinton, 1999; Zanoli and Naspetti, 2002), since they are perceived as being healthier. In particular, according to a recent survey (ISMEA, 2003), the usual consumer of organic products has a high opinion of these products as he attributes particular value to the following items: they do not contain residues of harmful substances, they are healthy and genuine products, the packaged organic products do not contain colouring or preservatives, they do not contain GMO (absence of GMO is apreciated also by those who do not usually consume organic products).

Environmental awareness

According to Fabris (2003), among the new social trends that have had a marked effect on consumer behaviour, the trend concerning growing environmental awareness has exercised a significant influence over many aspects of consumption. Amongst food products, the sustainable products have thus become object of particular interest for all those consumers that have a certain sensitivity towards environmental problems. Recent studies (Zanoli and Naspetti, 2002; ISMEA, 2003) indicate how respect for the environment and product sustainability are important incentives for buying organic products.
Even the growing demand for products made with respect for tradition and with a powerful healthy image, which exactly describes Italian typical products, is closely tied to socio-environmental equilibrium, such as the safeguard of natural resources and the fight against environmental deterioration (Marescotti and Belletti, 1995, in Carboni and Quaglia, 2000).

The sensory experience: taste, appearance, texture and odour

In general, respecting a minimum threshold of organoleptic quality, in many cases high positioned by expectations, represents an essential condition in present-day consumption of sustainable products. Different studies (Pinton, 1999) on the attitude of the consumer towards sustainable products (regional and organic) indicate how the taste of these products (more natural, genuine and sometimes richer) is an important incentive to buy. In particular in the case of typical products, a recent survey (ISMEA, 2003) confirms that the consumer of such products has a higher perception of these products compared to conventional ones and in particular considers them as products that enhance the taste and flavour.

Transparency, correctness, equity of the process of production – commercialisation

Transparency of the production process is seen to be one of the principal motivations for buying typical products (Balestrieri and Cerruti, 2003).
Commercial transparency and correctness (in an ethical sense) become essential for the purchase of fair trade products. This aspect clearly emerges in a recent study by the Doxa Institute (2003), which analyses the motivations of the "fair" consumers in Italy: 35% of them purchase these products because they think this is a trade carried on correctly with no speculation; 22% want to buy products from the poorest Countries; and 12% feel that they are performing an action of solidarity towards those who need it. Other motivations include the desire to limit the power of the intermediate multinational companies (7%), to fight against child labour (4%) and to avoid purchasing brand labelled products (3%).

Hedonism and achievement, getting the most out of life

It has already been mentioned (par. II) how the hedonistic trend still seems to be in expansion at the present time (Fabris, 2003). The quest for subjective well-being reflects the need of the individual to achieve his desire for identification and personal inspiration through his food consumption.
From the study by Zanoli and Naspetti (2002) on the consumption of organic products it emerges that while usual consumers are also driven by considerations concerning health and ethics, occasional

consumers are motivated above all by hedonistic reasons. The latter consumers are particularly attracted by achieving personal satisfaction: they want the product to be tasty and good-looking as well, for one of the values they consider most important is pleasure, ie. getting the most from life. In this case therefore the flavour and sensory aspect prevails, and the consumer aims at seeking out the maximum tastiness and aesthetic aspect of the food.
This hedonistic trend is amply satisfied by the superior organoleptic characteristics of the typical and traditional products and by their capacity to reconcile the consumer to the Italian gastronomic tradition and to the values of serenity and genuineness evoked by the rural world (Miele and Murdoch, 2002).

Desire to preserve local traditions against "globalization"

Again in the case of regional products, next to the search for quality in terms of safety, health and goodness, the attention paid to local culinary and gastronomic traditions can push itself to include interest in their safeguard, together with that for the local social and economic contexts, which they form part of. It is clear from the study by Balestrieri and Cerruti (2003) that consumers prefer to buy local typical products rather then analogous products from other regions because they wish to support the economic sustainability of their region and, by means of that, the survival of activities forming the identity of their region.

The following table shows the different values, needs and motivations which (sometimes together) intervene in the consumer's choice of the different products:

Values, needs and motivations	**Ecological products** (Organic-Integrated products)	**Regional products**	**Ethical products** (fair trade and animal welfare products)
Food safety	X	X	
Healthiness	X	X	
Environmental awareness	X	X	X
Self-fulfilment	X	X	X
Taste, appearance, texture and odour	X	X	
Transparency, correctness, equity		X	X
Hedonism and well-being	X	X	
Cultural interest in the related life-style		X	X
Preservation of local traditions		X	X

1.2 Information, knowledge and uncertainty

The present set-up of the system of certification and of regulation for information concerning food is not always efficient in providing adequate knowledge for consumers, resulting in some circumstances absolutely counterproductive.
The following contribute to creating this situation:

- too many types of guarantees of quality (certification systems and distributors /producers private marks);
- the increasing complexity of deciphering the information present on the market;
- the overlapping of autonomous guarantee paths of the product which are dealt with by different actors in the chain (in this process the prevalent role finishes by being carried out by big industrial firms and supermarket chains, whose way of communication with the consumer is decidedly more efficient);
- the formulation of certification systems aimed at conditioning the distribution of the income of the chain in favour of certain sectors rather than at providing an instrument for qualifying the product on the market, providing correct and complete information to the consumers.

Perception and knowledge about the product on the part of the consumers

Organic food

Data from a recent survey on the needs for education and information about the organic food industry in Italy showed a worrying lack of knowledge and information about the products of organic agriculture: the market is expanding explosively but 1 Italian out of 4 has never heard of organic products and only 1out of 7 has sufficient information about them (Corno, 2002).

This is often due to the labelling which is not clear and comprehensible: in fact, according to another survey although most consumers, even the most occasional ones, were able to give a correct definition of organically produced food, a few controversial issues arise as to certification marks. Most frequently the consumers do not know the names of the certifying bodies, even though they have confidence in what is written on the labels.

In addition to the many sources of information, most consumers know of organic products through advice from friends (43%), mass media (14%) or because they have seen them in the shops (14%).

Regional products

Although overall the Italian, and more generally the European, consumer shows an interest in typical food products, on an individual level very different interpretations are given on the significance of typicalness and there is very scant knowledge about certification systems: according to data from the 8th Nomisma Report on agriculture (results from a survey conducted on a sample of consumers) less than 35% of the interviewees connected the typicalness of a product with its geographical origin, while more than 80% did not know the abbreviation PGI and 72% did not know the abbreviation PDO (Nomisma, 2001). A situation like this creates confusion and the possibility of commercial “cheating” at the expense of the consumer.

