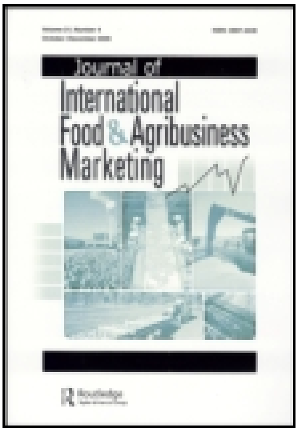

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Gatekeepers' Perceptions of Thai Geographical Indication Products in Europe

Rungsaran Wongprawmas [a], Maurizio Canavari [a], Rainer Haas [b] & Daniele Asioli [c]

[a] Alma Mater Studiorum-University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
[b] University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna, Austria
[c] Alma Mater Studiorum-University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

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RUNGSARAN WONGPRAWMAS and MAURIZIO CANAVARI
Alma Mater Studiorum–University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

RAINER HAAS
University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna, Austria

DANIELE ASIOLI
Alma Mater Studiorum–University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

This study is aimed at exploring perceptions of European gatekeepers toward renowned Thai fruit and coffee products protected by geographical indication (GI) and factors influencing purchasing decision of gatekeepers toward imported food products. Sixteen qualitative interviews with distribution channel gatekeepers were administered in Austria, Italy, and Switzerland in 2010. Content analysis and concept mapping were used to analyze data. Results show that Thai GI products might be interesting for European gatekeepers, but the GI attribute alone might not be sufficient to ensure that the product is successful. Support of consistent information and promotion campaigns and fulfillment of other gatekeepers' requirements of both products and suppliers are necessary.

KEYWORDS factors influencing purchasing decision, gatekeepers, geographical indication, perception, Thai fruits and coffee

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Address correspondence to Rungsaran Wongprawmas, Department of Agricultural Economics and Engineering, Alma Mater Studiorum–University of Bologna, Viale Giuseppe Fanin 50, I-40127, Bologna, Italy. E-mail: rungsaran.wongprawmas80@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Thailand is one of the main producers of agricultural products and is recognized as a producer of great unique and tasty products (Chomchalow, Somsri, & Na Songkhla, 2008). In 2007, Thailand produced 8.95 million metric tons of fruit, which is 1.61% of the world fruit production in 2007 (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2009). During the last few years Thailand has been trying to penetrate the European market because it is the largest single market with expanding demand for ethnic products and high premium prices for quality produce (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, 2010). Thai fruit export is mainly represented by tropical fruit (e.g., longans, mangoesteen, durians, rambutans, carambola, dragon fruits, pineapples, mangoes, lychees, and tamarind). The value of EU fruit importation from Thailand steadily grew over the last 8 years, from 216.64 million euro in 2002 to 274.65 million euro in 2009, now representing 1.88% of total fruit trade (European Commission, 2010b). Coffee trade between Thailand and the European Union is mainly represented by green bean coffee export to the European Union and (semi)finished coffee products import from the European Union. Thailand's share of the EU coffee imports ranged between only 0.01 and 0.26% in the period 2002–2009 (European Coffee Federation, 2009).

The Thai government is currently looking for strategies to improve quality standards and the differentiation of products so as to enhance the competitiveness of Thai exports because Thailand cannot compete on price with countries like China and Vietnam. Additionally, there is growing interest in the world market toward quality food products, in particular high-quality local and traditional food specialties, which may pave the way for specialty products from less developed countries, in order to gain access to lucrative international markets (Canavari, Galanti, Haas, & Wongprawmas, 2010). As a result, the Thai government endorsed policies and regulations—the Geographical Indication Act of B.E. 2546 (Jaovisidha, 2003) and Thai Geographical Indication Logo Approval B.E. 2008 in order to protect, foster, and promote Thai quality products and culinary recipes. It was expected that geographical indication (GI) labels will help consumers to recognize quality of the products by linking them with geographical characteristics and culinary heritage of Thailand. Thus, they aim to enhance the credibility of products, improve market access, promote typical products, and finally lead to sustainable economic and social development in a specific territory (Bramley & Kirsten, 2007).

