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MASTER'S DEGREE IN: FOOD AND BEVERAGE INNOVATION AND MANAGEMENT

ITALIAN CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES
FOR ORGANIC PASTA AND ATTITUDE
TOWARDS PRODUCT CLAIMS
EXPERIMENTAL THESIS

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

“Modern” consumer’s food choices appear to have fundamentally changed in recent years. Along with the traditional ones (taste, price and convenience), evolving value drivers in food consumption are safety, nutrition and health, social and environmental impact (Ringquist et al., 2016). While choosing which food to buy and eat, consumer becomes aware of pursuing multiple goals; both individual ones (dietary and health), and collective ones. The latter refer to protecting territorial food systems, reducing environmental ‘footprint’ (i.e. the environmental impact), enhancing the sense of community in accordance with ethical principles (Béné et al., 2019). The increasing attention in safety and quality has resulted into a deep transformation in whole food sector, from production facilities to consumption patterns (Food SRL, 2020; Mascarello et al., 2015).

Pasta is the most popular food in the world, and dried pasta for Italians is the food representative their culinary tradition and culture (Altamore et al., 2018). Italy is the first pasta producer and is the world's largest country consumer of pasta with 23.1 kg per capita per year (IPO, 2020). Although, the trend in healthier consumption pattern could be the reason why Italian consumption of pasta is slightly decreasing (Altamore et al., 2019; IPO, 2020). Changes in lifestyles and increased knowledge of different culinary cultures have influenced consumption habits and pasta preferences. In addition, alongside common durum-wheat dried pasta, other types of dried pasta, like whole-wheat, organic, local and “ancient” grains are gaining more importance (Altamore et al., 2018).

Due to the growing competition in pasta sector, communication strategies can give a key contribution in distinguish and differentiate products on the market by communicating distinctive features (Mascarello et al., 2015; Romano et al., 2018).

In the pasta market, there has been an increase in advertisements, claims, and labels that evoke origin of the product and related attributes: its territory, traditions, culture, production methods, etc (Altamore et al., 2018). These are regarded as main attributes that shape expectations and affect preferences (Cavicchi and Santini, 2018; Nowicki and Sikora, 2014).

Indication appearing by means of nutrition labels and package-based claims advertising hedonic or health benefits have been demonstrated as a powerful way of influencing consumer choice of food products (Bialkova et al., 2016; Corallo et al., 2019). As for pasta, consumers seem sensitive to claims placed on packaging, although health (e.g. low-fat, high fibre content) and quality claims (e.g. origin, organic) appear far more effective than environmental claims (Altamore et al., 2019).

Recently, “ancient” grain species – such as thuranicum wheat – or even “modern” (i.e. ameliorated) but somewhat set-aside varieties like Senatore Cappelli experienced renewed interest in the market (Boukid et al., 2018). Specifically, “ancient” wheat and local durum wheat varieties have been used in a wide range of end products like pasta, bread, biscuits, snacks (Giunta et al., 2020).

Given consumers’ positive attitudes towards products made of these varieties, Italian pasta producers perceived them as opportunity to develop differentiation strategies on an increasingly competitive market (Contò, 2016).

Luxury in food is not a new topic in consumer research; the potential of food as “luxury” market has been recognized but knowledge is still scarce and interpretation of the concept on food is hard and contentious (Hartmann et al., 2016). According to van der Veen (2003) there are no specific foods that are universally considered to be a luxury; rather, it depends on place, time and society; “*they are those foods that a society deems extravagant and unnecessary*” as such, both needs and luxuries are relative, not stable, highly person-dependent. For Berry (1994), luxuries in the food sector are things that offer pleasure and enjoyment and are characterized by a qualitative refinement (such as taste, texture) of a basic need (e.g. fresh bread instead of just bread for satisfying hunger) that can symbolize prestige and exclusiveness (van der Veen, 2003).

This dissertation work is part of an innovation project promoted by *Consorzio Marche Biologico* approved as part of the Marche Region European Innovation Programme (EIP). The pilot project “BIODiversity2Food” seek to reinforce the organic arable crops supply-chain in the Marche, by experimenting and disseminating new technical and managerial solutions. The goal is the recovery, characterization and enhancement of “ancient” varieties and the identification of genetic materials suitable for organic farming systems in the Marche. One of the project tasks aimed at analysing consumer’ preference and communication strategies with respects to “ancient” grain organic production.

In the field of consumer science, this dissertation work deals with consumer behaviour regarding pasta, and explores the determinants of quality perception by analysing consumer perception, beliefs, experience and knowledge for pasta made with “ancient” wheat varieties.

The purpose was to investigate the underlying motivations of pasta consumption and how consumer expectations and choice is influenced by product claims as cues of quality attributes. Consumer attitudes toward innovation and enhancement of these “ancient” varieties was also explored.

The study explored the point of view of a group of organic consumers with respect to the concept of exclusivity/luxury applied to the pasta product. The basic idea was to understand intrinsic characteristics and typical traits that possibly can target pasta as superior or exclusive, and how best communicate this feature on the packaging. The study aimed at answering the following research questions: How do consumers perceive “ancient” grains pasta? What is luxury pasta? How can wheat be the distinctive element of luxury in pasta? Can “ancient” grains be considered a luxury ingredient? How consumer would like to be informed of luxury features?

At the purpose to answer these questions, qualitative marketing research was carried out using the focus group technique, a methodology used in social science research as well as in marketing and other business area. It consists on a structured discussion with a small group of people, run by a facilitator, that generate qualitative data on a precise topic of interest, using a set of open-ended questions (Masadeh, 2012).

Two focus groups were held.

The first focus group (A) was conducted with the aim of exploring consumer preferences with respect to the consumption of durum wheat pasta in general.

The second focus group (B) was centred into the concept of exclusivity/luxury applied to food and pasta product.

This dissertation is structured as follows: Chapter 1 will give an overview on the topic based on the scientific literature about Italian’s preference for pasta and the reasons for the increasing interest in “ancient” grains. It will also illustrate the quality evaluation for food choice, especially in regard with the main quality attributes, and the use of product claims in the current pasta market. Chapter 2 describes the methodology of research and the design of the two experimental studies. It also reports the results. In Chapter 3 results of focus group will be discussed and in the final Chapter some Conclusions are outlined.

CHAPTER 1

PASTA: WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

Pasta is a popular and common food all over the world, and one of the most representative of Italian culture and identity. Furthermore, for Italians, whatever the type of pasta or the ingredient, be it dried semolina, dry egg, fresh egg pasta or stuffed pasta, it is still recognized as a culinary symbol of tradition.

In 2019, nearly 16 million tons of dried pasta were produced in the world, more than the double of the 7 million tons produced 20 years ago (IPO, 2020).

Italy, with more than 120 pasta factory and 300 milling industries focussing on milling durum wheat and transforming into wheat semolina, is the world leader in the pasta production. With 3.3 million tons of pasta produced in 2018, Italy is ahead of the USA, Turkey and Brazil production (ITALIA, 2020)

Even though Italy is the first producer, Italian semolina is not enough for global demand, that has been continually increasing, and consequently, 30 – 40 % must be imported from extra-UE countries. Italian exports increased much more than domestic consumption, consisting in more than 50% turnover coming from foreign markets of UE (Germany, France, United Kingdom,), and extra UE (USA and Japan) (ISMEA, 2020).

Even with Corona-pandemic situation, Italian pasta confirmed a positive performance in foreign markets; data by sector show that in the first seven months of 2020 Italian pasta exports increased by 25 % in terms of volume and 26 % in terms of values compared to the period January – July 2019 (Food SRL, 2020). Furthermore, exports of dried durum wheat semolina pasta in first 4 months of 2020 increased of 40 % with the respect of total exports last year (2019). In the national market, pasta being sold for 75 % on large scale, didn't suffer of closure of Horeca channels: first six months of the year selling counted +7,9% in volume and +13,5% in value compared to first semester 2019 (ISMEA, 2020).

Despite the gradual decrease in domestic consumption in last years, Italian consumers are those with the highest per capita level of consumption (23.2 Kg), followed by Tunisia (17 kg) and Venezuela (12 kg) (Altamore et al., 2019; IPO, 2020).

Recently, new food, cultural and social trends are redesigning pasta sector and reports on pasta consumption find out that consumers are seeking for higher quality and wide variety: Industry in food sector are asked to innovate, thanks to development in production processes, to expand production lines, differentiate items by shape, ingredients and techniques, while focusing on reducing the environmental impact and meeting demand for health-oriented products (Food SRL, 2020). Wide range of alternatives are now available, from whole grains, fibre rich or protein rich pasta and to the use of “ancient” grains and special flours (i.e. legume flour), product containing oat, linseed. Much attention also in gluten-free option that include the use of no-wheat ingredients like rice, maize traditionally used in oriental cuisine (noodles, udon) or starch-based preparation, however still many technological limitations must be overcome for this sector (Protopapa, 2009; Troiani, 2010).