According to another study (Balestrieri and Cerruti, 2003), some consumers made reference to typical products in a very loose way, simply naming locality or even brand name. Access to the formally correct notion of typical product - products whose production techniques and consumption habits are rooted in the traditions of territories geographically delineated and well characterised in terms of culture and life-style - seemed at first to be the elitist residue of a good education, if not social status. However (and the technique of the focus group was effective in this respect), after a little discussion all the respondents demonstrated that when actually evaluating and selecting food they behave as if they knew fairly well what a typical product is. The exception was represented by foreign rural tourists, who link “typicity” to the Tuscan or even Italian origin of the products. On the contrary, domestic rural tourists appear to possess a formally and substantially correct notion of typical product.

Balestrieri and Cerruti (2003) noticed that, as a rule, all respondents attached importance to knowing the place of origin of food products, to brands and protective labels not only for food, although at times they also showed scepticism about the veridicity of the claim of origin. Consumer behaviour of this type is consistent with findings in the existing literature, which suggest that (i) there is a functional similarity between a place-of-origin label and the brand name of products identifying the origin of the product (Farquhar, 1989); (ii) the more importance consumers attach to the presence of quality labels and brand names, the larger the chance of purchasing a regional product; (iii) consumers who attach more importance to knowing the place of origin of food products of any kind are more likely to purchase protected regional products. However, although PDO/PGI labels are believed to be able to yield an added value to the product, there is lack of consumer awareness regarding these labels (Van Ittersum, 2000).

Fair trade products

As to consumption of fair trade products in Italy, a recent study by GPF & Associati defines for the first time the size of this phenomenon: c.s. 4 million Italians (i.e. half of those who know the products) have purchased a fair trade product at least once, whilst the number of consumers in the previous months amounted to 2 million (equal to 4% of the population aged between 15 and 74); two thirds of them are prepared to pay a higher price than for equivalent brand products (Salafia, 2002). In terms of trend, a

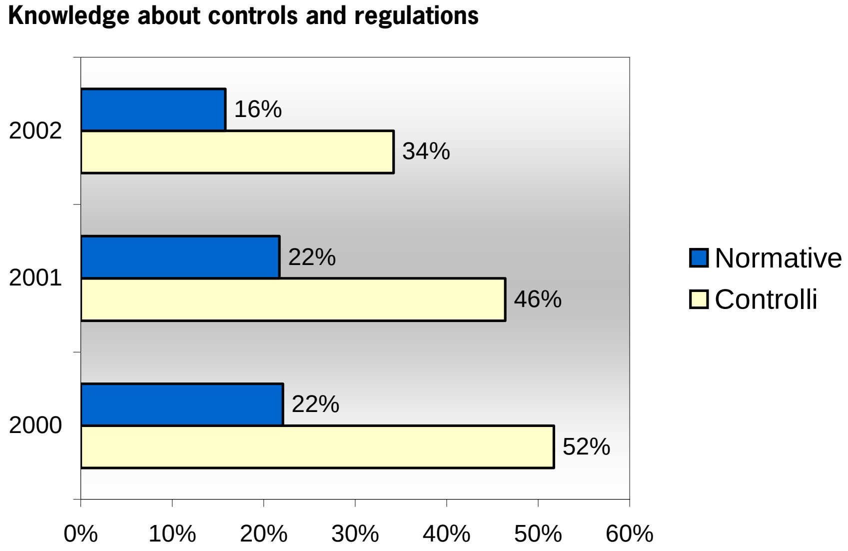
constant increase can be seen in the number of consumers aware of the existence and aims of fair trade (from 19% to 23% in the course of 2002) (DOXA, 2003).
As already reported, a recent analysis of the motivations of Italian "fair trade" consumers (DOXA, 2003) shows that 35% of them purchase these products for the correct character of this trade, without speculation; 22% want to buy products from the poorest Countries; and 12% wish to carry out an action of solidarity toward those who need it; other motivations include the need to limit the power of the multinational companies (7%), to fight against child labour (4%) and to avoid purchasing brand labelled products (3%).

Animal welfare products

In the Italian case the number of animal friendly products is very limited and organic products represent almost the only experience that consumers have of these products.
In general, Italian consumers very seldom spontaneously name animal welfare among their concerns about food. When asked about animal welfare, consumers tend to refer to it as an indicator of healthier and tastier products. Animal welfare, as a concern, is legitimised through association with human health and safety.
Italian consumers expressed more particular concern over battery cages and veal crates and least concern about dairy products.

Efficiency of guarantee systems

In general the food products that arrive on our table satisfy the minimum qualitative requirements established by the law. Next to these there are products that go beyond these requirements and have a voluntary certification mechanism, as in the case of products with producers' or big distributors' marks. Then there are those that have a regulated and legally binding certification mechanism, as in the case of the products with denomination guarantees or organic products. In the first case, the consumer, when he buys certified products, delegates a substantial guarantee to the mark or trademark; however more than 50% of consumers read the labels to verify the characteristics of the product. In the second case, the consumer, when he buys controlled and guaranteed products, delegates a total guarantee to the institutions.
A fundamental factor in channelling the level of information and awareness in consumers is represented by the knowledge and reliability of the guarantee systems (control/certification) in the eyes of these same consumers. A typical case is the organic product, towards which there is still a considerable amount of diffidence and scepticism, due in fact, some say (Didero, 2003), to the lack of information. As far as controls are concerned, knowledge about them is on the increase, as emerged from the survey "*Principal actors on the organic scene in Italy 2002*", carried out by the association of organic products, while certification is still seen as a mainly burocratic and notarial moment (see the following figure)



Source: Ccp in Didero (2003)

Distributors' role in conditioning information and knowledge

In Italy a process of rapid and significant involvement of the multiple retailers is under way in the commercialisation of organic, ethical and typical products. This involvement is clearly aimed at catching up with the expansion of the market segment of consumers of these products.
The retailers have managed this commercialisation very efficiently; on the one hand, giving still more space to these products, both under normal conditions and during promotional campaigns, thus increasing the opportunities for passing on information to the consumer; on the other hand, launching complete product lines which have further qualified the overall offer of these products.
In so doing, even though with differences regarding the individual products, the big distributors have contributed considerably to the diffusion of knowledge about sustainable products and to their consumption and, on the basis of the evolutionary trends of purchasing behaviour, seem destined to play a key role in the future (Berni, 2002).