As of June 2010, 35 product names are registered as GIs in Thailand, 29 of which are from Thailand, 5 from the European Union, and 1 from Peru. Registration is pending for 34 more products (Department of Intellectual Property, 2010). The most represented product categories are fruit (23%), handicrafts (23%), rice (20%), alcohol (17%), and coffee (6%). Furthermore, during the last few years, Thailand applied to register some Thai products under the EU regulation, namely, Thung Kula Rong-Hai Thai Hom Mali Rice, Doi Chaang Coffee, and Doi Tung Coffee (European Commission, 2010a). This motivates the belief that Thai GIs will be perceived as higher quality products and will gain a better position in the EU market if recognized by the European Union.

The Importance of GI Labels in the European Market

In the last decades, European consumers became more thoughtful about their purchasing decision, especially about product quality and food safety as well as environmental and social impacts associated with food production and marketing (Bredahl, Northen, Boecker, & Normile, 2001). One of the quality cues frequently used in the EU market, especially in wine and food products, is related to product origin. The European Union has a long history of GI labeling and currently two types of GIs are available for food products: protected designation of origin (PDO) and protected geographical indication (PGI). Producers and companies have been using GIs label to signal quality to the consumer and it is expected that they will perceive GIs as a quality attribute adding value to the product. Several studies in the literature indicated that perceived quality associated with the intrinsic attributes of PDO products have a positive and significant influence on European consumers' buying intentions (Fandos & Flavian, 2006) and they are willing to pay higher prices for PGI label in fresh meat (Loureiro & Mc Cluskey, 2000). Hence, GIs might signal quality to the consumer and create a sense of affection for consumers but only when they deal with a high-quality product and consumers recognize its superior quality (using GI labels as a brand).

GI Products From Third World Countries in the European Market

Many successful cases of GI products enhancing value are available in Europe, especially in Southern Mediterranean countries. However, most of these products are produced in small local areas inside Europe, which were already famous among consumer groups (Barjolle & Sylvander, 2000). For Thai GI products this is not the case because consumers might not be able to perceive their value due to lack of knowledge, awareness, and familiarity with products (Boccaletti, 1999). In addition, successful value-enhancement strategies for GI products depend not only upon origin but also upon effective value-adding strategies used to promote the product (Bardaji, Iraizoz, & Rapun, 2009). Vandecandelaere, Arfini, Belletti, & Marescotti (2009) highlighted that third world countries that would like to develop fruitful GI schemes should be aware of a number of requirements to be achieved in advance, such as traceability along the supply chain; responsibility and accountability of producers, processors, and marketers; and clear and sound marketing strategies.

Issues Addressed in This Study

Because introduction of Thai GIs into the EU market is still in its initial stages, products have to be chosen by European gatekeepers first. Gatekeepers are food channel members who have the power to select products to be in the market. Even though they are expected to merely select products according to their perception of consumers' demand, in many cases they may also exert a great influence on product ranges in the market due to their power to make food-buying decisions on behalf of food importing and distribution companies that supply millions of end consumers (Knight & Gao, 2005).

Hence, this research focuses on gatekeepers' perceptions toward Thai GI fruits and coffee. We aim to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes of gatekeepers and the possibility to use GI labels to foster the competitiveness of Thai fruits and coffee products in the EU market. Given this is an exploratory qualitative study, the objectives are shown as follows:

1. Explore how European gatekeepers perceive GI fruit and coffee products from Thailand;
2. Explore potentials and barriers for GIs in fruit and coffee products from Thailand in the European markets; and
3. Explore the key factors that influence purchasing decision of European gatekeepers.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Exploratory research based on qualitative approach is adopted in this study. This approach makes us able to deal with complexity and rich diversities of the gatekeeper perceptions; it also leaves room to generate hypotheses for further research, although it cannot be generalized to all food chain members and channels (Myers, 2009). A semistructured interview outline was designed to serve as a nonbinding outline of the discussion with respondents following the three research aims mentioned earlier. The schedule contains a series of open-ended questions introducing wide topics and inducing the informant to raise salient issues that he or she thinks are important and relevant to the topic of interest during the conversation (Myers, 2009).

