

## **Sensory Experiences and Expectations of Italian and German Organic Consumers**

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*We explore sensory experiences and expectations of Italian and German organic consumers when purchasing and eating organic food. Ten focus group interviews were performed and the results were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Outcomes indicated that although sensory attributes are not the main purchase drivers, flavor and odor are the most important in driving consumers' choice. Findings also suggested that training consumers' sensory abilities offers new market opportunities to organic marketers. From a marketing perspective, Italian consumers seem to equally appreciate nonsubjective as well as subjective marketing information about organic products, whereas in Germany non subjective aspects appear to be predominant.*

**KEYWORDS** *consumers' sensory experiences and expectations, focus groups, Germany, Italy, organic food, sensory marketing*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Trends in the European Organic Food Market: Germany and Italy

Since 2004 the European organic food market has grown steadily (Hamm & Gronefeld, 2004) and changed its original supply chain structure and characteristics.

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In this framework, Germany is still the largest retail market for organic products in Europe in terms of overall production and imports (Obermowe, Sidali, Hemmerling, Busch, & Spiller, 2011). The German turnover of organic food products was about 5.8 billion Euros in 2009, whereas the per capita consumption reached 70.7 Euros (Willer & Kilcher, 2011). Apart from a temporary stagnation due to a financial crisis, the development of the German organic food market is characterized by a boom concerning the demand for organic products along with a notable structural change of the distribution channels during recent years in which multiple retailers are gaining importance, compared with the specialized organic shops, accounting for more than 50% of organic sales in 2007 (Obermowe et al., 2011).

The Italian organic sector also grew considerably since 2004. Despite the world economic crisis, Italian consumers are increasing their consumption of organic food. Italy is one of the world's largest domestic markets for organic products, with a turnover of 1,500 million Euros in 2009 (Willer & Kilcher, 2011) representing about 3% of the overall Italian food consumption. Although Italy is the fourth European country in terms of turnover of organic products after Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (De Ruvo, 2011), per capita expenditure is still low (about 25 Euros). With regard to the distribution channels, although organic farms play a very important role in the distribution of organic products, large retailers and specialized organic shops remain the most important distribution channels. However, although Italy is following the European trend and large retailers are increasing their importance in organic distribution over other distribution channels (De Ruvo, 2011; Schaak & Willer, 2010), organic foods are still mainly sold by traditional grocery stores and specialized retailers.

### Sensory Attributes as Relevant Elements for Organic Consumer Choices

On the consumer's side, even though sensory features are not the main buying motivations, they are gaining relevance. Some studies showed that flavor and other sensory attributes are important product features for specific consumer segments, which approach pragmatically the purchase of organic food products (Pellegrini & Farinello, 2009) and tend to evaluate them according to the same parameters applied to conventional products (Berardini, Ciannavei, Marino, & Spagnuolo, 2006). Other studies revealed that flavor and appearance are among the most important criteria in organic food purchase (Aertsens, Verbeke, Mondelaers, & van Huylenbroeck, 2009; Cerjak, Mesic, Kopic, Kovacic, & Markovina, 2010; Kuhar & Juvančič, 2010). These findings were confirmed by Lüth, Enneking, and Spiller (2005), who reported that consumers are willing to pay higher prices for organic products solely if they feature aspects beyond the fact of being organically produced, such as a unique flavor or odor.

Therefore sensory attributes are important elements that should be taken into account in marketing strategies by organic food operators (Brennan & Kuri, 2002; Padel & Midmore, 2005). As a consequence, consumers' sensory judgments of a food product are needed to exploit new markets based on preference understanding (Ruan & Zeng, 2004).

### Sensory Food Marketing

Sensory marketing could be defined as a group of key levers controlled by food operators in order to create a specific multisensory environment around the product or service by focusing on sale outlet environment or product environment and the communication of features of the product itself (Filser, 2003). Sensory marketing could be an effective tool in gaining sensory consumer insights for a marketing strategy of food companies because it influences emotional consumer decision making by variability of products, concepts, packaging, and marketing mix scenarios to ensure long-lasting success.