Role of the media

On the Italian scene, the supply of information is seen to be extremely differentiated, sometimes contradictory, in the source, level and reliability of the guarantees which it offers and in its response to requests from users. This contributes not a little to increasing the difficulty of directing the consumer to shaping his own system of preference and to carrying out his purchase choices (Carbone and Sorrentino, 2003).
The recent great interest, for example, in the problems concerning food (the subjects of mad cow disease, genetically modified organisms, adulterated foods are certainly in the forefront of people's worries) has resulted in the Italian media dedicating a large amount of space to the problem of health, but often not providing adequate information. Issues such as biodiversity, market economy and organic foods interest the readers-viewers more and more, but information in depth on the subject is not always provided, being limited to being spoken about in the first rush of enthusiasm or as the scandal of the moment.
In the case of "mad cow" disease, the attention of the media contributed in spreading great alarmism in the consumer, which only thanks to the increased sensitivity and information on the part of the consumer was subsequently translated into a higher threshold of attention concerning products purchased.
Organic products are also a case in point: if on the one hand controls carried out very recently have shown that this is a substantially safe system, events happening elsewhere have been reported by the

Italian media with great emphasis (like the news of organic chickens containing pesticide residues in spring 2002 in Germany) contributing, in this way, to giving "disinformation".

Also the subject of genetically modified organisms had a large space in the media for a certain period; often it has been talked about in a wrong way, without explaining exactly to the consumers the advantages, disadvantages and the real unknowns in turning to the cultivation of GMOs, with the result of incomplete, and often incorrect, information.

A one-year analysis of communication in newspapers and the TV about GMOs points out some interesting elements (Osservatorio di Pavia, 2002):

- GMOs in the agro-food sector receive an essentially negative connotation or are presented as "bad" per se, both in newspapers and on television;
- GMOs are only generally discussed, often within the framework of general arguments that only seldom focus on the specific implications of individual applications;
- as to the actors, these are relatively few in number: the debate strongly focuses on very few individuals and the agricultural associations appear as unimportant actors in the media-based debate on biotechnologies;
- the dominating language of media communication reflects the ideological clash and the polarisation of the debate.

1.3 Availability of products and behavioural control

The availability of sustainable products is often a fundamental factor in influencing consumers' behaviour. This is at the basis of the trends of consumption of organic, typical and ethical products.

Organic products

The present structure of the distribution system of organic products in Italy appears very articulated. The number of sales points that deal with organic products has progressively increased; in particular, the importance of the modern distribution has increased progressively and this circumstance conditions the growth path of the sector, especially today when signs of a slowing up in demand are emerging.

In fact in Italy organic products are so widespread that they are no longer directed towards the market only via specialised shops. In particular, after a long period during which the organic product was penalised by lack of space on the shelves in the self service sales points, for several years now the modern distribution has become a strategic channel.

The new organisation of sales spaces dedicated to the organic product in many supermarket chains is today able to satisfy the demands of a consumer increasingly more exacting, offering a very large number of alternatives for purchase. In particular the more recent findings by Nielsen estimate that there are 2,926 packaged organic food products mentioned, that is, a number large enough to assure a reasonable choice within the main shopping complexes.

Modern distribution chains are estimated as holding a quota equal to about 35% of the sales against 60% in the specialised shops (Nomisma, 2003), but with prospects of a strong increase in the next 5 years, so much so as to foresee an overturning in the quota with respect to the specialised shop. The goal of the big distribution system is to reach 50% of the market (European average at present) within 2005 (Didero, 2003).

In fact, modernisation of the sales network for organic products has favoured the transfer of important numbers of consumers used to shopping in the specialised shops to the big supermarkets. In fact those that already use organic products have moved from the "without chemicals" requirement (that has become a prerequisite) to the search for "plus", other advantages, even if remaining in the context of greater safety. Moreover somebody who becomes interested today finds himself in a much more advanced supply phase, with products with characteristics that make them similar to "functional food", endowed with a high shelf life (which has contributed towards attracting to the sector many processing firms, previously only operating in the conventional sector), products ready and easy to use, frozen foods, etc. And regarding quality, the foods are not inferior to the best of the conventional range, in some cases organic and POD at the same time. The organic product has become under many aspects

"normal", with value added by the greater safety (on this matter, it seems essential that the sector still guarantees the absence of "GMO" from its ingredients) (Didero, 2003).
The circuits of conventional distribution (supermarkets, specialised retail and direct sale), have carried out and will continue to carry out a fundamental role in supporting the demand for organic foods. In fact, although not dealing with very big quantities of these products, they are the preferred places of purchase by the majority of consumers. But next to these there are others which show great potential; these are the new channels, which in countries where they have been adequately used have been able to obtain excellent results. These innovations include the *box scheme*, the *organic markets*, the *selling by correspondence* and the *e-commerce on Internet*. They are channels no less important than the traditional ones since they could, if sufficiently developed, generate big volumes, being able to interest a growing number of consumers.

Typical products

In an even more marked way, typical products have also assumed a very precise and quantitively more important role in the sales strategies of the supermarket chains.
According to the Ismea AcNielsen data (2001), hypermarkets and supermarkets absorb the greatest quota of shopping for typical products (61.3%), indicating growth in this year of 5.1%. The increases have been generalised and consistent over all the classes of product under examination, determining a strengthening of the role of the modern distribution channel for these products. This is having important effects in terms of diffusion of information about these products amongst consumers and facilitating and promoting their consumption (as regards their availability, potential frequency of purchase and price).
Side by side with the conventional distribution circuits, new channels are developing for typical products as well. Changing trends in consumers' attitudes are making way for new circuits tailored to small quantities and high quality and allowing a closer and more efficient interaction between farmers and consumers. In some cases, new circuits are built on old models of direct interaction (townpeople combining a tour in the countryside to buy food from the producers). In many other cases they are organised through more innovative ways: groups of buyers, farmers' markets, thematic routes, gastronomic itineraries among them. Several types of actors participate in the construction of these channels, such as consumers' associations, environmental associations, municipalities, local tourist offices, cultural associations (i.e. *Slow Food*). All these initiatives are in fact based on the consciousness of their effectiveness for growth of producers' added value, of visibility of the agricultural world, of synergies with the more general development of the rural areas.

Fair trade products

The difficulty in locating products and the inefficiency in the distribution system have been the main drawbacks to development of fair trade in Italy. In fact the absence of retail sales points in many centres and big provincial towns, or their displacement to not very accessible areas, far from commercial or residents' centres, does not improve their visibility or aid diffusion of information regarding commercialisation of fair trade products.
To overcome these problems an ever increasing range of fair trade products is sold through "conventional" sales points: both at the level of microdistribution (shops specialised in organic products, food retailers, etc.) and at the level of large-scale distribution. According to data reported by AcNielsen these products are by now available in 35% of the national distribution, including most of the more important names on the mass market commercial scene in Italy (Selva, 2002). And it has been exactly this development of commercial relations with the large distribution channels that has allowed the fair trade products to move out of the dimension of a market tied to traditional sales points only and, in some cases, to achieve significant market quotas.
The entry of fair trade products into the big distribution channels has enlarged the catchment basin of consumers without however damaging traditional retail: in 2001 26 new sales points were opened (World shops) (Bernieri, 2002).