Selection of Respondents

Purposive nonstochastic sampling was applied to recruit participants in this study to retrieve information from persons who have knowledge and might be able to highlight the relevant problems or issues on a specific topic (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006). In addition, the snowball sampling procedure was applied.

A list of European operators was created on the basis that those listed are expert and professional practitioners in European food distribution (importers, wholesalers, retailers, practitioners, and experts) who already have experience dealing with Thai or Asian products in Europe. We interviewed 16 out of 35 selected contacts—10 in Italy, 5 in Austria, and 1 in Switzerland.

In the context of confidentiality, the specific names of the interviewee and the company are preserved. The characteristics of the interviewed companies were as follows: 13 respondents were importers and distributors of fruit and food products and 3 respondents were researchers and experts on agrifood marketing and European fruit markets (see Table 1). Among the importers and distributors, 6 companies were fruit and/or vegetable distributors, 4 companies were specialty shops, and the remaining were representatives of large retail companies. Among the researchers and experts, 2 were specialized in organic products only. These key informants are the main importers and distributors of Thai and Asian products in these countries so that they could provide insight and relevant information for the research. Given the limited geographical scope covered by this sample, conclusions and hypotheses drawn by means of this research are most likely to be valid only in the Austrian and Italian situations.

Interview Procedure

Sixteen semistructured interviews were administered during March–June 2010. The semistructured interview schedule was sent to respondents in advance and personal interviews ranged between 30 and 60 min in duration. They were conducted in English, in Italian, and in Thai according to respondents' preference. The interviews were structured according to a semistructured interview guideline but did not adhere strictly to them because a "conversation-like dialogue rather than asking questions that impose categorical frameworks on informants' understanding and experiences" is preferable (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994, p. 492; Knight, Gao, Garrett, & Deans, 2008). Therefore, the core information would be collected through a series of open-ended questions introducing wide topics and inducing the informant to raise salient issues that he or she thinks are important and relevant to the topic of interest during the conversation (Myers, 2009). Thirteen interviews were face-to-face and 3 interviews were administered by telephone. Interviews were recorded if the respondent agreed, and the interviewer took note of important information and observed context-specific elements during the interview. Immediately after the interview was administered, the interviewer prepared a summary report based on notes and on the

TABLE 1 Profile of Key Informants, Companies, and Organization in Samples

No.	Company	Interviewee	Sector	Location	Activity
1	A	Communication head	Research institute	Frick, Switzerland	Researcher on organic food marketing and on Thai organic products
2	B	Executive director	Research institute	Vienna, Austria	Researcher on organic market development and capacity building
3	C	Sales manager	Specialty shop	Vienna, Austria	Importer/Distributor of Thai and Asian products
4	D	Manager	Specialty shop	Vienna, Austria	Importer/Distributor of Thai and Asian products
5	E	Senior quality manager	Large retailer	Vienna, Austria	Big supermarket chain/retailer in Austria
6	F	Owner	Specialty shop	Vienna, Austria	Importer/Distributor of Thai and Asian products
7	G	Owner	Specialty shop	Bologna, Italy	Importer/Distributor of Thai and Asian products
8	H	Trade manager	Fruits distributor	Bologna, Italy	Main exotic fruits importer and distributor in Italy
9	I	Marketing and quality manager	Wholesaler	Bologna, Italy	Major fruits and vegetables wholesaler market in Bologna
10	J	Administrator	Fruits and vegetables distributor	Bologna, Italy	Small fruits and vegetables distributor in Bologna
11	K	Purchasing manager of fruits and vegetables	Large retailer	Bologna, Italy	Big supermarket chain/retailer in Italy
12	L	Purchasing manager	Fruits and vegetables distributor	Bergamo, Italy	Main exotic fruits importer and distributor in Italy
13	M	Marketing researcher	Agrifood marketing research institute	Bologna, Italy	Marketing researcher/expert on fruits market and GI products
14	N	Purchasing manager	Fruits and vegetables distributor	Milan, Italy	Exotic fruits importer and distributor in Italy
15	O	Purchasing manager of tropical fruits	Integrated supply chain company	Bologna, Italy	Fruits and vegetables producer/importer/distributor in Italy and exporter
16	P	Category manager of fruits	Large retailer	Bologna, Italy	Big supermarket chain/retailer in Italy

Note. GI = geographical indication.
Source. Data from the survey.

recorded conversation, when available, and this report was verified by another person who collaborated in preparing the report to reduce the risk of a subjective view.