1.1 Pasta market: Ancient wheat varieties

Italian pasta market offer includes two main segments: dried pasta (semolina, eff, stuffed) and fresh pasta (egg, filled). Regulation DPR 187/2001, concerning the production and sale of milling products and pasta, it defines dry pasta as the one exclusively obtained from semolina (*semola/semolato*) and prohibits the use of common wheat (*T. aestivum*). “Durum wheat semolina pasta” and “low grade durum wheat semolina pasta” are the names to be used for the products obtained by drawing, rolling, and drying a dough prepared only with durum wheat semolina and water. According to Italian regulation, dry (durum wheat) pasta is clearly distinguished from egg pasta, special pasta or other food preparation made with different ingredients.

Durum wheat (*Triticum turgidum durum*), a key raw material for producing many traditional foods of the Mediterranean diet, belongs to cereals, a large group of grass plants. Cereal (true cereals and pseudo-cereals), currently furnishing at least two-thirds of the world’s food calories, represent a major staple food in most countries throughout the world (Čurná and Lacko-Bartošová, 2017). *Triticum* (wheat) belongs to Fam. *Poaceae*, commonly known as *Graminaceae* that includes over 600 genera and more than 10000 species (Boukid et al., 2018). In terms of total world production, wheat is the third major cereal crop in the world, after maize and rice (Saia et al., 2019). Nowadays about 95% of the cultivated wheat worldwide is *T. aestivum*, while most of the remaining 5% is *T. (turgidum) durum* (Boukid et al., 2018).

Archaeologist findings, show genus *Triticum* “wheat” was the first cultivated crop more than 10.000 years ago, by populations in “Fertile Crescent”, enabling settlement and

civilization start (Cooper, 2015). “Hulled wheats” (like *T. monococcum* - einkorn), that is a wheat where the kernel retains its husk during harvest, were the earliest domesticated species and the ancestors of current wheats (Righetti et al., 2016). During natural breeding and genetic manipulation, many species evolved from diploid to tetraploid species as *T. turgidum* and subspecies, until more recently hexaploidy species (*T.aestivum*, *T. spelta*) About etymology of the name, according to Varrone, it comes from “*tritum*” for practise used to separate kernel from spikes and “*turgidum*” from latin “*túrgeo*” meaning swollen, of turgid aspect (Colonie, 1931).

During evolution under domestication, wheat plants have undergone significant changes aimed at avoiding lodging, preventing yield losses through seed shattering, minimizing seed dormancy, and increasing both seed size and number (Boukid et al., 2018). Major wheat species were continually improved and transformed into highly productive crops to feed humankind and satisfy increasing demands in terms of both quantity and quality. On the contrary, low yield varieties, were gradually abandoned due to dietary and economic changes, as a consequence to improved technology and breeding programmes (Righetti et al., 2016). The main results of this revolution were the development of modern varieties characterized by higher yields, a reduced susceptibility to diseases and insects, an increased tolerance to environmental stresses, and a homogeneous maturation (Dinu et al., 2018). Whilst these intensive breeding programs and the complete replacement of “ancient” local breeds with modern varieties, concomitant decrease in genetic variability and a gradual impoverishment of the nutritional and nutraceutical properties of the wheat occurred (Dinu et al., 2018).

In last years, enhanced consumer attention on healthy and equilibrated diet, traditional products and low-input agricultural systems, prompted into a renewed interest in old durum wheat cultivars. These old varieties, recognized as healthy and beneficial as compared to modern cereals cultivars (Giunta et al., 2020) are commonly referred with the name “ancient wheat”; including old cultivars and landraces, have been rediscovered by consumers, bakers, millers, and farmers as those preserving genetic variability and reducing genetic erosion (Boukid et al., 2018; Colomba and Gregorini, 2011).

Some studies have confirmed the influence of genotype, environment, and their interaction on the expression of quality traits, such as protein content, technological properties and on the accumulation of specific metabolites (Beleggia et al., 2013; Shewry, 2018). For this reason, despite the extensive literature covering the phytochemical

composition of wheat, a comparison of wheat varieties is still considered a challenge (Dinu et al., 2018; Shewry and Hey, 2015).

According to research, emmer (*T. monococcum*) and einkorn (*T. dicoccum*), significantly differ in term of carotenoid and lutein content, as compared to “bread wheat”. Emmer also has a higher fibre content, antioxidant concentrations, higher protein digestibility, high resistant-starch content and a slower in vitro digestibility of carbohydrates (Čurná and Lacko-Bartošová, 2017). Differences in content of soluble dietary fibres, proteins, and lipids (mostly unsaturated fatty acids were also found for spelt, emmer, and einkorn as compared to modern wheats (Shewry and Hey, 2015). In addition, they also have a greater proportion of rapidly digestible starch (RDS) and higher starch digestion index (SDI) as compared to “bread wheat”. Moreover, emmer, einkorn, spelt also count a higher content in trace elements, while a wider spectrum of phenolic compounds has been detected in old common wheat varieties compared to modern ones (Prandi et al., 2017; Righetti et al., 2016).

Due to the current increase of coeliac disease, much attention in studies was addressed to protein fractions, gluten quantity and quality of “ancient” wheat varieties (Prandi et al., 2017). In particular, durum wheat breeding programs, cultivars with higher quality standard like gluten quality, stability and strength, were developed. In relation to both technological and health properties, glutenin and gliadin subunits and the level of expression of gluten protein sub-fractions are now under investigation (De Santis et al., 2017). Research is still on-going, nevertheless, among the hypothesis of possible low toxicity of “ancient” grain is a lower content of toxic peptides after digestion (Prandi et al., 2017). In a recent study, aiming to investigate a possible dietetic alternative to a gluten free diet for gluten sensitive non-coeliac subjects (NCGS), some preliminary positive results have been obtained for Senatore Cappelli pasta (traditional Italian wheat variety) as compared to a standard commercial wheat (Ianiro et al., 2019).

In addition to health reasons, also environment and sustainability concerns are among the additional reasons behind the reintroduction of “ancient” grains (Boukid et al., 2018). Indeed, some peculiar traits of “ancient” landraces and old cultivars have strong impact on cultivation and management: their lower yield potentials make them suitable to low-input systems (sowing rates and nitrogen fertilization) and their adaptability fits with the organic production and cultivation in marginal areas (Mefleh et al., 2018; Prandi et al., 2017).

The expression “ancient grain” and “ancient wheat” has not a universal definition neither in scientific nor in common language (Boukid et al., 2018). In Italy the term “ancient grain”

is mainly used with a time-limit notion, referring to wheat species that remained unchanged over the last hundred years, including species locally cultivated before genetic manipulation and/or improved varieties formed before 1940 (Boukid et al., 2018; Dinu et al., 2018). Modern species have been extensively modified and subjected to cross-breeding in what is commonly referred to as the “Green Revolution”. This term was developed to refer to a set of research and technological transfer initiatives that occurred between the 1930s and the late 1960s. Nazareno Strampelli, a geneticist and the initiator of The Green Revolution, in Europe and in the World, systematically applied Mendel's laws to modify the rust resistance, early flowering, wheat maturity and short straw. As a consequence, Italian wheat production doubled; an achievement that during the fascist regime was referred to as the “Wheat Battle” (1925–1940). After the Second World War, the Green Revolution started and thereafter researchers concentrated on improving the storage of protein quality, increasing the technological properties and yield (Dinu et al., 2018).

Among the commonly named “ancient wheat” varieties, hulled species like einkorn (*T. monococcum*), emmer (*T. turgidum* ssp. *dicoccum*), khorasan (*T. turgidum* ssp. *turanicum*) and spelt (*T. spelta*), increased in popularity (Cooper, 2015). In addition, within the Genus *Triticum* there are several heritage cultivars varieties: namely Senatore Cappelli also referred to “traditional” (Colomba and Gregorini, 2011), Russello, Timilia or Tumminia and Urria, Autonomia B, Frassineto, Gentil Rosso, Inallettibile, Maiorca, Sieve, Solina, and Verna (Dinelli et al., 2011; Dinu et al., 2018).

Literature’s review suggest that the need of preserving biodiversity, the demand for traditional products, for high-nutritional value food, are the reasons behind the people interest in these grains and wheats (Giunta et al., 2020). In food industry, product differentiation followed this trend, proposing on the market many product addressing organic, origin, health aspects (Teuber et al., 2016). Indeed, the expression “ancient grain” (that include also “ancient wheat”) is a marketing term which could include either environmental (preserving biodiversity) or health (higher nutrient density) reasons, and that is now considered a meaning attribute for consumer’s quality evaluation and food choice (Teuber et al., 2016).

