

# The perception of the quality of traditional sausage products by the consumers

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## 1. Introduction

Increasingly, understanding the consumers is becoming a vital necessity, not only for the companies, but also for all market-oriented organisations. In Portugal this need became more evident when the level of competition increased and the consumer movements began to be structured in order to influence the behaviour of the companies and the preferences and demands of the consumers (Du Bois, 1993).

In this context, both the understanding of the purchasing mechanisms, as well as the process of stimulus perception by the consumer, which identifies the existing differences in the distinct segments of the market, are important aspects. Also the components of quality, related to the origin, traditional manufacturing, ecological environment of production, appearance, image, technology and the individual or collecti-

## Abstract

Understanding the consumer is admittedly an essential need for companies as well as for all market-oriented organisations. In this context, both the understanding of the purchasing mechanisms, as well as the process of stimulus perception by the consumer, which identifies the existing differences in the distinct segments of the market, are important aspects. Also the components of quality, related to the origin, traditional manufacturing, ecological environment of production, appearance, image, technology and the individual or collective brands are of great importance. The concept of quality, in the case of the Traditional Alentejan Sausage products (TAS), is formed through the intrinsic characteristics of the products as well as their extrinsic attributes. This study will identify the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of the TAS products, with which the consumers associate and identify the product quality. The evaluation of the quality is done indirectly, through information obtained from a survey of the food retailers of the city of Évora.

Notwithstanding the limitations associated with the commercial reality of the Évora market, the use of an indirect process for information acquisition, and the differences that might eventually exist in the concept of quality between the retailers and consumers, it can be concluded that the consumer has a high awareness and appetite for TAS products, where the variable price has a small influence on their acquisition, contrary to the variables taste, appearance and origin, admittedly associated with the quality of the product and the determining factors in their selection and purchase. For better acceptance of the products, consumers consider a better characterisation, certification and publicity as fundamental factors.

## Résumé

*Comprendre le consommateur est indubitablement une exigence fondamentale pour les entreprises et les organisations de marché. A cet effet, il est très important d'appréhender les mécanismes d'achat tout comme le processus de perception de stimuli par le consommateur, qui permet d'identifier les différences dans les divers segments de marché. Egalement, il est nécessaire de prendre en compte les composantes de la qualité, liées à l'origine, la transformation traditionnelle, les conditions écologiques de production, l'aspect, l'image, la technologie et les marques individuelles ou collectives.*

*En ce qui concerne les saucisses traditionnelles d'Alentejo, le concept de qualité est défini par les caractéristiques intrinsèques de ces produits et par leurs attributs extrinsèques. Le présent travail vise à mettre en évidence les caractéristiques intrinsèques et extrinsèques de ces produits, que les consommateurs associent et identifient avec la qualité du produit. La qualité a été évaluée indirectement, en se basant sur les informations fournies, dans une enquête, par des commerçants de produits alimentaires au détail dans la ville d'Evora.*

*Malgré les contraintes dues aux conditions du marché d'Evora, à l'utilisation d'un processus indirect pour acquérir les informations et aux éventuelles différences du concept de qualité entre les détaillants et les consommateurs, il est possible de conclure que le consommateur connaît bien et apprécie beaucoup ces produits. Par ailleurs, le prix variable n'influe guère sur les achats, contrairement au goût, à l'aspect et à l'origine variables qui sont clairement associés à la qualité des produits et s'avèrent donc être des facteurs déterminants dans leur choix et achat. Pour que les produits soient acceptés davantage, les consommateurs avancent qu'une meilleure caractérisation, certification et publicité sont des facteurs fondamentaux.*

ve brands are of great importance (Canut, 1993). During the purchasing process, the perception of the product quality can be a key factor of the selection criteria, as it allows greater efficiency and efficacy in the distribution chain and becomes a sustainable competitive edge.

A large number of the managers responsible for marketing agricultural and food products have based their strategies of product differentiation on natural and geographic components and on the specificity of a superior quality of their product relative to that of potential competitors. Included in these are the products called Traditional Alentejan Sausages (TAS), which have a well established reputation for quality, but the genuineness of which is being questioned by customers who are presented with products that are identified as traditional Alentejan, but have little to do with the original recipes.

The purpose of this report is to analyse the

quality perception of the TAS in the Évora market, through identification of the quality intrinsic and extrinsic

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characteristics and its comparison with other sausage products. The interest of this analysis is multiple. On one hand, it is important to identify the determining factors for the appreciation of TAS products and for their differentiation from the remaining sausage products. On the other hand, it is important to know the opinion of the consumers and their decision to buy TAS, in order to define the fundamentals of eventual marketing strategies of companies that market these products. Finally, the information thus obtained can be used at an institutional level for the development of a food policy geared towards promoting quality goods, produced in relatively small quantities, certified and aimed at specific customer groups for whom the natural and geographic component might have a great weight in their differentiation.