Data Analysis

Summary reports of each interview were written in English immediately after conversations. A preliminary version of summary reports was submitted to the interviewees for "checking how accurately participants' realities have been represented in the final account" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125; Knight, Holdsworth, & Mather, 2007b) in order to establish credibility of the results. Their comments and additional information were included into the final version of interview summaries. Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and eventually translated into English. Comments were coded on the transcripts using different text colors and marginal keywords in order to identify important themes and patterns (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Knight et al., 2007b).

Information from the summary reports, together with available transcription and comments, were analyzed through a content summarizing procedure, aimed at describing the phenomenon and at presenting the most interesting elements arising from each interview, in order to gain an extensive overview of informants' attitudes toward the topic (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). From the analysis and synthesis of relations among factors affecting purchasing decisions a conceptual map was created. This was in order to visually describe the concepts mentioned by key informants and connections among them (Novak & Cañas, 2008).

RESULTS

Perception of European Gatekeepers Toward Thai GI Fruit and Coffee Products

It was concluded that European consumers and gatekeepers are aware of the GI concept mainly as it relates to local or European products because GI products strongly link to territory and traditional local culture. European consumers have already developed positive perceptions toward these products and the GI label can therefore be used as a differentiation tool. However, when dealing with Thai GI products, respondents made many various comments.

Most of the gatekeepers thought that the GI label may not be able to add value to Thai fruit and coffee products because consumers do not have enough information or experience concerning these products:

> This business is too small in quantity. For me, you have to work with quality—freshness, information. Because for me, in my opinion, when

you have many fruits, you use PGI to differentiate. This is a small market, so it cannot be differentiated. (Importer and distributor in Italy)

On the contrary, other gatekeepers maintain that the use of a well-known quality label such as European public brands for GIs could represent an advantage for Thai GI products because of confidence and trust that European consumers associate to them:

If you have an origin certification of the product, it could be a way to enforce the knowledge, the nationality of the product. For the European market, I think it could be interesting, if you have this kind of certification between the European and Thai at the same level of quality assurance, origin and traceability, and so on. I think that it could be a possibility especially for fruits. (Marketing researcher in Italy)

Some gatekeepers and marketing researchers thought that the GI labels might be useful as a mediator of trust to assure the quality and food safety of Thai products:

Certainly, PGI would help us to have warranties and also suppliers. They would enter the market more easily. It would be an advantage for consumers, too. (Importer and distributor in Italy)

Although GI certification is not a food safety guarantee, the gatekeepers argued that it could be seen as such in the eyes of the public. This is due to the fact that gatekeepers and consumers tend to be more sensitive to imported food than domestic products. Food scares and general unfamiliarity cause them to look for any form of certification for reassurance, holding them as signs of food safety and quality. Gatekeepers also mentioned that traceability systems are crucial for products entering the EU market.

One retail respondent stated that GI labeling would not be useful for Thai products because he gave more value to his quality private brand than to the GI certification. This inferred that GI labeling, which is one of many quality labels, might be a competitor to quality private retailer brands. Therefore large retailers might have less of an inclination to stock products with other quality labels in their stores. This could be especially true for coffee but it might not be the case for Thai fruits because they are basically totally different from fruits produced in the European Union.

Opportunities and Challenges for Thai GI Products

Information and promotion campaigns are necessary to support the Thai GI product registration efforts because European consumers and gatekeepers are unfamiliar with these products and cannot distinguish the differences between them and other similar products in terms of quality and taste.

The interviewees underlined the following conditions required for Thai GI products to be successful in the European market: (a) products must be a specialty fruit with outstanding quality; (b) exporters should provide correct information or story behind products about landscape, production area, production and work conditions; and (c) food safety certification according to the EU regulation must be provided.