Ancient grains are generally perceived as healthier, having rich and balanced micronutrient composition, with raw ingredients enhancing the product quality or/and health (Boukid et al., 2018). Recent analyses on compositions of bioactive components and nutritional content of “ancient” wheats, do not support the suggestion that “ancient” wheats

are generally more healthy than modern wheats (Shewry and Hey, 2015). From environmental-sustainability point of view, “ancient” wheat varieties represent an interesting option, being cultivated with environmentally sustainable organic agriculture (Dinu et al., 2018).

The rediscovery of “ancient” grains provides potential alternatives to farmers, consumers, and the food industry (Boukid et al., 2018). In pasta sector, new pasta typologies emerged and spread valuable alternatives to traditional “classic” pasta; these new pasta varieties represent a reply to the consumers requests of healthier and environment-friendly productions, for an improved life-style (Food SRL, 2020). Consequently, the massive usage of advertising message “ancient grain” label in the market is progressively encouraging Italian consumer toward these types of pasta, that may meet their preference while satisfy different needs (e.g. social, esteem and self-actualization) (Altamore et al., 2018).

1.2 Italian consumer preferences for pasta in previous literature

Food quality definition for Italians today it’s a multi-dimensional concept that relates most to their increased knowledge and interest in the link diet-health, their awareness of quality characteristics, and the access to huge amount of information (Mascarello et al., 2015). The evaluation of food product is based on many criteria which importance is varying according to the product category.

The first criteria Italian consumers use to evaluate pasta is related to the organoleptic attributes (taste, appearance, etc.), the second one is associated with the place and methods of production (certifications, organic production, local production, etc.), and finally, the third factor is related to the brand and price (Altamore et al., 2019).

Despite the prominent role of pasta (durum wheat – dry) in Mediterranean diet and international market, studies that investigate pasta in terms of consumer’ quality perception, preference and purchasing behaviour are still scarce. In general term, pasta it is considered as familiar, harmless, and a good meal (Altamore et al., 2019).

Among the motivations for pasta consumption, recent findings mention taste and texture (sensory-experience) as the most relevant attributes. While main drivers in consumer’s purchasing choices features are related to health and origin (Altamore et al., 2017; Contò, 2016).

In Italy, where pasta has always been a key component in the culinary tradition, the origin of the product is also deeply connected to culture, rooted into a territory, region or land (Defrancesco et al., 2017). Wheat-origin is regarded as a quality indicator for pasta. Italian consumer's preferences are for local brands, that appear to be closely connected with local territory and grain cultivation traditions (Altamore et al., 2019). Choosing local origin addresses a plurality of aspects: from one side, it is a more environmentally and climate friendly choice, from the other side, consumers perceive pasta as fresher, safer and healthier products (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015). Local buying supporting the local economy and community through social relationships and/or close proximity is also positively perceived (Altamore et al., 2019; Feldmann and Hamm, 2015).

When talking about healthy orientation in pasta product, many features could be included: from the nutritional content (whole-grain, gluten-free, enriched or high/low in beneficial/toxic component, low glycaemic Index) to the type of production techniques (e.g. organic, natural ingredient, low added artificial). Organic pasta, rather than just environmental aspects, also embodies health aspects (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2013; Tobi et al., 2019). Even though, the association between organic and healthiness has been under critics, questioning if organic food is actually healthier. Still it's relatively strong conviction among consumer, given by a general natural vision (free from chemicals, minimal processing etc.) and health remains main reason to choose organic products (Teuber et al., 2016; Tobi et al., 2019).

Dry pasta works as a perfect example of perceived synergy between healthiness and sustainability (Verain et al., 2016). For instance, Italian consumer show preference is for pasta labelled "100 % *Italiana*", in virtue of the fact that believe Italian pasta is made with Italian durum wheat and consequently it is safe and healthy (Altamore et al., 2019). Other trends from last ISMEA report are for whole-grain pasta, heritage grain, enriched and organic (ISMEA, 2020).

In a marketing prospective, for the identification of consumer preference it's necessary to understand importance consumer give to quality attributes, in order to develop effective strategies and taking into consideration all the factors which may influence buying decisions (Altamore et al., 2019).

1.3 Food choice and Quality attributes

Consumer's food choice is determined by complex mechanisms, driven by a plurality of reasons, massively studied. Food choice motives, and the related importance consumers attach to specific product attributes, explain perceived product quality and also information consumer are sensitive to (Contò, 2016; Defrancesco et al., 2017; Verain et al., 2016).

In consumer's science literature, many methods and approaches have been developed for interpretations and analyses of subjective quality consumer's preferences.

According to a validated economic approach (Steenkamp,1980), the quality perception process (main driver in purchasing choice), is determined by quality cues (previous purchase) and quality attributes (after consumption) (Romeo, 2016). Quality cues are stimuli that shape expectation on product and can be intrinsic (physical characteristics and technical specifications) or extrinsic quality cues such as brand name, price, distribution, outlet, packaging (Brunso et al., 2002). Previously (Nelson,1970 and Darby and Karni,1973) classified quality attributes based on the research-effort consumer make to get the information they want, in search, experience, credence attributes. Search qualities are those that can be verified easily prior to purchase by actual inspection of the good (e.g. colour, brand, price); experience qualities are those that can only be verified after purchase and consumption of the product (e.g. taste, convenience); and credence qualities are those that cannot be verified even after purchase and consumption (e.g. origin, health, organic)(Romeo, 2016).

As mentioned, consumers shape quality perception, prior to consumption, based on extrinsic quality cues: brand, names, generic marks, labelling schemes are all possible ways of providing consumers with information about food quality attributes. What is important to notice is that information in consumer's choice are increasing the ones related to credence attributes, described as intangible characteristic and of difficult evaluation (Brunso et al., 2002; Grunert, 2005).

As example, organic foods, commonly fall into the credence good category, that also include healthiness characteristics (i.e. referring to the production methods), social sustainability attributes (environmental and animal friendliness, and origin), ethic principles. Also for pasta, consumers likely seem to choose products that address credence attributes "local origin" in regard of the wheat (Contò, 2016).

1.4 The role of information and Communication

Since modern consumer enriched agri-food products with many new meanings, and created complex patterns in terms of purchasing choice, communication has become even more a key component of success and an essential tool in a competitive market (Brzozowska et al., 2015).

Labels, marks, logos, product claims, health and environmental claims, are an opportunity to communicate product advantages that shall lead to a higher willingness to pay. Claims are known to enhance demand as they make it easier for consumers to justify a decision (Lemken et al., 2017).

Since “credence” quality attributes (organic, health and origin) are among the most prominent value-added attributes (Teuber et al., 2016), indication for origin, production, nutritional content are increasingly appearing on packaging of food products. Furthermore, also environmental and social responsibility labelling schemes, such as “green” claim, “eco-label”, fair-trade are becoming widely used (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2013; Tobi et al., 2019).

1.4.1 Literature review on communication in pasta market

Pasta market is strongly affected by promotional aggressive strategies: recent studies support the fact that Italian pasta consumers are sensitive to labels, considered as a tool to get more information (Contò, 2016). Producers’ progressively encourage with advertising messages appearing in the form of labels, indications, claims that evoke the context of origin of the product, its territory, traditions, culture, production methods, etc. (that is credence attributes). Examples are organic pasta, whole-wheat, “100 % *Italiana*”, “ancient grain” (Altamore et al., 2018).

From literature emerged that a limited number of studies explored consumers knowledge and attitudes towards these different types of pasta and the influence of product claims: (Aghaei and Bonyadi Naeini, 2018; Altamore et al., 2019, 2018, 2017; Defrancesco et al., 2017; Di Monaco et al., 2004; Foster et al., 2020; Shepherd et al., 2012; Sogari et al., 2019) some of them investigated the sensory liking (Altamore et al., 2018, 2017; Di Monaco et al., 2004; Magalis et al., 2016). Moreover, only two studies explored consumers perceptions towards “ancient” durum wheat varieties (Contò, 2016; Teuber et al., 2016).

The effect of communicating pasta's health benefits among consumers was studied by (Shepherd et al., 2012; Sogari et al., 2019). Sogari (2019), who investigated the effect of different claims, reports that promoting whole-grain pasta with healthy messages increased the choice probability for this kind of goods. Furthermore, health benefits related to a short-term effect, a particular outcome, is likely to be preferred.

Moreover, providing more clear information on health benefits would increase the willingness to adopt and pay a premium price for pasta with high quality features (Altamore et al., 2019, 2017; Dolgoplova and Teuber, 2018; Mialon et al., 2002). In addition, the type of information to be used should specifically target the different type of consumer to be more effective (Sogari et al., 2019). Several studies report a poor knowledge and a low awareness concerning health benefits linked to product claims like "whole grain" "rich in fibre" (Altamore et al., 2017; Foster et al., 2020; Magalis et al., 2016; Sogari et al., 2019). Even if whole-grain products are associated to a general idea of "healthfulness", the lack of an effective health message campaign, promoting these benefits, results in low levels of consumer attention and interest towards whole-grains (Arvola et al., 2007). Moreover, whole-grains products are perceived as more expensive (like "ancient" grain pasta (Contò, 2016) and having less sensorial appeal as compared to the traditional one (Altamore et al., 2019; Arvola et al., 2007; Defrancesco et al., 2017).