To our knowledge, only a few studies focusing specifically on consumers' sensory experiences and preferences for organic food have been conducted in Italy and Germany (Stolz, Jahrl, Baumgart, & Schneider, 2010). Even if sensory features are not prioritized in organic food choices and other issues prevail, such as idealistic and ethical concerns, they seem anyway to be quite relevant for Italian consumers when choosing organic food (Zanoli & Naspetti, 2002). Also in Germany there are only a few studies considering consumers' sensory experiences and preferences with regard to food products in general as well as in particular for organic foods and beverages. In this context the results of the German National Nutrition Survey II show that taste is the most important criterion for the choice of buying a particular food. This aspect was considered important or very important by 97.2% of the people questioned, followed by freshness, minimum durability, and healthiness (Max Rubner-Institut, 2008). In addition to these results, the importance of sensory aspects has been repeatedly mentioned in the context of surveys on the buying of organic food. Taste could be identified as the most important criterion for the purchase of organic products in a study by Kuhnert, Feindt, Wragge, and Beusmann (2003) followed by species-appropriate husbandry, healthiness, freshness, and ripeness.

The debate about the relevance of sensory features in purchasing organic food lies in the wide field of discussion concerning the existing difference between the sensory performance of organic and conventional food products. The growing interest in organic production has prompted several studies and researches aiming at comparing organic and conventionally grown food. Nonetheless, contrasting evidence in literature (Bourn & Prescott, 2002; Theuer, 2006; Yiridoe, Bonti-Ankomah, & Martin, 2005; Zhao, Chambers, Matta, Loughin, & Carey, 2007) makes it hardly possible to claim

the existence of differences between organic and conventionally grown products in terms of sensory properties, due to the amount of variables affecting the evaluation (e.g., product specificity, processing techniques, etc.). With regard to this and with specific reference to organic products, consumers' previous experiences, habits, and beliefs can play a role in influencing the perception of sensory properties, thus giving organic practitioners the opportunity to develop more customized marketing strategies involving sensory "hints."

## Objectives

The aim of this article is to explore and highlight the differences between Italian and German organic food consumers regarding sensory experiences, expectations, and perceptions when purchasing and eating organic food. The study provides details for further quantitative consumer surveys aiming at segmenting consumers and improving marketing strategies for German and Italian markets.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

To explore consumers' experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and expectations concerning the largely unexplored topic of organic sensory properties, the "focus group discussion" technique was chosen. This method is the most common qualitative method used in market research in order to explore in-depth topics, allowing detection of elements that could be used in further investigations (Molteni & Troilo, 2007).

### Survey Design: Recruitment, Composition of Focus Groups, and Location

Five focus groups (FGs) were conducted both in Italy and Germany with a target number of 5–10 participants each. Participants were recruited according to criteria concerning age, gender, and purchase/consumption of organic food. Details for recruitment criteria are listed here:

- Age: 18–45 = 50%, 46–75 = 50% for each FG.
- Gender: male = 33%, female = 66% for each FG. This conforms to the evidence of some empirical studies conducted in Germany and Italy, confirming that women are predominantly responsible for food purchasing (Fondazione Censis, 2010; Stolz, Stolze, Janssen, & Hamm, 2011).
- Purchase/consumption of organic food: participants should be organic food buyers and consumers. According to the frequency of purchase of organic products they were divided into heavy (purchasing organic twice

**TABLE 1** Composition of Focus Groups (FGs) in Italy and Germany

Country	FG Identification Number	Type of User	Number of Consumers	% Female	% Male	% 18–45 Years	% 46–75 Years
Germany	1	L	9	89	11	33	67
	2	L	5	100	0	20	80
	3	L	9	78	22	100	0
	4	H	7	71	29	71	29
	5	H	9	78	22	44	56
Total			39	82	18	56	44
Italy	1	L	8	63	38	50	50
	2	H	8	75	25	50	50
	3	H	9	56	44	56	44
	4	L	6	50	50	50	50
	5	L	10	60	40	50	50
Total			41	61	39	51	49

*Note.* L = light user; H = heavy user.

a month or more) and light (purchasing organic less than twice a month) users of organic food. Separate heavy and light consumer FGs were conducted.

Except for a few cases (Table 1), FG recruitment criteria and consumers' quotas were fulfilled.

FG discussions were conducted during autumn 2009. Italian researchers performed five FGs in five different cities across Italy (namely, Trieste, Genoa, Rome, Bari, and Matelica) with the intent to include large and small towns and to address both areas where organic food has already a well-established market and others where it hasn't. Due to budget constraints, in Germany FGs were all held in one location (Göttingen) in or nearby central town areas with a potentially high proportion of organic food consumers. Therefore, the German FGs were expected to reflect opinions widespread in a mature organic market, whereas the Italian FGs should mirror a market environment where organic food is less popular.