> I think for some products, GI is important for merchandise as a tool if it's really a typical product from this region. But I think it has to be a well-known product so that people know that it comes from this country [Thailand]. Thai GI products have to get the image in people's mind that this product is a typical Thai product and that it's one of the best coming from Thailand. (Large retailer in Austria)

Some of the interviewees suggested that *Organic* and *Fair Trade* labels used in combination with the Thai GI labeling might be useful to enhance the competitiveness of products, although this could be costly and difficult to achieve. Furthermore, usefulness of combining GI labels with other quality labels relies upon clear consumer understanding of the separate value of product attributes communicated by each label. It is also important to synchronize the Thai GI label with the European one (mutual recognition) to maintain consistency in labeling.

Another challenge for Thai GI products mentioned by gatekeepers is consumers' attachment to own local food and culinary tradition. This is especially relevant in Mediterranean countries like Italy, where a well-defined and renowned national food culture dominates and, as a consequence, a limited demand for foreign products is present.

Factors Influencing Purchasing Decisions of European Gatekeepers

Eight major factors appear to influence European gatekeepers' decisions to purchase imported food products: quality, price, food safety, environmental aspect, social aspect, business relationship, consumer awareness, and preference and competitors (see Table 2). These factors are illustrated in the conceptual map analyzing gatekeepers' views as shown in Figure 1. However, it seems that the elements of trust and reliability are the most prominent ones with regard to deciding to import food products. In light of this, country image might influence the psychic distance between customers and exporters. Additionally, cultural distance may hinder the successful market penetration of Thai products as they may be perceived by European consumers as simply too strange, alien, and unfamiliar to be desirable.

The conceptual map of factors influencing imported food products purchasing decisions of the European gatekeepers performed in this study is a useful tool to design marketing strategy aimed at adding value to Thai fruit

TABLE 2 Overview of the Factors That Influence Gatekeepers' Purchasing Decision on Foreign Fruits and Coffee and Illustrative Quotations

Factors	Illustrative quotations
Quality	Important is quality. Price is for sure, then come the issues like pesticide and certification. (Large retailer in Austria)
Price	Price is the most important because of economic crisis. I have to sell product consumers can afford. (Importer and distributor, specialty shop in Bologna)
Food safety	Important is quality. Price is for sure, then come the issues like pesticide and certification like Global GAP certification, IFS quality certification. Low pesticide residue. I think these are the most important issues. (Large retailer in Austria)
Business relationship	For the retailer, the market is full and there are so many partners, so many suppliers to deliver the products. You have to get into this market, you have to have only very high standards and good partners for many years. (Large retailer in Austria)
Competitors	Among suppliers with similar products, I will choose the one with a better offer. (Importer and distributor, specialty shop in Bologna)
Consumer awareness and preference	Consumer preference, I think consumers' need is the most important thing. Before we import any products we have to check consumer preference and trend this year. (Importer and distributor, specialty shop in Bologna)
Environmental aspect	For the European, I think it would be the key question because of climate change and carbon footprint. It will be important; I think it will become more and more difficult to sell products that come by airplane. (Large retailer in Austria)
Social aspect	People start to say okay, we have products from country A, okay, they are good. They have good worker conditions, they have a good environment. I don't have to have a bad feeling if I'm buying it. It's good for me because it tastes good, it's good for the environment, and the people there are happy, something like that. (Large retailer in Austria)

Note. GAP = Good Agricultural Practices; IFS = International Food Standard.
Source. Authors' elaboration of survey data.

and coffee, exploiting the opportunity offered by GIs. However, given its qualitative nature, it needs to be tested in further research.