It's also important to consider that, consumers behavior is likely to be a routine for pasta, always choosing their preferred brands. Consistently Contò (2016) reports that brand name is considered the most relevant attribute, followed by overcooking (Contò, 2016). In the study of Di Monaco (2004) on consumer's expectation on dried pasta, it is shown that providing information, like the brand name, affects the liking score (hedonic-based) of specific brands of pasta. In other words, consumers change their liking scores when the name of the pasta brand is given, confirming that non-sensory characteristics of food products play an important role in the consumer choice (Di Monaco et al., 2004).

The influence of hedonic factors in consumer's choice have been confirmed in other study (Defrancesco et al., 2017), that explored the importance of environmental attributes (e.g. pasta with lower content of fertilisers). Findings indicate that importance attached to environmental and social responsibility labelling schemes highly depends upon consumer groups attitudes. A significant part is not willing to pay more for products presenting only positive environmental benefits, resulting overall less efficacy of "green" labels when compared nutritional or healthy ones.

Some other studies explored the level importance of packaging in relation to products like pasta, bread and cereals (Altamore et al., 2019; Contò, 2016; Di Monaco et al., 2004; Foster et al., 2020). Despite food products packaging is significant for the consumer choice, in the case of pasta consumers usually purchase their favorite brands and packaging attributes are secondary elements (Altamore et al., 2019; Garber et al., 2000). However, some general consideration can be done. For example, Contò et al. (2016) report that consumers preferred ecological and smart packaging. This is also in line with Altamore et al. (2019) who found that consumers highly prefer recyclable packaging. Another study showed that there is a preference for transparent packages as this allow to assess the colour of the pasta (Di Monaco et al., 2004). In Foster et al. (2020) consumers declared to look to specific words or phrases on packaging such as whole grain, high fibre, low GI (glycaemic index), low sugar/carb etc (Foster et al., 2020).

In regard to the “ancient grain” attribute, limited studies have been carried out. By the way, in reference to heritage cereal product, the work of Wendin (2020) confirms that product claim such as “ancient” is most likely to have a positive impact on the consumer’s preference and/or choice (Wendin et al., 2020).

The positive attitude reported in literature, could be deemed to intrinsic attribute either environmental-friendly (e.g. preserving biodiversity) or health dimension (e.g. higher nutrient density) to which “ancient” or “old” variety are linked. Among others, Teuber et al.(2016) used a set 5 attributes (healthy, expensive, exclusive, trendy) in his experiment to investigate the level of awareness and perceptions on ‘ancient grains’(Teuber et al., 2016). Other attributes possibly connected to “ancient” grain varieties were: environmentally friendly /ecological/sustainable, not genetically modified, tasty, wholesome, romantic, do not causing allergies and high in fibres. Ancient wheat varieties, being considered to be healthy, nutritious and environment-friendly, are perceived in a very similar way as organic products (Teuber et al., 2016).

1.5 Innovation and Tradition for pasta

A universal definition of traditional is still missing, and researchers find challenging dealing with “traditional food product”, as based on various subjective interpretations (Guerrero et al., 2009). However, pasta is commonly recognized as “traditional food product”, since it reflects several elements such as long product existence, familiarity, well-known use (Altamore et al., 2019). Pasta operates as an expression of cultural historical and

geographical identity being permeated with heritage, old history and long tradition (Guerrero et al., 2009; Vanhonacker et al., 2013). People mostly connect to their cultural or ethnic group through food patterns. Especially in Italy, where the culinary culture is deep-rooted and transmitted from generation to generation (De Boni et al., 2019).

In the present day, traditional foods constitute an ever-growing sector in the European food market with the increasing demand being in line with the general positive image consumers have of traditional foods (Almli et al., 2011; Sajdakowska et al., 2019; Vanhonacker et al., 2013).

Previous studies suggest that perceptions and acceptance of innovation are strongly dependent also on the product and on the type of innovation (Mascarello et al., 2015). For traditional food product, acceptance is linked to the perceived impact of the innovation on the specific traditional characters. It is also important to consider that, consumers should be properly informed: honest, informative, and reassuring communication is essential when introducing innovations in traditional food product (Altamore et al., 2019; Guerrero et al., 2009).

Other findings by Altamore (2019), underline that the Italian consumer show slightly different attitudes towards pasta. Little or no interest in innovative time-saving products such as frozen cooked and ready eat or functional pasta with added vitamins (Altamore et al., 2019). The study (Vanhonacker et al., 2013) showed that innovations which provide consumers with tangible-visible relevant benefits without producing substantial changes in the product (the most important ones like taste and texture) are well accepted in traditional food products. They act like a reinforcement of the traditional character (e.g. a label that guarantees the origin of the raw material). As confirmation, when the typical characteristics of pasta are involved, innovations on sensory elements tend to be rejected. It is important to “maintain the same flavour” or “keep the original taste” (Verain et al., 2016).

CHAPTER 2

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the field of consumer science, qualitative research methods (also called primary methods) are beneficial in capturing dynamics and changes. By analysing and interpreting consumers perceive products, these methods investigate consumers attitudes as well as situational and environmental factors influencing consumers behaviour.

2.1 Focus Group Theory

Focus group is a qualitative methodology where data are generated by unstructured, free-flowing interviews (discussions) with a small group of people about the subject under investigation (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Its origin can be ascribed to Robert K. Merton (Merton, 1948), but it was limitedly used in market research; only after 1980, it was widely applied in different fields going from social, political, psychological and communication research (Masadeh, 2012).

Discussion on a specific topic is organised for a group of 6 to 10 people maximum, relatively homogeneous but different and pre-screened based on selection criteria, depending on the study framework. The homogeneity facilitates discussion, and extraneity of participants assures self-disclosure and privacy protection. Members are asked to discuss open-ended questions, encouraged to talk openly about their opinions, perception, experiences, and they are asked to express their feelings and beliefs, interacting among respondents. Interaction is what makes this technique highly effective, since participants are allowed to interrelate and can be influenced by each other, creating a closer to reality environment (Emilien et al., 2017).

The role of moderator, a trained facilitator in charge to introduce the topic and guide the discussion, in a limited range of time (usually 60 – 90 minutes), is essential. Moderator assists in developing affinities among people and help to create a clime of relaxation, but also make the different opinions emerge; he can also provide inputs to stimulate responses and manage the flow of discourse (Chrysochou, 2017). He follows a discussion guide, containing questions and duration times, listens to what people say, assuring that everybody

gets the chance to speak spontaneously and freely. His role is only to control the dynamics in the discussion, and in case he can manage, correct or redirect the discussion to assure the participants address the topic. In no case, she can express her personal views to influence the discussion.

A Moderator Outline structures the discussion flow. Around 8-12 questions in a sequence, following an opening “ice breaker” question, set up the discussion: introduction to the topic, transition questions that lead to the main argument of interest, key questions and conclusions (Masadeh, 2012). Furthermore, to favour the discussion, clarifying probing questions are proposed, and in some cases audio/image or more interactive methods are included

The discussion is recorded and videotaped. The analysis collects and describes information expressed both via verbal and non-verbal ways. A final report illustrates the results and findings.

2.2 Research procedure

Next paragraph illustrates the procedure in planning two experimental studies identified in FG-A (January 2020) and FG-B (November 2020).

Description and organization of the FG-A:

The purpose of the first study (FG-A) was to understand quality determinants in (durum wheat) pasta and its main purchasing drivers. It also aimed to investigate new trends in consumption and preference in pasta made with no- conventional varieties (like “ancient grain” or “ancient wheat”), and to assess consumers perception and belief, experience and knowledge of these grains.

According to the aim of the study, people regularly or occasionally buying organic food were selected.

The meeting took place in January 2020 at the laboratory of Consumer’s Science of Università Politecnica delle Marche. The group was facilitated by Laura Aimone Giggio in the role of moderator, and the discussion audio-video recorded. Multimedia files viewed and transcribed for analysis phase and results comprehension.

2.2.1 Topics and Questions

In this Focus Group, according to the discussion guide (Annex 1), after opening the discussion on food in general, the topic of conversation was introduced by asking the

relationship between the participants and the consumption of pasta: purchasing and consumption habits, experiences, values, stories and impressions.

With the second question, the moderator directed the discussion into pasta quality and main ingredient (grain), investigating participants experiences, preferences with different pasta typologies. The names “*Senatore Cappelli*” and “ancient grain” were proposed and several probing questions on health aspects, gluten content, and taste, guided the conversation to elicit perceived differences between “ancient” and “modern grains”. Next question was specific about occasions, home/restaurant consumption and reasons in choosing organic pasta were also investigated.