1.4 The decision process: attitude and consumption behaviour

There are various different factors which influence consumption behaviour and the decision process of the consumer. These can be traced, on the one hand, to psycho-sociological and economic spheres, in their turn connected to the evolution of consumption models (different role of the woman, destructured consumption, new purchase sites and new food habits), on the other hand to attributes perceived by the consumer and placed at the base of the decision process (with priority that can vary with time and with the different places/occasions of consumption). All these factors together are integrated in the process of choice.

On this matter the consumer bases his decisions on what are commonly defined as “quality signals”, in other words on characteristics of the product that satisfy the purchaser’s expectations.

In the consumer’s eyes, the quality signals can be (De Rosa, 2001):

- intrinsic, if referring to “internal - physical” characteristics of the product and therefore verifiable through consumption;
- extrinsic, if directly visible and interpreted by the consumer to be left out of consideration from the act of purchase (brand, price, geographical origin).

According to a recent Doxa survey (2003), factors considered by consumers as decisive in the choice of a product were ordered as follows: brand (47%), sell-by date (34%), price (32%), ingredients (21%), previous experience of the product (18%), promotional offers (12%), place of purchase (11%).

Amongst the aspects considered important as regards safety, consumers put in first place: respect for sanitary-hygienic regulations (42%); control from site of production to site of purchase (33%); knowing the origin of the product and the raw materials used (33%); knowing the technical details of production (29%); knowing the ingredients (22%) and the post-production method of conservation (18%) (Dell’Orefice, 2002).

Brand and types of certification

It is evident therefore that great importance is placed on factors such as the brand, obviously considered synonymous with a guarantee by the consumer who relies, for his purchases, on trust in the producer, based on previous experience. Equally very important seem to be the types of certification of process and product, through which a careful consumer expects to receive information and guarantees; in this case, the wish to know and evaluate personally the origin and characteristics of the product prevails.

According to an ISMEA study, moreover, it should be noted that brands and quality certifications are not very well known amongst Italian consumers and there exists a lot of confusion about their different types: often the producer’s or trader’s mark is confused with the quality mark.

Attention to aspects of health and territorial specificity that distinguishes the recent trends in demand have also led to the appearance (or reappearance according to how abrupt the distancing was between the worlds of production and consumption) of a type of consumer of sustainable products who favours direct relations with the retailer, in the conventional purchasing sphere defined as “domestic”, based on reciprocal knowledge and shared appreciation of the specific characteristics of the product (Marescotti, 2001); this type of consumer is willing to sacrifice the brand mark.

Geographical origin

The consumer sees a product with an origin denomination mark as a product of quality. In the case of typical production this denomination appears therefore as a sign bearing a significance of quality: the origin of the product becomes guarantee of uniqueness and inimitability of the product. The correct perception of this sign of quality, however, is often impeded by the substantial informative asymmetry between consumer and producer: the consumer is rarely aware of the legislative set-up for the protection of origin denomination (Belligiano, 1999). Communication strategies in this case become fundamental.

Price

Another factor of great importance is, as already seen, price. After the "euphoric" consumption of the '70s and '80s and the recovery at the end of the '90s, price has once again become one of the main criterion in decision-making for a large number of consumers. This renewed importance has been encouraged by the action of socio-economic variables (recession), but its origin can be found in a complex of factors of a socio-cultural nature that urge consumers towards a greater rationality in the use of their incomes.

According to Eurisko, 79% of consumers are more aware of price than they were one year ago (in fact 84% according to Chermes-Bocconi) and 44% admit to buying the best brands only in promotional offers (Maggi, 2003): in fact there is an increase in the number of consumers, the so-called "cherry pickers", who have time and necessity (or the desire) to save money by hunting out the super bargains.

The consumer has developed, at all levels of income, even the highest, a great sensitivity to price: not only in the direction of spending less but, above all, spending well. He has developed a real awareness (sometimes even a true expertise) as regards the tangible aspects of quality, that evolved in parallel with dimensions more intangible, semiotic and of images of the goods (Fabris, 2003).

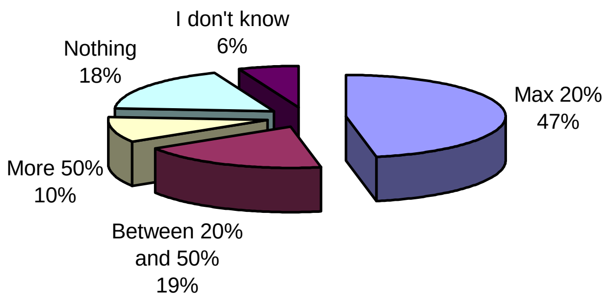
In absence of further information, price in fact becomes the central element for attributing quality to a product; the relation price-quality becomes central to the case of new food products for which there is no adequate information.

This tendency does not only appear with respect to purchased products, with a very careful comparison between interchangeable typologies of product and within the typology of product itself (redimensioning attention paid to the brand**),** but also with respect to the choice of purchase site (preference for big distribution chains and most convenient channels, and recent growth of hard discount phenomenon), to information channels (for example, with greater attention to price promotions, both with regard to brand and sales-points) and in general with greater attention to avoid any kind of waste in every phase of the consumption process**.**

- *Price and typical products*

The attention paid to price and the significance given to it is very evident in the case of typical products. The consumer is in fact willing to recognise a higher price for products with guaranteed origin. Italian and European data confirm this: according to Nomisma data (2001) there are up to 65-70% of these consumers. Clearly this is an average figure, referring to the simple statement about willingness to spend, while in reality there exist marked differences of attitude between categories of different goods (eg. much higher for salami sausages and cheese than for fruit and vegetables or ready-made meals); the willingness becomes regular purchase choice only for some consumers, it remains occasional for the others.

Graph: The "sustainable" differential of price for typical products



Source: Nomisma 2001Text on graph not clear

As to the willingness to pay for typical products, participants in research interviews conducted by Balestrieri and Cerruti (2003) stated that they accept paying prices higher than those paid for conventional products. They accounted for this attitude towards higher prices for typical products mainly in terms of a wish to support their regional economies and their productive and cultural identities. The premium prices consumers are willing to pay varies also according to the context of consumption. The interviewees stated that when travelling they are prepared to pay higher premium prices for the typical products of the regions they visit. However, the interviewees also stated that they are willing to pay more for typical products because they consider them of "better quality". Indeed typical products are generally regarded by consumers as exclusive, high quality and expensive products. The exclusive image of typical products is due to the combination of limited production volumes and specific production characteristics. Their high prices reflect their higher production costs (production systems of typical products are often of the handicraft type).