Suggested Distribution Channels for Thai GI Products

There were three potential channels suggested by gatekeepers: specialty shops, large retailers, and restaurants/spas. They explained that specialty shops are a good distribution channel because they are run by experts with similar products. These experts can be a better vehicle of information on products, methods of preparation, and consumption of consumers. Limitations of this channel include the fact that it will be only a niche market; however, the consumers in these channels tend to have a larger intention to purchase these products than other channels. Large national and international retailers are thought to be a promising channel for Thai GI products because they can move high volumes of products, have wider access to mass consumers, and

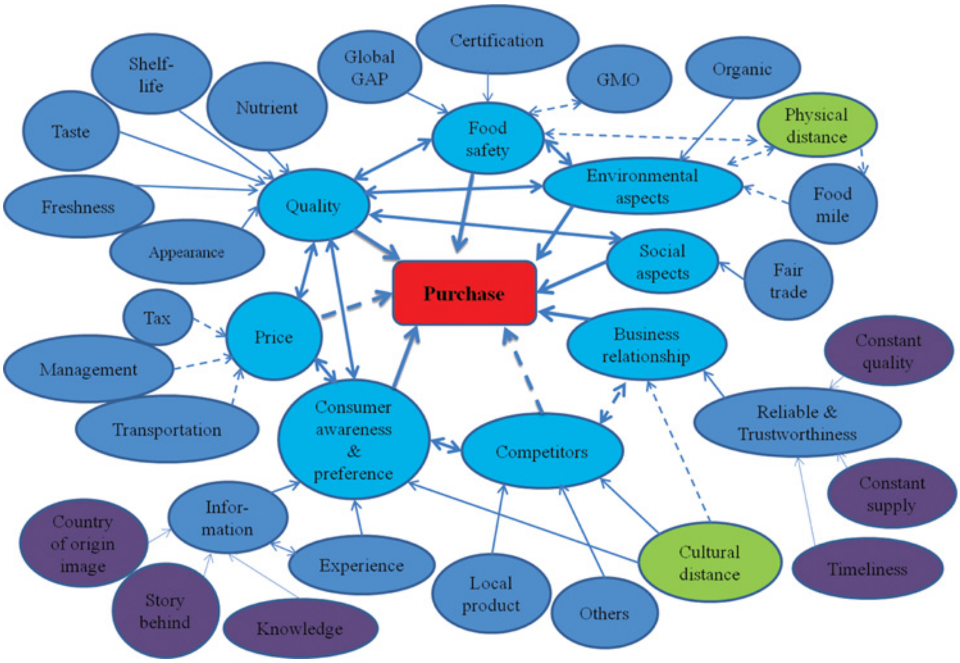

FIGURE 1 Factors influencing imported food products purchasing decision of the EU gatekeepers. *Note.* Solid arrow represents positive effect and hollow arrow represents inhibitory effect. *Source.* Authors' elaboration of survey data. (Color figure available online.)

employ better marketing strategies. However, producers and operators interested in distributing products through this channel may face difficulties in maintaining bargaining power because premium prices and stricter regulations are required. Thai restaurants and spas were mentioned as channels to display and perhaps provide a first impression of Thai products to European consumers. Agritourism markets were also mentioned as an innovative channel by one respondent.

Suggested Avenues for Further Marketing Activities to Promote Thai GI Products

Gatekeepers suggested some potential marketing activities to introduce Thai GI products in the European Union: spread of information through public relations and communication initiatives; showcasing the region of the products and telling the story behind them; assuring product safety and guaranteeing quality; demonstrating products and letting consumers try them; developing joint export platform for Thai cuisine and fruits; starting with pilot products that are typical, high quality, and without environmental and social problems; differentiating Thai GI products from other products by quality, healthiness, and packaging; offering promotion to gatekeepers; and selecting the proper distributors to channel Thai GI products. Learning lessons from the outcomes of marketing strategies used by both success and failure cases in the EU market could also be beneficial.

DISCUSSION

According to European gatekeepers Thai GI products might be interesting, but the GI attribute alone cannot enhance competitiveness of Thai GI fruit and coffee. Other attributes of products and suppliers such as quality, price, food safety, environmental aspect, social aspect, business relationship, consumer awareness and preference, and competitors also have an impact on purchasing decisions of the gatekeeper. These factors are more general for imported food products and are similar to previous literature. Skytte and Blunch (2001) found that traceability, sufficient quantities, and long-term relationships are the most prominent attributes involved with European retailer decision-making criteria. This supports the idea that the product characteristics are not the only the main factor considered by gatekeepers but supplier characteristics, business relationship, marketing strategies, and traceability are also used as key decision-making factors in evaluating foreign food products.