In the second part, the discourse was centred on choice and buying behaviour: decisional process, brand loyalty and price influence.

Finally, it was asked about communication and especially how the participants get information on what they are interested in, while purchasing at a supermarket or any other point of sale, through packaging, labels, and claims.

To conclude, every participant was invited to imagine which characteristic would be embodied in their ideotype of pasta, in order to get deep into consumer’s attitude towards pasta product and grasp their general vision on innovation.

2.2.2 Participants sample

Participants were recruited from voluntary bases during their grocery shopping at a specialised shop (NaturaSi, Ancona, Italy). The selection respected specific requirements: people being responsible for grocery shopping at household, ageing range 18 – 70, being a regular or occasional organic buyer, but exclusion of people working in agriculture, University, marketing agencies, HO.RE.CA. sector. Regular organic consumers were recruited among those who buy more than 50 % of their food shopping as organic and at least 2 categories (cereals, fruits, dairy and egg, others) once a week. Occasional buyers are all the others, excluding who never buy organic neither are interested in it. Men and women and regular and occasional organic were recruited in similar proportions.

Among all, 11 participants took part in the discussion held on 10th January 2020 (Ancona, Italy)

Table 1: characteristics of participants

Subject	Sex	Organic buyer	Age
P1	F	Occasional	51
P2	F	Regular	47
P3	F	Regular	51
P4	F	Regular	36
P5	F	Regular	63
P6	M	Occasional	58
P7	M	Occasional	52
P8	F	Regular	59
P9	F	Occasional	69
P10	F	Occasional	49
P11	M	Regular	63

2.2.3 Results

Focus Group discussion was transcribed in original language (Italian) and analysed in qualitative content without technical support. Findings have been interpreted and results elaborated to come up with conclusions.

Conclusions from the results obtained unable to understand consumption patterns for pasta, quality perception and specifically for “ancient grains”, purchasing behaviour and attitude towards innovations.

Consumption pattern

Discussion started with general consideration on pasta and consumption habits, experience and preferences of participants. Although all participants recognized in pasta a symbol of culture and tradition, they also highlighted some differences between past and present consumption patterns. Major concepts are listed below:

- Familiar food: pasta commonly is considered a familiar food (P9,F,Occ; P11,M,Reg; P7,M,Occ) and strictly linked to tradition: (P7,M,Occ): *“I come from a family where pasta is the meal per excellence”*.
- Typologies: increasing interest in alternative typologies to “classic pasta” (P9,F,Occ) is emerging. Are mentioned spelt pasta (P1,F,Occ; P5,F,Reg;

P7,M,Occ; P11,M,Reg; P9,F,Occ), legume pasta (P5,F,Reg), whole-grain, organic pasta.

- Health concern and well-being: it was mentioned as first reason decrease in overall consumption and also in term of individual portion size (P8,F,Reg; P11,M,Reg) or using typologies listed above: (P3,F,Reg): *“I try to be more careful... may be with mixing normal with whole-grain flour”*. It’s thought positive benefit can derive *“control the glycaemic issue”* (P11,M,Reg) or from weight control (P9,F,Occ).
- Time and place of consumption: it is usually associated to domestic consumption and typically to lunch time: (P4,F,Reg) *“main dish at lunch”* and agree also (P5,F,Reg; P9,F,Occ). Even though, conditions are determined by kind of job and the organization of own commitments in correlation with those of the other members of the family. Two participants (P11,M,Reg; P7,M,Occ) stated would prefer to eat other things rather than pasta when out of home: (P7,M,Occ): *“if I’m eating fast I don’t pretend to eat a good pasta”* (P5,F,Reg): *“with my time schedule at work it’s not possible...in weekend days still is the main ingredient for lunch at least”*.
- People and occasion: participants declared that occurrence of consumption, quantity and quality of pasta depend on the number of people and occasion: (P11,M,Reg) *“I don’t usually eat pasta...when I am at home with my son I cook pasta...”*. With the exception of only one participant (P6,M,Occ), everyone agreed with the idea of pasta as *“festivity”* dish (P7,M,Occ) and (P8,F,Reg) explained: *“it’s not for everyday, and it’s of every typology”*.

Quality perception for a “good” pasta dish

When asked by the moderator to describe characteristics of a “good” pasta dish, all participants contributed to the discussion with their personal views on the topic:

- Optimal cooking properties *“that keep cooking al dente”* (P6,M,Occ) it’s a common desire from all participants. In general terms, it is assigned to the quality of raw material and method of production (P7,M,Occ; P2,F,Reg; P8,F,Reg).
- Origin (grain cultivation and place of transformation) is reported as the first driver in their choice. Preference is for Italian and/or regional origin. (P9,F,Occ; P7,M,Occ; P2,F,Reg) and even *“possibly local”* (P4,F,Reg). As for restaurant consumption, participants appreciate the use of local products for

supporting local producers (P7,M,Occ; P10,F,Occ). Local buying is perceived as an added value, due to possible benefits that derive from a relationship of trust (P4,F,Reg.): *“flour of the farmer I know”*.

- Organic certification in the discussion reflects a sign of quality and safety: for organic consumers, certification is an assurance for grain’s origin, methods of cultivation, transformation, production. However, not everyone give to organic label the same value: for occasional organic buyers, raw material characteristic and origin are more relevant (P7,M,Occ): *“...maybe for pasta organic is not so relevant. It is more the manufacturing industry, the origin of raw material”*.
- Taste: sensorial aspects are fundamental pasta must be “good”. Linked to the previous concept, some participants also declared are not willing to sacrifice the pleasantness at taste for organic product (P8,F,Reg). In addition, it’s highlighted that pasta has its own taste. As confirmation, four participants (P10,F,Occ; P7,M,Occ; P8,F,Reg; P4,F,Reg) admitted to having bought a whole-grain pasta brand (FiorFiore Coop), even if it was not-organic, because it is “good”. They concluded that (P7,M,Occ): *“sometimes the taste, the quality, prevails also on the health choice”*.
- Methods of production: drying, drawing, information reported being looked at (P5,F,R) while purchasing.

Wheat and “ancient” wheat

Some participants (P10,F,Occ; P11,M,Reg; P3,F,Reg), to the proposal of the terms “*Saragolla*” and “*Grani Antichi*”, stated that they have already bought or tasted pasta with these grains before. However, these were rare events motivated by the curiosity to try something new (P11,M,Reg). In addition, no subjects claimed to have had experiences at the restaurant with pasta made with “ancient” grains.

By their discourses appear a lack of knowledge on the topic: even more (P6,M,Occ) admitted to do not know the meaning of the expression “ancient grain”. Concerning a health concern, a generalised positive impression was shown and clearly stated by the idea that *“ancient give an idea of healthy”*(P8,F,Reg). According to the impression of participants, a list of features can be attached to “ancient” grain:

- high price: (P1,F,Occ) it is mentioned as the reason why “ancient” wheat pasta has been an occasional purchase (P10,F,Occ): *“on a big amount of purchase...I go for supermarket pasta... for budgeting reason”*.

- “different” taste: many times it is used the term “*different*” (P10,F,Occ; P8,F,Reg) (ita. *diverso*) but a clear description is not given.
- Healthiness: The association with health is strong in the mind of participants even if not based on a strong knowledge, but rather on scarce information. At the explicit question, on the healthiness of “ancient” grains, only two answered in a clearly affirmative (P4,F,Reg) or negative way (P5,F,Reg). Ancient grains could be considered healthier because (P10,F,Occ): “*present before intensive industrial agriculture spread in Italy*”.
- Technical properties: one participant (P4,F,Reg) reported personal experience in using “ancient” grain in cooking, also according to (P8,F,Reg) “*are difficult in using...have low gluten content*”. The difference in cooking capacities was also cited (ita. *Tenuta di cottura*) (P2,F,Reg)

Purchasing behaviour

All the participants declared that the first aspect guiding their choices is the origin of the product (the company and the raw material); they also highlighted a preference for Italian or even local pasta.

(P8,F,Reg): “*I prefer small producers*”, and (P11,M,Reg) agreed.

The origin, together with the organic certification and the processing technique (drawing and drying process mentioned by P5,F,Reg) are information they look at in pasta package while purchasing.

Only one (P4,F,Reg) alludes to the indication “*low in sodium*”, justified by greater attention for children. The only other packaging feature mentioned is the material composition “*at least recyclable*” (P4,F,Reg).

From the study also emerged that the majority is loyal to one or a few usual brands. Reason for change could be curiosity towards new brand, new shape (P8,F,Reg), or sales occasion (P10,F,Occ). Concerning sale and price, a “*Fair quality-price ratio*” also cited by two participants (P3,F,Reg; P9,F,Occ).