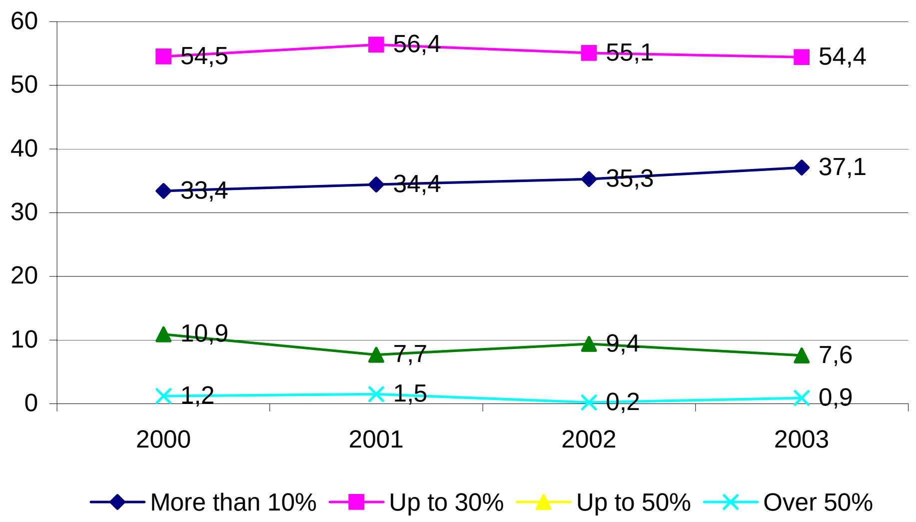
- *Price and fair trade products*

It could be supposed that the profile of the ethical consumer refers to the more extreme positions and that there are consumers who are ethical for some purchases and not for others. Or that the consumer's ethical coherence varies also in relation to the price of the product. There are few studies that have been made on this topic. In one of the few, Thogersen (1999) raises the question about the measure in which it is possible to imagine that ethical considerations could be more important than price in purchase choice, when the product costs little or when there is an important ethical involvement that can be reinforced or not by the sharing of social norms. According to Canel-Depitre (2000), the application of ethical principles varies: for food products with high turn-over and low price it would seem that price is an important criterion of choice and that ethical criteria are secondary.

- *Price and organic products*

In all the surveys carried out both amongst consumers and distributors it emerges that the maximum acceptable price for organic products is that which sees an increase of 30% with respect to a conventional quality product. This 30% is the "indifference threshold", above which consumers are not willing under any circumstances to buy the product (Didero, 2000).

Graph: Price level for organic products considered acceptable by consumers



Source: Nomisma 2003

1.5 Socio demographic profile

Organic food

As purchases of organic products appear progressively more substantial, both in terms of volumes of sales and turnover, the profile of the typical consumer becomes increasingly clearer based on the principal socio-demographic variables.

The typical consumer is usually male, of high socio-economic level, single, a graduate and aged between 40 and 49 years; he lives in the North and is self employed (Corno, 2002).

Putting the average national expenditure on organic food equal to 100, the sectors of the population with medium-high and high incomes show the highest propensity for spending. It is usually a case of young families (the shopper being under 44 years in age), living in the North (North West and North East), with 3-4 members (Ismea, 2003).

Analysis of purchase dynamics draws attention to the fact that the organic food sector, overall, shows growing widespread consensus in all the segments of consumers considered. The North West is confirmed as the area with the greatest consumption of organic products, with an expenditure growth rate, with respect to 2001, of 26.1%. It is followed by the North East (21.3%), the Centre (15%) and finally the South (13.1%). The South, the leading area for total food consumption, is in fact still in last place for expenditure on organic products, partly because of the difficulty of finding these products locally.

In March 2000, Demoskopea (Biobarometro, 2001) carried out a survey on organic food commissioned by Dieterba on a sample of 10,000 people. Out of 63% that had never bought organic products, 19% wanted to try them. Results indicate that 37% of the sample had purchased a product organically produced at least once; of this percentage, 11 % were disappointed; 26 % would buy organic products again; 21% were regular users; 5% were occasional users.

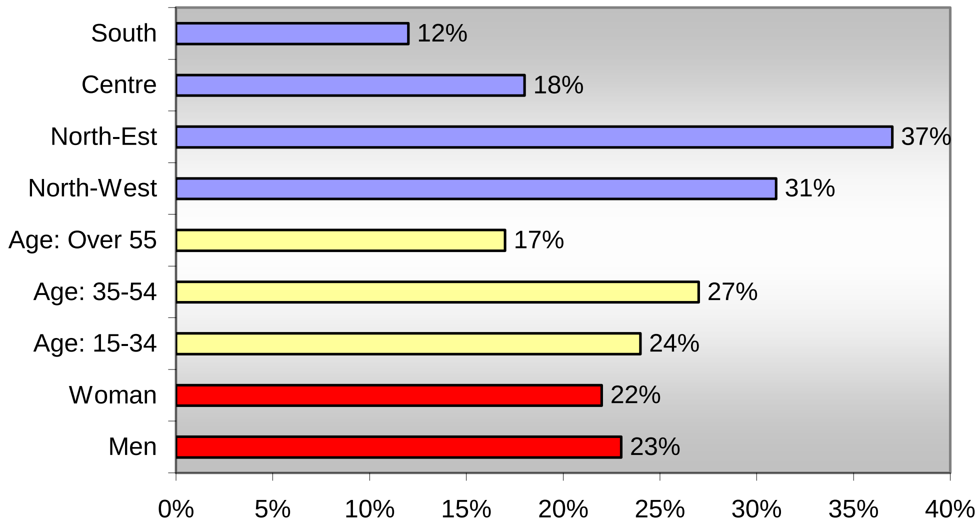
Male consumers account for 55% of the category, females for 45%. 59% of medium-low consumers are females at 41% are males at The large majority of consumers are middle class. 26% ranged in age from 25 to 34 years and 24% from 45 to 54 years.

43% of consumers have reached high school educational level, have children and accept a premium price of 10 per cent. Reasons for purchase are health, protection of the environment, an incentive to agriculture. According to a survey carried out by the Arsia, most consumers know organic products only vaguely and the organic sector encompasses many prejudices and misinformation. Frequent users represent 28% of population (http://www.coopfirenze.it), occasional users 53% and 19% never use organic products.