All respondents highlighted that information and communication are crucial issues for Thai GI products. This conforms with the study of Boccaletti (1999) that GI products from abroad should have good communication, quality indication that this product has traditional characteristics and other relevant characteristics to consumers' requirement. The originality of a typical local area can lead to a differentiation of the product only if consumers recognize its value. This highlights that niche marketing through origin labeling may require an extensive awareness campaign so as to capture the benefits associated with differentiation of products (Bramley, Bienabe, & Kirsten, 2009).

The study outcomes suggest that GIs seem to act more as a mediator of trust in the ability to assure quality and safety of Thai food products rather than as an attribute able to enhance the product image per se. This is consistent with Knight, Holdsworth, and Mather (2007a), who found that country of origin is related to confidence and trust of products rather than to country image itself. They also investigated factors influencing gatekeepers' purchasing decisions and discovered that gatekeepers are more concerned with trust issues when it comes to imported food in the product, its packaging, and in the producers and intermediates involved in supplying that product. The explanation for this issue is that normally gatekeepers and consumers are more sensitive about imported food than domestic products due to food scares and they do not know or cannot check the real production conditions (Bredahl et al., 2001). As a result, gatekeepers tend to look for a guarantee to assure the quality and safety of products they selected (Willems, Roth, & van Roekel, 2004) and they thought that GI labels might be helpful in this aspect.

Nevertheless, GI labels might be useful as an attribute to foster the perceived quality of Thai GI products both as an intrinsic and an extrinsic cue. This may transform credence quality attributes of products into search attributes (Fandos & Flavian, 2006). Furthermore, the respondents also insisted that Thai operators and producers should improve quality control and traceability systems in order to maintain high quality of products, which will lead to the differentiation of products and better market access later. Therefore, high and consistent quality standards, well-known products, and consumers' knowledge are essential properties for GI products to be successful.

All in all, GI products' registration should not be considered the ultimate goal for Thai products in the European market but rather that it is the first step to build a clear communication strategy for high-quality and added-value products (characterized by GI labeling). Information, promotion, and proper marketing strategies should be designed and implemented to stimulate the interest of gatekeepers and to foster understanding and appreciation among consumers of the diverse array of unique and high-quality products bearing the Thai GI label.

The limitation of this research is that the qualitative research approach could not give conclusive answers to specific research questions and could not be generalized in the market directly. However, the elements that emerged could be used to arrange a subsequent analysis based on a quantitative research approach. Suggested future research based on this study is to test the relative importance of factors influencing gatekeepers' purchasing decision in order to accurately define marketing strategies to introduce these products into the market. It is also useful to test awareness and purchasing behavior among consumers who purchase products from different distribution channels because they have different knowledge and purchasing intention toward Thai GI products. This would help the operators or government to decide which distribution channels they can use to promote the product and which are proper communication actions. Finally, the only source of information used in this study is the European gatekeepers; the voice and the point of view of the Thai exporters are not taken into consideration. Therefore, further research is needed to collect information from the Thai counterparts.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Rungsaran Wongprawmas is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Agricultural Economics and Engineering at the Alma Mater Studiorum—University of Bologna. Her research fields are food safety standards and quality management systems and agri-food marketing focusing on consumer behavior, international trade and quality products.

Maurizio Canavari holds a Laurea degree in Agricultural Sciences (Bologna, 1990) and a doctorate degree in Appraisal and Land Economics (Padova, 1996). He is associate professor of Agricultural Economics and Appraisal at the Alma Mater Studiorum–University of Bologna and he lectures

on agrifood marketing, strategic marketing management in agribusiness and marketing research. Current research interests regard topics in agri-food marketing and economics of quality in the agri-food chains, such as trust and quality assurance and certification in food networks, marketing and consumer behavior related to quality food products, such as organic, functional and unique specialty food.

Rainer Haas is a professor at the Institute of Marketing & Innovation. His research field is Food & Ag-Business Marketing.

Daniele Asioli is a post-doc research fellow at the Department of Agricultural Economics and Engineering at the Alma Mater Studiorum–University of Bologna, with a practical experience in food industry, specialized in agribusiness marketing, new food product development and food traceability.