### Conducting Focus Group Discussions and Data Analysis

ECROPOLIS<sup>1</sup> researchers prepared a semistructured qualitative schedule aimed at providing a structure for the FG procedure, including a time frame and the formulation of the key questions to be discussed. FG discussions focused on the following aspects:

- Symbolic meanings and associations that participants relate to sensory characteristics of organic food;
- Experiences, expectations, and preferences for specific sensory properties of organic food;

- Consumers' sensory expectations and preferences related to variability and standardization of organic food; and
- Consumers' perceptions of the use of sensory "hints" in organic product marketing.

Data analysis was conducted by using a qualitative content summarizing approach, carried out in six steps:

- *Recording*: All FG interviews were recorded by tape and video recorders.
- *Transcription*: FG discussions were transcribed by Italian and German researchers. Nonverbal communication was not considered in the transcription process.
- *Coding*: FG discussions were coded by each partner. This enabled the discussion to be structured into different themes.
- *Group-specific theme analysis*: After coding, an analysis of the specific issues that arose in each FG was conducted.
- *Comprehensive theme analysis*: The issue-related results of each FG interview were compared in order to identify differences and similarities between occasional and regular buyers of organic food in each case study country.
- *Cross-country analysis*: The results of the case study countries were compared in order to summarize the results and to identify differences and similarities between countries and groups.

## RESULTS

In this section, a summary of the results of FG discussions is presented. In order to support some considerations, in some cases consumers' statements (or parts of them) are cited in the text together with the reference to consumers' country of origin (Germany = DE; Italy = IT) and to the frequency of organic food purchase (light users = L; heavy users = H). Sensory lexicon and terms adopted in the article conform to the definitions provided in the International Standard ISO 5492:2008 (ISO, 2008), where

- Taste is defined as "sensations perceived by the taste organ when stimulated by certain soluble substances." Basic tastes are acid/sour, bitter, salty, sweet, and umami.
- Flavor is defined as "the complex combination of the olfactory, gustatory and trigeminal sensations perceived during tasting."
- Smell is defined as "perception to perceive an odor."
- Odor is defined as the "sensation perceived by means of the olfactory organ in sniffing certain volatile substances."
- Appearance is defined as "all the visible attributes of a substance or object."

## Symbolic Meanings and Associations That Participants Relate to Sensory Characteristics of Organic Food

When asked about symbols and associations related to sensory properties of organic food, both German and Italian consumers described images connected with production methods and nature. Organic food is associated with the idea of natural, traditional farming; small farms (e.g., Tuscany landscapes); and former times, bringing fond memories for both German and Italian participants. For Italian consumers, organic food is also connected with personal feelings, such as the increase of personal well-being and the idea of “a rest for the spirit,” and with no-stress situations.

Regarding specific sensory aspects, such as flavor, odor, appearance, and so on, and the related images and symbols, taste appeared to be the easiest sense to connect with associations and images; it was linked with the image of grandparents’ traditional farming and with sensory childhood memories (“taste of product as it used to be,” DE.L). Product memories are extremely relevant for consumers because they represent a sort of personal sensory quality standard to which all their sensory experiences when eating food are compared. Also appearance of unprocessed organic products was mentioned in association with symbols. In particular, German consumers provided positive comments on organic fruits and vegetables’ visual aspect (“should look fresh and natural,” DE.H) and colors (“ideal world colors,” DE.H; “intense colors,” DE.H; “light and friendly colors,” DE.H). A slightly negative image arose when German consumers associated unprocessed organic produce with flavor and odor (“always a bit earthy,” DE.H; “not so intense, rather washed out odor,” DE.L).

## Experiences, Expectations, and Preferences for Specific Sensory Properties of Organic Food

Some difficulties arose when consumers were asked to focus on experiences, expectations, and preferences for specific sensory properties of organic food due to different reasons. Some consumers (especially German) were hardly able to contribute to the discussion due to their little experience either with organic or conventional food; some others declared a low interest for sensory features and a consequent difficulty in expressing their experiences and preferences. Some Italian participants revealed their difficulties in perceiving sensory differences between organic and conventional products when food is processed, while they affirmed that a difference can be perceived when products are unprocessed.