Fair trade products

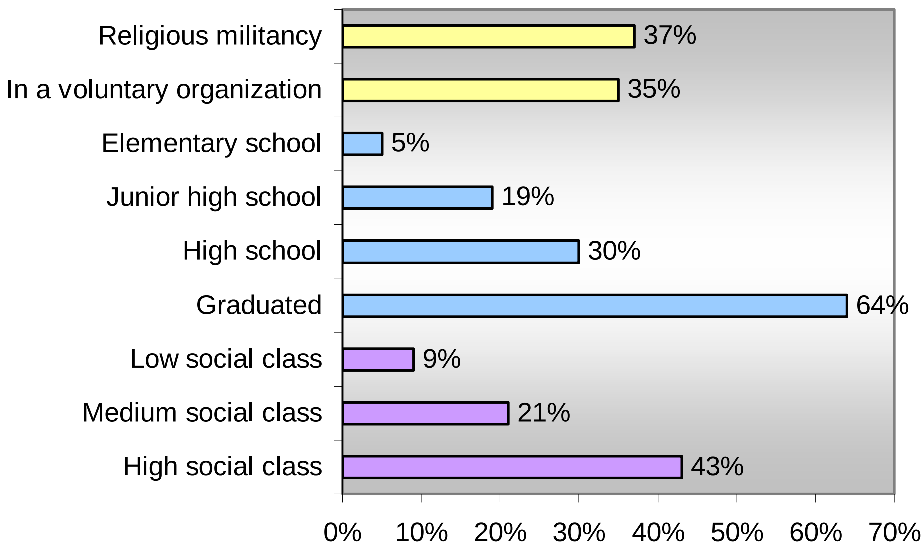
According to the Doxa report, carried out in 2002 on a sample of 5,424 people, the typical consumer is aged between 35 and 55 years (but can also be younger), is academically well qualified, lives mainly in Northern Italy and may be either male or female (see figure). In general he buys in World Shops and only recently has begun to frequent supermarkets and hypermarkets; he rarely buys products at occasional sales points like markets organised by the parish or associations.

Figure. The demographic profile of consumers of fair trade products



Source: Doxa (2003)

Figure. The social profile of consumers of fair trade products



Source: Doxa (2003)

1.6 Social embeddedness

The origins of the new trends in food consumption mentioned in the preceding paragraphs can be found in the changes in Italian society as a whole and in the influences that the entire social context has on the individual consumer.

The changes in the society are obviously an expression of the changes in the heritage of values, ideology, culture and customs that take place with time along with the evolution in knowledge, technology, economic activity and relationship with the natural environment. With time these changes have affected, as for other forms of consumption, the relationship with food; directly, through the evolution of the times and places reserved for food consumption, of the buying power of the consumer, of information and of knowledge; but also indirectly, through the conditioning originating from the "social" background of the individual consumer, and thus from value, cultural and behavioural contexts.

To these general tendencies, in more recent times, have been added specific stimuli from the processes of post modernity, which guide the present evolutionary phase of society and of which the changes in character and significance of consumption (even food products) are the most efficient expression (Fabris, 2003).
Within these processes one observes a growing individualisation and decontextualisation of the relation with food, in which the strongly individual adhesion (personal declination) to the already existing "life styles" (behavioural models) multiplies the "consumption styles" to infinity. Moreover in this sphere consumption of food becomes sign and communication of the many identities of the consumer. *Eclecticism* and *syncretism* appear to be the factors qualifying the postmodern consumer and fundamental dimensions of the new *complexity* of society and markets. Other key words which define the condition in which the consumer operates in this phase are flexibility, discontinuity, liberty, refusal of rationality, experimentation, aesthetic and cultural pluralism.
But the post modern society is also the *network* society. And so, parallel to the growth of the importance of subjectivity and distinctivity (both in the form of *individualism* and *individuality*) the social dimension of consumption finds new force. In this dimension the fact of belonging to specific social networks, not necessarily tied to common territorial contexts, but united in the sharing of values, identities, needs *(virtual communities),* continues to have or acquires new importance. In this dimension consumption becomes a generator of sociality, a powerful instrument of aggregation, it takes the form of matrix of the community. Within these relationships information is exchanged, knowledge is reinforced, meanings are defined and shared.
This search for new forms of sociality includes attention to values traceable to the ethical sphere, to values common to large segments of society and that some groups and movements defend more explicitly. The sense of belonging to specific networks or the individual willingness to satisfy these needs finishes by conditioning, completely or more often in part, the behaviours of consumption or at least, in this phase, the attitudes towards consumption, the expectations with regard to the world of production. Into this context appears the new consumer demands regarding cultural conservation, social equity and solidarity and animal welfare, and thus the consensus around the supply of products able to satisfy such requirements.

2. Barriers to consumption of sustainable food products

The main barriers to the development of consumption of sustainable products can be traced to certain common elements:

- limited or imprecise knowledge of different methods of production;
- limited or confused knowledge of brands and certification bodies;
- inadequate quality of products;
- too a high price, especially in difficult economic times;
- scarce availability of products.

Organic products

Like all other food sectors, organic foods find themselves faced with a new, unexpected and quite difficult scenario. The choice of the term "sector", is actually an inappropriate one: it would be more accurate to speak of a set of activities without any precise features shared by all (Tirelli, 2003). But quite apart from the general tendency to prefer products grown using ecologically sound techniques and offering greater health-enhancing qualities, the problem remains of establishing a classification of what does and does not constitute an "organic product". This is all the more important in a market in which purchasing patterns are so difficult to assess.
The growth prospects expected in the years up to 2000, which much of the trade had started to take for granted, have been negatively affected by changes in the economic situation. The fact that western nations have been getting increasingly bogged down in recession and the dark shadows that have been cast over world public opinion in these last few years have done nothing to help the development of a

merchandise area that is still widely perceived as a “rich man’s pleasure”, restricted to a culturally advanced elite.
Despite the increase in demand, caused by its entry into the large-scale retail trade, the scattered nature of production (already a significant factor in the conventional food trade, but ever more so in the organic business) causes a lengthening of the production chain, which accentuates the dispersion of value along its whole length. This produces two types of inequality (De Vincenzi, 2003): on the one hand it reduces the profit margins for the producers - and to a certain extent halts their growth -, and on the other, keeps up the level of consumer prices, which compared with conventional produce are still too high to attract a large proportion of consumers.
Thus many studies on consumers of organic products (Pinton, 1999; Zanoli and Naspetti, 2002; ISMEA, 2003) emphasise that the main factor in the non-buying of these products is the **high price**. It should be said however that these data refer to an average level of information and sensitivity to food on the part of the consumers. In fact, the importance of price as discriminating factor in the buying of organic products is inversely proportional to the degree of information, sensitivity and motivation of the consumer on food problems; the more the consumer is informed on and sensitised to the benefits deriving from a correct diet, the more the price plays a smaller role in the choice of what to eat.