Innovation

When asked about innovation and the characteristics they would like to see embodied in their ideotype of pasta, some hints were given:

- Grain cultivation: hill-cultivation (P6,M,Occ)
- Manufacturing phase: water’s quality (P2,F, Reg; P4,F,Reg)

- Ethic principles (P6,M,Occ)
- Environmental and sustainability issue: suggestion to biodiversity, agronomic practices
- Traceability on the label: a clear indication of the whole supply chain (P10,F,Occ)
- Eco-friendly packaging: “*recyclable, compostable*” (P4,F,Reg) and “*less plastic*” (P5,F,Reg)

2.3 Description and organization of the FG-B

The second Focus Group discussion aimed to understand consumer’s attitudes towards the idea of luxury and exclusiveness applied to pasta; products characteristics, external or intrinsic properties, that can embed these concepts and eventually how it could be communicated to consumer through packaging.

The discussion was held online on Zoom platform. The group was facilitated by Laura Aimone Giggio in the role of moderator and the discussion audio-video recorded. Multimedia files have been viewed and transcribed for analysis phase, in order to elaborate the report for results analyses and comprehension.

2.3.1 Topics and Questions

The conversation began by asking the participants to make an example of one luxury food or exclusive goods they like (Annex 2). Some probing questions on which distinctive elements can confer to foodstuff the dimension of luxury and exclusiveness were asked.

The second part was organized to address attention on the pasta product, without limitation on typologies. Moreover again, participants were stimulated to think about distinguishing marks that can address a luxury feeling to pasta. According to the aim of the study, the discussion was directed to grain typologies, to test the level of knowledge, perception and importance they address to raw material in determining a high-quality pasta.

Then, participants were questioned about visible elements on the packaging; characteristics that could communicate the idea of luxury, those that could attract attention and possibly influence purchase choice.

2.3.2 Participants sample

Participants were recruited in the week before the meeting on voluntary basis with an online survey (Qualtrics), shared on social media platforms. The selection has respected the following requirements: people being responsible for grocery shopping at household, ranging 18 – 70, and being regular or occasional organic buyers. People working in agriculture, University, marketing agency, HO.RE.CA. were excluded. Regular consumers were recruited among those who buy more than 50 % food shopping as organic and occasional buyers all the others, excluding who never buy organic neither are interested in it. No-Pasta buyers were also excluded.

Within the ones that filled the survey, 6 (out of 14 contacted) took part to the discussion held on 12th November 2020 (online Zoom platform).

Table 2: characteristics of participants

Subject	Sex	Organic buyer	Age
P1	M	Occasional	44
P2	F	Occasional	56
P3	F	Occasional	53
P4	M	Regular	24
P5	M	Regular	48
P6	F	Occasional	56

2.3.3 Results

Luxury

At the beginning of the discussion, all participants expressed their point of view by mentioning the food that they most associate with the idea of luxury or exclusivity. The products mentioned were: truffle (white), Sassicaia wine, champagne, oysters, fish, porcini mushrooms. In addition, one subject (P5_M) stated that he could not easily associate these concepts with food. Despite some difficulties, however, he has contributed to the debate.

Throughout the meeting, the moderator repeatedly stimulated the discussion to ensure that all participants actively participated.

In general, one of the first things that emerged was the idea of exclusivity associated with a food product has to do with something that is rarely consumed and on special occasions, has

a high price, necessarily satisfies the taste and is of extremely high quality. Making a list of the concepts cited we find:

- Something that has/does little, something “not daily” (low frequency of consumption)
- Special taste and organoleptic properties: *“a product with special organoleptic characteristics... unique features I have never found in other products”* (P1_M)
- Something that is consumed for certain occasions (e.g. Sassicaia wine is referred to as food *“outside daily consumption habits”* and linked to a special occasion (P1_M), oysters (P3_F) *“once a year”*)
- Well/produced with specific characteristics (e.g. Brunello di Montalcino, South Africa, New Zealand) (P1_M)
- Rarity/scarcity of the good (e.g. *“in the sense of small quantities as in the case of truffles, which determines the high price”* (P6_F). This concept has also been expressed with terms such as *“(something of) exotic”* (P2_F) in the sense of products may be more difficult to find in the common market such as truffles)
- High price
- Something related to personal pleasure: *“(something) you give yourself”* for pleasure or to *“be kind to yourself”* (P3_F, P1_M, P6_F), a *“I give it to myself as a cuddle”* (P6_F)
- The concept of exclusivity has also been associated with the concept of *“Crapula”* as meaning excess (P5_M)

The concept of luxury/exclusiveness for pasta

With regard to the concept of exclusivity/luxury applied to pasta, the following considerations have emerged. For example, it has been said:

“I can’t think luxury pasta... luxury on pasta is hard to justify” (P2_F)

“Luxury on pasta is difficult” (P6_F)

“I absolutely do not associate the concept of pasta with luxury” (P1_M)

“I find it very difficult to associate the idea of luxury with food” (P5_M)

“I think pasta is proletarian food” (P4_M)

In any case, always with reference to the idea of exclusivity for the pasta product, some have declared the importance of some objective attributes, such as:

- The type of preparation/production. The concept of “homemade” or “handmade” has often been referred to. Some reported their personal experience: *“I make*

homemade pasta I give myself that luxury there.... A unique experience... also connected to the exceptional situation” (P3_F), *“homemade tagliatelle by the mom are a luxury food... for me they are priceless”* (P1_M), *“my luxury was my mother’s tagliatelle....”* (P6_F).

- The craftsmanship of the product, which is very well connected to the previous concept, is another key element: *“The fresh pasta of a local craft market”* (P4_M).
- The type of raw material used for the production of pasta. Not only particular grains (such as Kamut, but also legume-based pastas): *“Alimenti Ritrovati, “ancient” wheat pasta, spirulina pasta”* (P4_M), *“particular pasta made with legumes...or bronze drew”* (P1_M), *“burnt wheat flour”* (P2_F), *“Kamut wheat then a special wheat”* (P5_M), *“made with grains a bit more sought after”* (P6_F).
- The high price/cost has been recognised as an element that recalls a high quality product: *“a higher price compared to other products”* (P1_M; P3_F), *“the Kamut very good but also very expensive”* (P5_M).
- The brand. Trust in a brand is considerably important when it comes to pasta. One participant named a pasta factory (Pastificio Mancini) and added *“(Pasta) is made with selected grains”*, *“allows you to make a pasta (luxury) dish ... with just a good tomato...”* and then... *“uses Italian wheat and grows “ancient” grains”* (P6_F). Another participant mentioned the Armando pasta factory which, according to its knowledge, *“is attentive to small productions, short supply chains”* and *“uses grains of excellent quality and with very accurate, very careful production methods”* (P3_F).

In reality, more “implicit” aspects also emerge, including:

- The importance of a “good” taste. Despite many participants stressed the importance of the quality of the ingredients and the production methods, some also believe that a “good” pasta is the result of the quality of the ingredients of the dressing: *“for me a luxury can be a pasta with a good fresh garlic a whole organic pasta... a particularly precious herb, a borage flower a particularly good oil...a sort of daily luxury”* (P5_M, agree also P6_F, P4_M).
- The concept of utility (P3_F). Satisfaction and gratification is related to the consumption of food; *“(consumption) must always be related to the degree of*

gratification, satisfaction it gives you. Otherwise it is not a luxury, it just expensive...". As clarification, (P3_F) added: "if I don't like red wine I don't care drinking Amarone"

- The pleasure of "indulging in luxury", already mentioned at the beginning of the conversation by a participant (P6_F), emerged when referring to food and pasta with the meaning of "*a daily pleasure*" (P5_M, P4_M). However, throughout all the discussion the concept of exclusivity was strongly perceived as an "*exception to routine... We don't think we can do it every day*" (P4_M), "*I hardly ever eat pasta... when it happens it becomes a luxury experience, because it is a special occasion*" (P1_M).
- The consumer define as "unique experience " the exceptionality of making yourself fresh pasta at home (P3_F) or the consumption at the restaurant: "*exceptionality compared to something I could do at home or still find the easy enough way to do it*" (P1_M).
- The participants also highlighted the importance of "word of mouth" (of friends and people whom they trust) and the proximity to the area of production of pasta/wheat production. A subject declared to buy the pasta of a pasta factory in his area "*knowing the people who work there... then I trust a little*" (P6_F). A good reputation is fundamental, to trust the company or the retailer. Although the information on the label also plays an important role, one subject said: "*We buy on the basis of packages, word-of-mouth, advertising...*" (P4_M).