Despite the difficulties in talking about sensory features, it emerged that authenticity is what both Italian and German consumers would like to find in organic products’ flavor, which should be also more intense and natural. Tasting experiences with organic food, especially fruits and vegetables, were

described by Italian and German consumers by using positive attributes (organic flavor as “different,” “stronger,” “more intense,” “authentic,” “natural,” “less watery”). However, both in Germany and Italy especially light users mentioned negative quality parameters when talking about sensory performance of organic food (e.g., shorter shelf life, DE.L; visible quality defects, DE.L). This may be explained by the fact that light users are more used to conventional products and compare organic food sensory performance with the conventional counterpart. Considering the appearance of organic food, consumers affirmed that organic products are generally more heterogeneous and less perfect. However, especially German consumers remarked that these features are used as “organic quality” indicators and organic product detectors. Both Italian and German consumers declared they paid attention also to organic products’ texture and color performance, the latter being mentioned only by heavy users in both countries. When discussing sensory experiences, Italian consumers appeared to be more able to provide information, using many more sensory characteristics to describe food. This attitude differed according to consumers’ age: older consumers appeared more careful about sensory and safety attributes of food, whereas younger participants showed higher concern toward environmentally friendly methods, animal welfare, and avoidance of dangerous inputs into food production.

### Nonsensory Attributes and Their Relevance as a Buying Motive

As already remarked by literature, sensory aspects of organic food, even though playing an important role, are not the main purchase driver, especially for heavy users who are more concerned about other issues (e.g., environmentally friendly production methods, animal welfare, ethics, etc.), which meet their personal values. In particular, German heavy users appeared to be positively influenced by products’ variety, manufacturing processes, and organic food ingredients but less attracted by sensory features.

Also German light users seemed to be influenced in their buying decisions by other factors, such as price, production methods, and avoidance of dangerous inputs. Moreover, negative sensory performance of organic products seems to have influence on light users’ purchase behavior, which appears to be in general more pragmatic.

### Consumers’ Sensory Expectations and Preferences Related to Variability and Standardization of Organic Food

Generally, participants agreed upon the fact that organic food should not be standardized and should differ from conventional in terms of variability and



sensory aspects. Hence, the variability of organic products was perceived as important.

Organic products should have a “strong innate flavor,” differing from conventional food. Participants therefore expected organic products to taste “authentic,” “natural,” to have a “more intense flavor,” to “exalt basic ingredients,” and to “have a particular identity.” The lower level of some ingredients/components (e.g., sugar, salt, fats) was mentioned as typical of organic food and responsible for the difference with conventional counterparts in terms of sensory performances. Nonetheless, organic products are equally appreciated because they are perceived as more natural and pleasant.

Similar to taste, the visual appearance of organic products should not only differ from conventional ones but also among organic products themselves. Talking about appearance, German light users mentioned that the color of organic products differs in some cases from equivalent conventional ones.

A certain appearance was not only desired for products but also for the way products are presented at the point of sale. Italian light users noticed differences in this regard depending on the type of retail. Some participants preferred to buy in specialized organic food stores, where organic products are presented in a way participants are reminded of the “naturalness” and “simplicity” of food. On the contrary, other consumers preferred to buy organic products in retail stores, where organic food is presented similar to conventional food.

Sensory attributes differing between organic and conventional products were not always desired by the participants. Some consumers stressed that organic food ought to imitate conventional products because consumers need time to adapt to the new flavor, especially when a new product is launched.

Discussion on standardization versus variability was further delved into by asking consumers if sensory aspects of organic food should or should not be standardized in the way many conventional food products do. Italian consumers stated that organic products should not be standardized and should differ among them because sensory attributes of organic basic ingredients are perceived as the result of organic production and preservation techniques and depend on shorter supply chains and sales in season. This can be linked to the recent media exposure of initiatives aimed at marketing organic food products through short supply chain initiatives (Annunziata et al., 2011). In Germany, the discussion differed remarkably between heavy and light users. Whereas light users tried to talk about this topic based on examples and concrete products, heavy users discussed the question in a more general way. Furthermore, they did not discuss this topic with the same intensity as the light users did because for them it seemed very clear that organic products do not need to have the level of standardization that is typical for conventional food products.

## Consumers' Perceptions of the Use of Sensory "Hints" in Organic Products Marketing

With reference to claims on food packaging, consumers stated that sensory information can be helpful for people who are buying organic products for the first time, especially if these "claims" are associated with information on processing techniques and ingredients, in order to let consumers be aware about sensory performance of food (e.g., particular flavor due to the use of natural/nonnatural additives or possible modifications of sensory characteristics over time). Italian and German participants expressed particular preferences and expectations toward sensory information that should be reported on the label (e.g., indication of the levels of acidity, types of odors, levels of firmness and texture); in Germany participants also declared they appreciated information about the impact of storage on sensory quality of products. Italian consumers remarked that colors, images, symbols, keywords, sounds/noises, and packaging materials could be associated with certain sensory attributes and qualities and may increase consumers' trust and likelihood of purchase. They acknowledged a certain attraction to messages promising specific sensory attributes; nonetheless, in their opinion sensory information should be simple and very immediate.