Another obstacle to the diffusion of knowledge and consumption of organic products is undoubtedly represented by **insufficient,** non-homogeneous **information,** which is in any case too complex for consumers of conventional products. Efficient communication is also lacking, even at institutional level, for information on the method of organic farming and how it differs from other farming methods, including low-input methods. The press and the media have begun to give some space to organic farming (in the newspapers that deal with food and diet, but also in weeklies, a few dailies, occupying even the economic pages); the information supplied however is not always correct or complete (regarding the requirements of the products, production and control, quality, economic data). Part of the blame for this lies with the sector itself, that does not have the capability to communicate efficiently. This lack may be due to technical reasons (knowledge about the means available, professionalism and resources), but the real reason is mainly “cultural”: the 50,000 Italian operators have not yet been able to provide themselves with a joint instrument for constructing a strong image of the sector and spread the [organic]culture, while there are so many individual activities in existence, often valuable, but that are not able to speak to the consumers in an adequate way (Didero, 2000).

The lack of information does not regard only the media, but often what is missing is that little essential piece which is the information at the sales point (Didero, 2000). Without an adequate capacity for information in the distribution chains the sector is not very visible and the consumers that do not already know about it certainly have difficulty in finding it, whether it is found within its own family of merchandise, the most conceptually correct location, or whether it is under the “health umbrella”, an improper location but providing a good visibility.

Other barriers to consumption of organic products can be considered:

- the quality of organic vegetables does not always merit the high cost. Consumers often find that the products are not as fresh as conventional products and the lack of freshness of the products often affects the external look of the products: organic fresh foods are perceived as having less visual appeal than their non-organic equivalents, while it is precisely this imperfect appearance that makes them wholesome and natural.
- Some perceive the quality of the **taste** to be variable. Dalla ricerca di Zanoli e Naspetti (2002) it emerges that most users say that they purchase organic products "in spite of taste". It is possible that this consideration refers not to the product tout court but to certain processed organic products that offer lesser sensorial satisfaction because of the lack of additives or reduction of sweetening ingredients."
- Sometimes the **selection is poor**; this can be blamed on the organisation of the distribution system (in the different circuits operating: specialised retail and otherwise, large-scale distribution, markets, etc) which is still very inefficient.

Typical and regional products

Elements of weakness of typical and regional products include the following:

- **difficulty of location**, although their diffusion in the big distribution chains has noticeably reduced this problem (also contributing to their being better known to the public);
- **the sometimes high price of these products** compared to equivalent high-consumption products, an aspect which varies greatly according to the type of product considered (the specialities produced in limited quantities, in specific areas and well known can be very costly compared to other products) and the circuits on which they are found commercially; the high price is seen as a big barrier both for regular customers and occasional ones (ISMEA, 2003);
- consumer diffidence concerning the effective superiority of **organoleptic and nutritional quality** of these products (the doubts and uncertainties on product quality mainly regard consumers that do not regularly buy typical products) (ISMEA, 2003);
- **incorrect and incomplete information** regarding the specific characteristics of the products and the guarantee system which are fundamental to the problem.

Ethical products

In the case of fair trade products, in the past the main barrier was the difficulty of locating the products and the **inefficiency of the distribution system.** In fact the absence of retail sales points (world shops) in many important urban centres, or their location in not very accessible zones, did not help visibility and diffusion of information as regards commercialisation of ethical products.

To meet these inconveniences an ever increasingly wide range of fair trade products is sold through “conventional” sales points: both at microdistribution level (shops specialised in organic products, food retailers, etc.), and at big distribution level. According to data reported by AcNielsen, they are by now available in 35% of national distribution, including a large part of the most important names on the commercial scene of the mass market in Italy (Selva, 2002). And it was in fact the development of a commercial relationship with big distribution channels that allowed the fair trade products to go beyond a market dimension tied to traditional sales points only and in some cases to reach significant quotas of the market.

The problem remains of the **scanty knowledge about this commercial circuit**, still very much the territory of a specific segment of consumers, and above all the **lack of awareness of the ethical principles** which are behind the purchase of such products. On this point, according to many operators in the circuit, the entry of fair trade products into the big distribution chain may continue to play an essential role in increasing the volume of sales in the circuit but at the same time may impede the increase in consumer knowledge at the moment of purchase.

Consumer interest for “ethical” products is a market trend and as such big distribution has inserted them into its own system of reference, binding producers to own brands which guarantee the ethicalness or to forms of external certification. But the risk is that this becomes only a different form of consumption, in which the conscience of the consumer is tranquillised by a label, without changing his attitude to the significance of the price that he pays for that product and thus without substantially modifying his behaviour as “unaware” consumer.

Even among the most careful and informed consumers, however, the willingness to participate in a distribution chain of alternative commercialisation, different from the conventional market, is often limited by the perception that they have of the **quality of the product**. If the widening of the circuit and the opening up to traditional transformation and distribution firms has guaranteed a greater security, it has not yet resolved the problem of “different” taste of some products. Typical of this is the case of the symbolic product of fair trade: coffee. In Italy the degree of faithfulness to the brand for this product is very high, the search for a particular taste to which the consumer is used to often becomes more important than the ethical motivations of purchase.

In the case of products concerned with the principles of “animal welfare” the fundamental problem is their **non-availability on the market**. Here it is a case again of the formation and diffusion of sensitivity towards this value, an attitude towards consumption, regarding which all the factors concerned with the evolution of the cultural and values models come into play.

BARRIERS TO CONSUMPTION		Ecological products (Organic-Integrated products)	Regional products	Ethical Products	
				fair trade products	animal welfare products
Quality	*freshness*	X			
	taste	X	X	X	
	appearance	X			
Lack of information	*knowledge of methods of production and commercialisation*	X	XX	XX	XXX
	knowledge of brands and certification bodies	X	XX	XX	
Price		XX	XX	X	
Avaibility of products		XX	XX	XX	XXX

3. Possibilities of removing the above-mentioned barriers

The **high price** of the products is a barrier to purchase and a common factor to all sustainable production. The possibilities of removing this barrier, according to us, does not lie so much in the lowering of price at consumption as the increase in the relation quality-price and in the improvement in the perception that consumers have of these products. For typical and organic products promoting organoleptic and nutritional characteristics of the products and transparency of the production and certification process are important actions in order to gain the acceptance of a higher price by consumers. Regarding fair trade products on the other hand, to knock down the price barrier and reach a price perceived as “fair” also by the consumers it is necessary to adopt the principle of “transparent price” (or as one begins to say for some typical products which are excessively expensive, the “source price”), unfortunately still not widespread enough today.

Another big barrier to purchase of sustainable products is **lack of information**: increasing knowledge about production methods and certification systems is certainly a fundamental aspect in the stimulation of consumption.
Information directed towards the consumer should be an axis carrying all the promotional activities. Action should be taken as follows:

- through education and information programmes concerning production methods and the requirements of sustainable products. Goal: to provide emotional and rational back-up to the sustainability concept in a variety of ways: description, demonstration, information presenting in the best possible light the real benefits for the consumer. Tools: information campaigns, events, differentiated displays, eye-catching in-store layouts, etc...
- promoting the consumption of sustainable products in canteens (school and hospital canteens, etc.).