The exclusivity of raw material

Going into detail, participants were asked to list what are the distinctive elements of the raw material of a pasta that give the idea of exclusivity:

- High quality of raw material (wheat, flour)
- Selection of selected grains: "*typical local varieties*" (P4_M) or "*special grains such as Kamut*" (P5_M)
- Type of production: "*special wheat produced in a special way.*" (P2_F)
- Organic wheat
- Origin of wheat. It is important that it is "local" or "of the territory", and that the "supply chain is short"

Exceptionality and “particularity” of these raw materials is associated to idea of the “exclusiveness” in pasta product, more than a “luxury” feeling. Moreover, two participants share same experience in operating a “*selection of raw material*” and affirming they like to “*experiment particular flour*” while cooking at home (P2_F, P3_F)

Packaging

In general, the participants agree that the purchased pasta is always the same (brand) they usually buy; they also stated that they do not to pay a particular attention to the label. When asked by the moderator about how the distinctive elements of an “exclusive” pasta can be better communicated, some suggestion for specific labels which refer to:

- Certifications: organic, carbon footprint, water footprint, sustainability, in particular a subject (P1_M) specifies that these are the ones that can “attract” especially a consumer sensitive to sustainability issues
- Denominations of origin of raw materials: “*specification, punctual*” (P3_F) referring to the provenance of wheat. For example, (P4_M) focuses on the issue of origin provenance, showing his preferences for the “origin/local” and in any case excluding from his purchase those without the indication of provenance/origin. This consumer also suggests his idea of a “label” that gives information to the consumer about healthiness/eco-sustainability/quality . A mark that includes the assessment on a scale of 1-10 of a number of criteria: place of production, mode of production, energy consumption, cost by transportation.
- Information in “*talking labels*” indicating the type of grain, the composition of the raw material, etc. (P3_F).
- Information on the technology used or the method of production, drawing method, type of water used for production.
- Information on any checks on the raw material and the finished product.
- Other attributes such as colour, shape or “*pleasant*” or “*special*” packaging may attract the consumer. These aspects have been cited by only one subject (P1_M).

In particular, with reference to the issue of traceability, two of the participants mentioned the Qr-code system. This system could allow the final consumer to have access to data from the entire supply chain, from wheat cultivation to the package of pasta. When asked on traceability, the two participants (P5_M and P4_M) said: “*On the Ecor the supply chain makes traceable all stocks up to the single company*”. With reference to the brand Cascina

delle Orsine (P5_M) said: “*Pasta that come from 2 maximum 3 plots of land that are well determinable time by time*”, and again “*...in relation to the lot numbers, production times, because of course they are very limited lots, but they are traceable in a very precise way both with regard to production times, places, and production farms.*”

Final consideration

It is interesting to note that references to the concept of “good taste” and in general to sensory pleasure/flavour were very uncommon terms during of the discussion.

Many of the participants use the adjective “particular” and the concept of “particularity” intended in the sense of “good quality” [ref. Wheat, raw material, flour, pasta, characteristics, taste, perfume, packaging, territory, method of preparation, processing, occasions]; especially a subject (P1_M), which uses frequently this term defines “particular” everything that is “*a bit out of the ordinary*” (P1_M).

Other examples of other participants using this term are:

- burnt wheat paste (P2_F)
- Kamut® wheat (P5_M)
- Pasta “*giglio rosso*”, “*lavender flowers*”, “*pignoletto rosso*”, “*typical varieties*” (P4_M)

For these consumers, a pasta is of “special quality” not only if produced with “traditional” techniques or ingredients from “organic/biodynamic agriculture”, but also if you can buy it directly from the mill or from the producer, this would increase its value to the consumer. This opinion, expressed by a subject (P1_M), finds the consent of the other participants, reporting experiences of purchase near the mill, the producer or to the market of the “local farmer” in which they can be found both the raw materials (flours) that the finished products.

CHAPTER 3

DISCUSSION

In this chapter is the discussion and the analysis of the results from the two focus group discussions.

Both the focus group discussions confirmed the new trend: preferences for high quality standards in food is affecting consumption and consumers evaluation of pasta. Although consumer still assign to pasta a traditional and cultural image, some differences between past and present consumption patterns were highlighted.

As we expected, pasta was generally considered a familiar food, being easy to prepare, economic, versatile and a traditional meal (Altamore et al., 2019). Despite this, in recent years, also according to the participants of the discussions in this research, it became of secondary importance in daily habits of consumption. In any case, pasta is usually associated to a domestic consumption and typically to lunch time (Altamore et al., 2018).

The discussion during FG-A confirmed that many factors are affecting the way we eat: lifestyle, the size of the family, the time available, the situation and the place of consumption (Altamore et al., 2018). In particular, the participants during FG-A highlighted the need for proper conditions (physical-time) for both the preparation and the consumption of a “good pasta dish”.

There decrease in overall consumption of pasta is reflected in the attitude of consumer in reducing quantity for portion size per person and the use of alternatives energy source instead of pasta. (Altamore et al., 2019). Pasta is progressively becoming a value meal, the meal for week-end days or exceptional and special occasions/festivities. Also, if frequency is very low the only consumption of pasta can be perceived by consumer as luxury.

Health and origin are assumed to be the two most relevant motivations for purchasing pasta (Altamore et al., 2019).

The origin of raw material, specifically grain cultivation and transformation, are mentioned with preference for Italian origin, regional and even local wheat/grains.

“Local” buying is perceived to enrich the product with values such as the trust in the local producer (e.g. miller/farmer/industry), and health benefits. Buying local pasta is perceived as a safer solution (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015), but also has an altruistic motivation aimed to support the local economy (e.g. buying pasta at local market).

Given that the origin is a key element of any quality evaluation for pasta, “local” is mentioned as an essential characteristics for a luxury or exclusive pasta (e.g. for grain, manufacturing) (Wiedmann et al., 2009). The term “local” was discussed by the participants as referred to the area, or territory where do they live or work.

The study findings also confirm previous literature on the organic certification perception: a guarantee for quality and safety (Naspetti and Zanolini, 2014). Regular organic buyers believe that the organic processing in pasta is a guarantee of the grain’s origin, methods of cultivation, transformation, and production.

Several alternatives to “classic pasta” offered on the market are mentioned. These alternatives, having different raw material or non-durum wheat based (e.g. Kamut, spelt, rice or soya, maize). While in FG-A these alternative raw materials (spelt, legume, whole-grain) were discussed in relation to health concern and personal well-being, it’s interesting to notice that in FG-B many are mentioned as possible ingredients for a luxury pasta. Raw materials like Kamut, “ancient” grain, “*selected grain*”, “*typical local varieties*” are described as “particular” and of “good quality”.

Participants use the expression “ancient grain” evoking the context of the origin of the grain, traditions, culture, production methods, as the main elements influencing their purchasing choice (Altamore et al., 2018).

“Ancient grain” has not a universal definition (Boukid et al., 2018) and the discussion showed that consumers cannot distinguish nor between “ancient grain” and “ancient wheat”, or between modern and old varieties. Despite a general positive attitude towards these products (Dinu et al., 2018; Teuber et al., 2016), consumers do not understand possible differences in terms of quality and health advantages even if commonly declared (Valli et al., 2018).

The association with health is strong in the mind of consumers even if not based on evidence. Health – related benefits and perceived advantages justify consumption of these grain typologies: also the word “ancient” seems to become synonymous of a traditional, and healthy product.

As expected, Italian consumers first parameter to evaluate pasta is related to the organoleptic attributes: taste is mentioned while talking about “ancient” grain and described it as a “different taste”. Both discussions highlighted that pasta has its own intrinsic taste. The so called healthy=less tasty intuition (coined by (Raghunathan et al., 2006)) persist in consumers’ mind. However, in line with previous studies, pasta consumers declared they are not willing to sacrifice the pleasantness for health reason (Huang and Wu, 2016; Teuber et al., 2016).

A high price is reported as a characteristic of “ancient” grain pasta, and the “ancient” wheat Kamut is recognized as an example of raw material for a luxury pasta. In literature, high price it’s also an external attribute of a luxury good (Dubois et al., 2001). And, “ancient” wheat pasta, is perceived of excellent quality.

From extensive literature on Luxury, the concept of exceptionality and uniqueness is strictly connected to luxury consumption. “Indulging in luxury”, when food is involved, is an act of love toward themselves.

The concept of luxury and exclusiveness in food is difficult to explain, and especially when it is the case of pasta. Luxury pasta, in consumers words, is something far from their viewpoint; they can talk about an exclusive product but cannot foreseen a luxury one. An exclusive, unique experience comes from the exceptionality of making pasta at home or in the occurrence of consumption at restaurant of a “special pasta”. Luxury seems to be related to the method of preparation, production process, in reconnection with the past and traditions. Home-made pasta “*tagliatelle, lasagne*”, symbol of the culinary Italian tradition, embodies the sense of “nostalgia” and the correlation between luxury and a traditional food product (Olsen et al., 2020). Traditional food product share some of the same attributes as luxury or prestige such as uniqueness, exclusivity, craftsmanship, intended for special occasion and having long history that make them authentic (Olsen et al., 2020).

