

DO CONSUMERS RECOGNIZE THE SENSORY QUALITY OF PDO PRODUCTS?

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Protected Designations of Origin or PDOs are, in general, well-known and appreciated, especially in southern Europe where a high number of collective quality marks (PDO, PGI and TSG) are present. With a total of 108 applied, registered or published PDOs (wines excluded), Spain is the third country in the world regarding the number of products having this quality label. According to the Council Regulation (EC) No 510/2006 (2006) on the protection of geographical indications and designations of origin for agricultural products and foodstuffs, the products to be protected under these norms should have a qualitative differentiation compared with similar products. However, the question is whether consumers are able or not to perceive some of these distinctive traits, especially those linked to the sensory properties of the different products.

The aim of this study was to evaluate consumers' ability to differentiate between different PDOs in two products (cheese and virgin olive oil) in a blind tasting condition. In order to have a more objective assessment of the uniqueness of these products, they were also assessed by trained sensory panels.

Eight different cheeses and 8 different virgin olive oils selected within the Ebro Valley were assessed, first by trained panels (in the case of the virgin olive oil by means of an official tasting panel and according to the methodology described in the Council Regulation No.640/2008) and later by 845 consumers, about half of them for cheeses (in Madrid and La Rioja) and about half of them for virgin olive oil (in Madrid and in Barcelona). In all cases, consumers scored the acceptability of the samples from 0 (dislike extremely) to 10 (like extremely).

Based on the descriptive profiles provided by the trained panels, samples were clearly different for 15 of the 19 attributes evaluated in the cheeses and for 10 of the 13 descriptors assessed in the virgin olive oils. As expected, consumers were also able to

differentiate between the samples, although their discriminating power was lower than that of the trained assessors. Overall, the results obtained show that consumers were able to distinguish between different PDOs within the same category of product (cheese or virgin olive oil), even when the sensory differences were rather small (e.g. between some virgin olive oils). According to the results obtained, the specificity of qualities of some PDOs can be detected and appreciated by consumers. Consequently they should be preserved and guaranteed in order to prevent these products from becoming too generic, which could result in a reduction of consumer loyalty, a rapid deterioration of their image and a decrease of consumers' trust in them.