These findings reveal that Italian participants seem to appreciate both subjective and nonsubjective marketing information; moreover, both styles of information are believed to enhance consumers' trust in organic products. Nevertheless, some Italian consumers showed skepticism toward sensory marketing effectiveness, arguing that habits have the strongest influence on consumers' choices; in one case, disapproval toward the use of "sensory hints" in organic products marketing was declared. Regarding German consumers, they seem to prefer nonsubjective marketing information, which is foremost seen as a suitable tool to overcome consumers' inhibitions with regard to sensory quality of organic products.

The majority of German participants did not see much point in sensory information; nutritional content, origin, and ingredients are in fact more valuable and relevant information for purchase decisions and deserve a higher marketing effort to be promoted.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main objective of this article was to investigate sensory experiences, expectations, and perceptions of German and Italian organic consumers when purchasing and eating organic food. Given the qualitative nature of the research, the results cannot be generalized to all Italian and German organic consumers. However, some suggestions can be evinced from the

analysis and used as input for further research as well as a source of speculation for organic operators.

The first relevant finding that emerged from the discussion is that the ability to differentiate between various categories of sensory perception is characterized, at least at a cognitive level, by a low level of development. For sensory-based marketing of organic products this premise leads to a limited set of possibilities when trying to reach consumers by affecting their senses. In both countries participants were shown to have a similar positive image of organic products and were able to mention several aspects such as intensity, naturalness, and authenticity that they consider important when it comes to the sensory properties of organic products. Another interesting finding being discussed within this article is that, even though taste is not the main reason for buying organic food, the importance ascribed to sensory aspects may differ depending on the organic consumption intensity and other food and lifestyle-related variables.

Confronted with the question of whether sensory properties of organic products should be rather standardized or variable, consumers often linked organic products with the concept of variability. However, depending on the product and on consumers' habits and sensory education, in some cases more standardized sensory properties of organic products are preferred. All these findings confirm that sensory perception is a learnable ability that depends on the "sensory training and education" of individuals: this offers an opportunity for the actors of the organic food market to bring their customers closer to their products by a corresponding training of consumers' sensory abilities. This sensory education could contribute to a successful positioning of organic products within the food market, which closely depends on the product group and the existence of strong competitors who are formative for a certain product standard as well as the sensory experiences and expectations of the targeted customer group.

With reference to sensory marketing activities, evidence from the discussions highlighted a difference between the countries. Italian consumers seem to appreciate more sensory marketing and to consider both subjective and nonsubjective marketing information suitable; in Germany nonsubjective information concerning organic food seems to be preferred by consumers. Nevertheless, German consumers declared that experiencing directly the sensory performance or receiving information about organic products at the points of sale would be appreciated. For organic product marketing, this finding suggests that for the Italian organic market a combined strategy that integrates a striking presentation of sensory aspects as well as objective information about product components, production methods, and their impact on sensory quality could be a valuable marketing strategy. For German consumers, only direct experience or objective information about product quality and how it can affect sensory performance seems to be

successful for sensory marketing. In both cases, additional efforts could be focused on food packaging and on label engineering and design in order to provide consumers with simple, immediate, and trustworthy messaging describing food products' components, the related sensory performance and its evolution during shelf life, and the way to process and consume a product the right way. In addition, it could be useful to stimulate consumers' sensory perceptions directly at the point of sale by using sounds/noises and colors that evoke organic and natural production methods as well as by including tasting activities and oral information provided by salespeople. This could prevent potential disappointment in cases of first purchase or when organic food is compared with conventional food. Because the organic market is affected by consumers' switching purchase behavior, due to the small number of well-known brands that assure organic products' distinctiveness and that are strong enough to foster consumers' loyalty (Jensen, Denver, & Zanoli, 2011), highlighting the added value of organic products in terms of sensory features could increase consumers' trust and reduce product substitution.

To conclude, the qualitative nature of the adopted approach implies that further research is needed to identify the right marketing tools to support a sensory-based strategy for product presentation and positioning. A quantitative research approach, aiming at segmenting consumers on the basis of their lifestyles, frequency of consumption of organic food, and attitudes toward sensory features could provide the actors of the organic food supply chain an overview on the target group-specific needs for a sensory-based marketing concept.

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