Although the majority of consumers declared they are loyal to one or few usual pasta brands (Altamore et al., 2019; Contò, 2016), many show curiosity towards new market proposal such as different wheat varieties, special ingredients, particular shape or new brands (Contò, 2016). Brand reputation, trust in the producer and retailer, “word of mouth” (of friends and people whom you trust) is important when it comes to pasta purchase. Also packaging, label, advertising have a relevant role in influencing consumer’s choice, but in the purchase of pasta brands already known, the attention to the label may be lower. In

accordance to literature, we found that packaging is less likely to affect purchasing decision role (Altamore et al., 2019). Even though, colour, shape, “pleasant” or “special” packaging may be attractive for the consumer. Little attention to packaging is given; possible innovations for an ideal pasta packaging are materials for eco-friendly solutions.

To conclude, while discussing about purchasing behaviour, consumers decision is highly based on credence attribute (origin and organic certification), along with method of production (e.g., drawing, drying, water quality) that are the main information they look for in a pasta packaging. The same attributes were mentioned in both FGs. It appears so, within intangible attributes, information on healthiness and environmental or social sustainability, on quality controls and traceability, are both necessary and desired/required, whatever for “normal”, luxury or ideal pasta.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings showed that Italians still consider pasta a traditional and familiar food, typical of domestic consumption and lunch time. However, recently pasta has become a meal for week-end lunches, and is increasingly perceived as a dish to be consumed in special occasions and festivities, and not a everyday meal.

The study revealed that the origin of the product (pasta) and its ingredients (wheat) is the most relevant attribute. Consumers do not just ask for the Italian origin of pasta and wheat; they prefer pasta locally produced (in the area, or territory where they live), because they trust the production more and want to support the local economy. The attribute “local” is also an essential characteristic for a luxury or exclusive pasta, and this highlights the relation between origin and quality.

When assessing consumer perceptions, beliefs, experience and knowledge of pasta made with “ancient” grains, results showed that consumers cannot distinguish between modern and old varieties, and do not have any clear understanding of actual differences in terms of quality and health. However, they perceived that the consumption of “ancient” grains will result in health benefits. In addition, the expression “ancient” grain seems to evoke something related to tradition, and this reason perceived as a positive attribute.

The study confirms that Italian consumers are not willing to sacrifice the enjoyment of food and a good taste experience for health reasons. Healthy, in some cases, is perceived as less tasty. In addition, the taste of pasta dishes is strongly associated with the taste of the pasta itself.

Consumers’ seem to recognize that some type of grains (e.g. the “ancient” wheat Kamut) could represent potential ingredients for a luxury pasta product. And consequently, “ancient” wheat pasta is regarded as of excellent quality and worth of higher economic value.

This study attempted to contribute to a wider understanding of how increasing pasta products’ value added, and what makes consumers experience pasta as a luxury food product. However, it emerged that the idea of luxury applied to pasta, at least among Italian consumers, is difficult to accept. Consumers seem to easily associate to some pasta types the concept of exclusivity, more than luxury: e.g., an exclusive, unique experience that comes

from the special occasion of consumption of a “special” pasta. A luxury pasta is more likely to be connected to an old family production method, e.g., home-made noodles by grandma with e with farm-house eggs; it is a symbol of the culinary Italian tradition, not a dried pasta product to be bought at the shop.

According to the study consumers usually buy the same brand but show curiosity for new market offers. Consumers seem to address far less attention to aspects related to the presentation of the products, such as its packaging. However, they appreciate some innovations related to eco-friendly characteristics of the packaging.

Given the results obtained from this qualitative research we can observe that these findings enrich the knowledge on Italian consumers’ quality perception, attitudes and motivations for pasta purchases and consumption. Results have enhanced the researcher’s understanding of consumer attitudes towards “ancient” grain pasta.

The study revealed that while purchasing pasta, consumers decision is highly affected by credence attributes that appear in the package (e.g., label with claims or marks). Again, origin and organic certification, along with processing methods (e.g. drawing, drying, water quality) resulted the prominent ones for pasta. Given usually consumers are very little knowledgeable about food processing methods, pasta is a bit of an exception among food products.

Among the main findings of this work is the idea that a high-quality or an excellent quality pasta, in the mind of consumers, is related to the type of durum wheat used and its origin. It is also interesting that in consumer’s mind an “ancient” wheat pasta and a quality pasta appear similar, due to the idea that an exclusive pasta must be something that belongs to our food heritage culture.

According to these consideration, “ancient” wheat can have positive implications in the pasta market, since consumers are always seeking for a superior quality.

About the strengths of this work, there is the investigation on the concept of pasta as a luxury food and its possible distinctive elements. Albeit this is not a new topic in marketing research, nevertheless studies are still scarce, and interpretation of these concepts is hard and contentious. Also, no previous studies were found that focus the investigation on the luxury attributes of pasta.

The limitations of this work refer to its exploratory nature and the limited geographical scope. The study consisted in qualitative marketing research by means of two focus group discussions. Nevertheless, even with the intrinsic limitations of qualitative research, focus groups allow rich, in-depth information to be collected, that may help in shaping conclusive,

quantitative research on the topic. Regarding geographical scope, the study was limited to Italian consumers, who have with pasta a special “relationship”, different than that of international consumers. A broader research should extend the finding to international pasta lovers.

ANNEX 1

MODERATOR OUTLINE FG-A

- 0) Ora possiamo iniziare a turno a dire il proprio nome e un ingrediente o un piatto della tradizione italiana a cui non potreste rinunciare!
- 1) Che cosa mi dite invece del rapporto che avete con il consumo di pasta?
 - Quali sono le vostre occasioni di consumo? Anche al ristorante?
 - Chi la cucina?
- 2) Quindi se doveste definire come deve essere per voi una buona pasta?
 - Quali sono le caratteristiche/ prerogative di una buona pasta secca.
 - Cosa significa per voi una pasta di qualità?
 - Il tipo di cereale come può influenzare la qualità-quindi la scelta?
- 3) Avete mai sentito parlare per esempio di Senatore Cappelli e di Grani Antichi?
 - L'avete mai comprata? Perché? Cosa ne pensate?
 - Quale sono le differenze che riscontrate?
 - Si dice anche Più digeribili? Più buoni?
 - Come vi comportate se andata al ristorante?
 - Ci sono differenza tra bio e non bio?
- 4) Oltre alla tipologia di grano, vi sono altri aspetti che considerate nell'acquisto di un pacchetto piuttosto di un altro?
 - In merito al processo produttivo, ci son elementi che mettete in relazione con la qualità?
 - Trafilatura al bronzo/Essidatura lenta?
- 5) Quindi, in base a quanto detto, come scegliete quale pasta comprare?
 - E di quale marca? Scegliete sempre la stessa?
 - Cosa guardate sul pacchetto di pasta nel punto vendita?
 - Leggete le etichette?
 - Cosa consigliereste ad un amico?
- 6) Se potessimo creare una nuova pasta ideale quale è per voi quella prerogativa a cui non potreste rinunciare?
 - Quali caratteristiche vorreste includere con riferimento alla qualità del prodotto finale (Pasta)?
 - Nuove caratteristiche?

ANNEX 2

MODEARATOR OUTILINE FG-B

0) Qual è il piatto della tradizione italiana che preferite?

Parliamo di alimenti:

1. Tra i prodotti alimentari quali associate ad un'idea di lusso o di esclusività? E perché?
2. Quali di questi prodotti esclusivi/di lusso avete già acquistato/consumato e in quali occasioni?
 - Quali sono, secondo voi, le caratteristiche che fanno di un alimento un prodotto di lusso o esclusivo?
 - Cosa lo distingue dagli altri?

Per quanto riguarda la pasta:

3. quale pasta associate ad un'idea di lusso o esclusività? E perché?
4. Quali di queste paste che avete nominato tra quelle esclusive/ di lusso avete già acquistato/consumato e in quali occasioni?
 - Quali sono, secondo voi, le caratteristiche che fanno di una pasta un prodotto di lusso o esclusivo?
 - Cosa la distingue dalle altre?

Parlando del grano con cui è fatta la pasta:

5. Vi vengono in mente delle varietà di grano che associate ad un'idea di esclusività? Cosa la rende esclusiva? Perché?
 6. Avete mai acquistato paste prodotte con questo tipo di grano?
 7. Se sì, ricordate di quale marchio/azienda?
- Quali sono, secondo voi, le caratteristiche che fanno di tipo di grano un prodotto di lusso o esclusivo?
 - Cosa lo distingue dagli altri?

Pensando alla confezione di un pacchetto di pasta:

8. Quali sono secondo voi le caratteristiche gli elementi(visivi) che comunicano un'idea di esclusività o di lusso? E perchè?

Secondo voi, la presenza di certificazioni (di origine, di processo) /marchi di qualità sulla confezione potrebbe favorire l'acquisto da parte vostra di una pasta di lusso/esclusiva?

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