## 2. The perception of product quality by the customers

The analysis of the perception of product quality by the consumers is included in the global study of the consumer behaviour, and is part of the so-called behaviour sciences (Dubois, 1993). With the evolution course of food consumption in the more developed countries, where the purchasing behaviour is becoming more and more demanding, analysis of this behaviour is becoming relatively more and more frequent (Meulemberg and Steenkamp, 1991).

From the point of view of consumer behaviour, the purchasing behaviour is understood as an activity aimed at solving a problem with limited rationality. Companies are interested in understanding this behaviour in order to be able to influence some of its stages. Due to the implicit difficulty in understanding it, various theories and models have appeared with the purpose of explaining this behaviour. Several authors consider the purchasing process as a multi-stage activity (Assael, 1992; Kotler, 1995; Lambin, 1995; León and Olabarría, 1991; Schiffman and Kanuk, 1987). The various stages are: 1) the recognition of the problem; 2) search for information; 3) assessment of alternatives; 4) decision to buy; 5) post purchase behaviour. Lambin (1995) sums up these stages into three levels of consumer reply: the cognitive reply, referring to the information retained by the buyers; the affective answer, related to the assessments, preferences and attitudes of the buyer; and the behaviour reply, responsible for both the act of purchasing and for its repetition.

In the first level, the cognitive answer corresponds to the perception of the product, that is, the positioning of the product in the mind of the consumer, which, according to Schiffman and Kanuk (1987), can be more important for the purchase than its real characteristics. The geographic origin of the product is one of the characteristics that acts on the perceived image of the product, decreasing the inherent risk of decision to buy (Bingne et al., 1983). In order to assess this first level, various patterns of recognition have been selected, which is understood as becoming conscious

of the existence of a product or brand. It is possible to distinguish between spontaneous recognition (recognised by the consumer without reference to any collective brand) and suggested recognition (consumer recognises a product or a brand included in a supplied list.)

In the second level, the affective one, the preferences for the product are structured, based on a previous assessment. That is, the identification of the attitudes needs an initial study of the assessment criteria that makes it possible to differentiate the behaviour. These are the most important attributes in each purchasing situation, the ones that determine the preferential structure of the individuals. This means that there are common attributes to all the products, that are non-relevant in any act of purchasing, and that do not determine the preferences of the individuals (Grijalba, 1989).

The quality attribute is formed either by intrinsic characteristics of the product, those that make it functional, or by the extrinsic characteristics, those that project the image of the product, with which the consumer associates a higher or lower measure of quality. Thus administered quality is distinguished from the market quality. The first is institutionally regulated, while the second is evaluated by the market and is the fundamental objective of this paper. Price is a special case of an extrinsic characteristic which, from the consumer's point of view, can be understood as the indicator of the level of quality of the product. In the meantime, this argument is not valid when in the consumer's market there is a divergence between price and the quality of the products (Roche and Grijalba, 1993).

The third level of response of the consumer in the act of purchasing, the behavioural one, is measured through his level of purchase, the frequency of purchase, the reasons for not consuming, the identification of the consumer at home, the places where purchase is made, and the proportion represented by each place in relation to the total of the acquired product. The reduced number of papers about the behaviour of the consumers of quality products in general, and of sausage products, in particular, has led to the development of the study within a global perspective. In each acquisition, the buyer consciously reflects on the explicit and implicit aspects of the product. Within the TAS product market, this paper tries to detect the fundamental intrinsic and extrinsic attributes that the consumers relate to and identify with the quality of the product.

## 3. Methodology

The perception of the quality of the TAS products was evaluated, in an indirect way, through the information obtained from a survey of 93 of the 132 retailers in the city of Évora, according to the list supplied by the Commercial Association. Those that were not surveyed are the retailers that have gone out of business, whole-sellers and those that do not sell meat products. The criteria chosen for assessing the preference for TAS products, that is the most impor-

tant attributes for the purchase, was the direct method of semantic differential scales (Shiffman and Kanut, 1987). The factors considered as attributes that distinguish TAS products were the importance of their geographic origin, their traditional manufacturing process and the raw material used (typical regional product), being natural (not have artificial products, such as colourings, conservatives and synthetic material in their composition), their high quality (present above average taste and hygiene), and the ratio between quality and price.