In this context, it is clear how fundamental is the role played by the institutions, which have to move in a twofold direction: the education and information of consumers and the promotion of programmes of training and development aimed at improving the organisational and managerial capacities of the agents involved in the production and commercialisation of sustainable products.

To improve the information-communication system in the organic sector, possible action could be as follows:

- better and less complex information on the label;
- more comprehensible text in the case of products from overseas;
- a definition centred more on organic as production system rather than sociological phenomenon;
- homogeneous communication in the different chains.

The true problem according to Didero (2003) is not so much in knowing the minutest details of an individual product, certified by the control body that assumes the responsibility, as in being able to understand what happens in a chain as complicated as the organic one. It would be sufficient to have a public body - like the EU, the Ministry or the Regions - organising a sort of “information desk” for consumers and talking to them in a comprehensible language.

The development of the market for typical products also needs to be thought out starting from the consumer and in this situation initiatives are necessary which are directed towards raising the level of knowledge and information in the Italian consumer:

- on the significance of national and community instruments supporting typical products (awareness of the different marks and of the significance of what lies behind the marks);
- on the individual products (production method, history, culture of the product, as well as its organoleptic characteristics).

Correct information can also reduce the risk of “disinformation” of the consumer who in fact frequently understands industrial products also to be typical products due to marketing strategies and publicity campaigns.

A possible solution for awakening an interest in typical products in the consumer is represented by markets of traditional and typical products, ie., where farmers sell their own typical produce directly to the public. These initiatives, found periodically in Italian town squares, could be an instrument for promotion of the products, a form of commercialisation and integration of income for farmers involved but, in a more general sense, also a way of constructing a direct relationship between the townsman and the rural world.

Likewise in the case of ethical products the overcoming of the barrier of lack of information appears to be fundamental for the development of the market: a consumer better informed on the criteria which are behind the fair trade movement is also able to carry out an informed act of purchase in the sales points of traditional distribution.

Regarding the development of the market of “animal welfare” products, only greater awareness on the part of the consumer of the methods of conventional rearing (a shocking but indispensable realisation of the frequently not-animal-friendly methods used in industrial farming) and the possible alternatives will encourage the development of sensitivity towards such problems.

Lack of information is also strictly bound to the consumer’s perception of the **scarce availability** of sustainable products: if the big distribution chains are to play an important role in increasing the availability of these products, they should improve their visibility in the sales points emphasising their distinctive qualities compared to conventional products.

In the specific case of organic products, the problems of inefficiency that are still met with in the organisation of distribution (mainly in balancing the offer with the demand), necessitates action to improve coordination between producers and between producers and distributors.

IV. STRATEGIES TO STIMULATE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

With regard to the above-mentioned barriers and possibilities to remove them, the possible strategies to stimulate sustainable consumption are various, strongly integrated and traceable to different fields of action: the availability of sustainable products, their adequacy in terms of sustainability attributes, the communication to consumers, the promotion of sustainable products, the policies and the other forms of public involvement.

The **availability of products** represents a first fundamental step towards the achievement of new consumption models and behaviours, in which the consumption of sustainable products are part of the food consumption habits and consequently of the consumers' purchase routines. To this end the presence of different distribution channels (from the more innovative direct channels to modern distribution channel), the availability of adequate volumes of produce and the continuity of supply (in terms of items) are important. That implicates the improvement of co-ordination among producers (in case it could offer some benefits in the supply management) and among these and distributors. Another element which is important in order to favour the preservation of artisanal/local productions, particularly significant for local socio-economic contexts and/or for the sustainable features of production processes, is the availability of technologies suitable for small scale production systems, including the farm scale.

The **adequacy of sustainable products** in terms of presence and consistency of the sustainability attributes, as well as in terms of the all consumers' needs satisfying capacity represents a necessary condition for the achievement of new consumption models. With regard to the first point, there should be an intrinsic sustainability, interesting the product 'core', but also there should be consistency in the other product attributes (packaging, label, image, etc.). The building of such consistency should involve all the agents and derive from an agreement among them, on the basis of shared meanings about sustainability; these could also find expression in elements for evaluating production-consumption sustainability. These processes can be foster through initiatives (co-ordinated by agents' organisations or public institutions/agencies) aimed at promoting the interaction among agents and, if necessary, their training on specific aspects.
The consumers' needs satisfying capacity (taste, appearance, functionality) often represents a pre-condition for a positive attitude towards the sustainability attributes.

The necessity to involve consumers in the process of development of SFSCs implicates the necessity to pay particular attention to the aspects related to **communication**. That through an appropriate information activity towards consumers, by using a communication style based on a right balance between factual and emotional elements. An educational activity, aimed at allowing consumers to (re)gain (lost) knowledge in relation to the production methods and the geographical and socio-cultural contexts of production processes, could be even more effective, for the involvement of still more important components of the decisional process.
Such communication practices should also allow consumers to understand the particular quality/price ratio of these products and so doing favouring their acceptance of the price premium. Still with regard to the price, the presence of a system guaranting the price transparency/traceability can represent another important communication instrument, particularly for those products whose premium price is traceable to ethical reasons. Also the certification system serves a communication function, being able to strongly affect the consumers' decisional process, and so it is essential its development in terms of clarity and coherence.
Among the actors of the communication activities towards consumers public institutions play a relevant role. In addition to the definition of an adequate certification system, they can make an important contribution to the change of attitudes and behavioural patterns through information campaigns and by promoting educational/training activities.
The promotion of collective consumption occasions as well as of meeting occasions between producers and consumers can be as effective for the amplification effect they can have on the information and awareness action.

On the side of **promotion**, in addition to the actions aimed at promoting sustainable products directly in the places of purchase, the synergies with other initiatives of safeguarding/promotion of the rural resources are particularly relevant, with regard both to the opportunities coming for producers and to the more effective re-connection between production and consumption. Furthermore, they allow to implement strategies differentiated for the specific contexts.

The role of **policy misures** in creating favourable conditions to sustainable production and promoting consumption is also important. In particular, rural-agricultural policies should create a better context for preserving and reinforcing the sustainable production realties, as well as for favouring the conversion of not sustainable production systems. Hygienic rules or other regulations should be implemented with flexibility, in order to allow small scale production systems to survive and take all the opportunities provided by the evolution of demand. Financial supports for promotion/certification/communication initiatives are also important, in order to provide small producers/producers' associations with useful means of connection with consumers.

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