The questions were divided into blocks that included 1) the division of the outlets into large (larger than 1200m<sup>2</sup> and with more than 16 employees), and small; 2) total volume of sales, of each product (paio-pieces of pork with just a small amount of fat, smoked pork sausage and white farinha-smoked sausage, horseshoe shaped, filled up with fresh pork fat, red pepper and wheat flour), differentiating those of traditional manufacture from others; 3) identification of the distribution circuits, and the assessment of the most relevant in the Évora market; 4) the seasonal variability of sales; 5) identification of factors that influence the consumer when purchasing sausage products in general and their characteristics; 6) comparison between the usual sausage products and TAS; 7) identification of the main differences between the TAS products and their competitors, of the same kind; 8) the differentiation between the demand for TAS and that for their competitors; 9) the client/retail relationship in terms of request for recommendation and the recommendation given for the purchase of TAS products; 10) identification of the suggestions for improvements in the acceptance of TAS; 11) the origin of TAS products and the respective quantities sold per producing region; and finally, 12) identification of differentiated demand according to social class. A block of variables, focusing on the principle reasons for not selling TAS products was directed to the retailers of food products that do not sell TAS.

The survey, one of the most widely used tools by sociologists and social psychologists in market studies and other

purely theoretical research (Ghiglione and Matalon, 1993), was developed with the support of opinion-survey specialists of the Department of Sociology at the University of Évora, through a pre-survey of six retailers of the city of Évora, with the purpose of evaluating the objectivity and clarity of the questions for the surveyed and to finalise some questions that had necessarily been left open.

The preliminary data obtained from the survey were introduced into a database and statistically treated, with the use of SPSS program (Statistical package for social sciences). All the variables were represented in absolute and relative frequencies, to permit a global reading about the behaviour of the surveyed universe.

## 4. Results

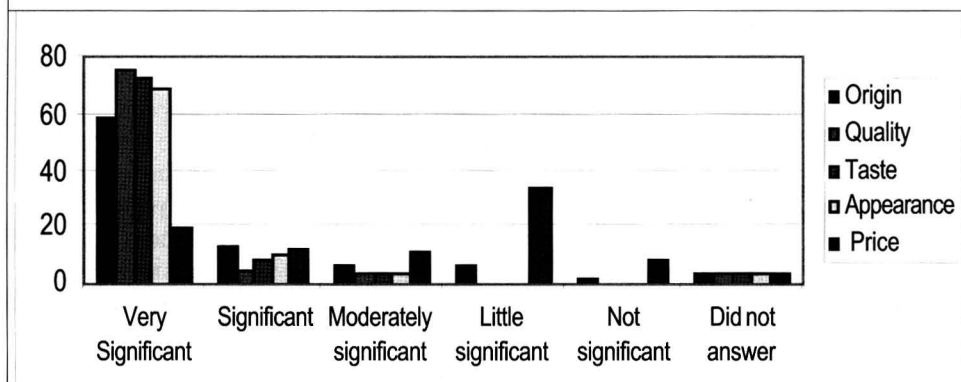
The results that will be discussed here can be divided into two parts. In the first, the data for the general characterisation of the Évora market is analysed. In the second, with graphs that combine the frequency of responses in each category with the respective variables, the results of the evaluation of the quality attribute of the TAS products are presented.

From all the surveyed establishments, only three per cent are large outlets, while the remaining ninety-seven per cent are small. All the large outlets sell more than 400 Kg/year, while in the majority of the small outlets, with the exception of meat sausage, the quantities sold are always less than 100 Kg/year. The purchase of TAS products by retailers is done, in 54.8% of cases, directly by the producer. The majority of TAS products originate in Estremoz (51.6%), Montoito (28%), São Mansos, Montemor and Évora. The TAS products have a higher demand in the Évora market (86%), as a result of which sausages of non-traditional manufacturing have a small share in this market. The total demand is distributed in a balanced way throughout high, middle and low social classes.

As to the seasonal variability of sales, they take place during the winter, the perfect time for slaughtering pigs and making TAS (sales from October to December, and January to March account, respectively, for 50.5 and 46.2 percent of all sales). The results show that 51.6 percent of the retailers "always" advise and 21.5 percent "frequently" advise the customers, and that 66.7 percent of these "always" or "frequently" ask the opinion of the retailer.

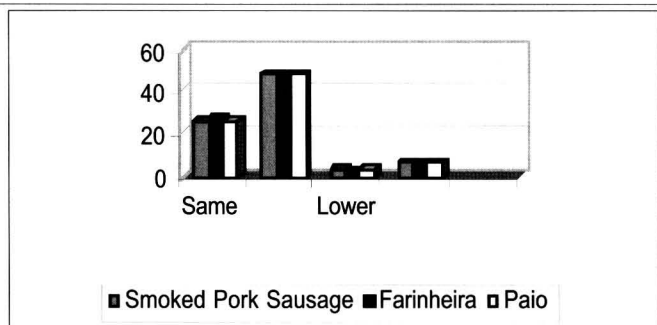
Analysis of Graph 1 shows the quality, taste, presentation and origin attributes (with a response index above 60 percent in the "very significant" category), as determining in the appreciation and sale of TAS products. As far as price factor is concerned, 45.2 per-

Graph 1. Determining factors in the appreciation and purchase of TAS product



Source: Survey results

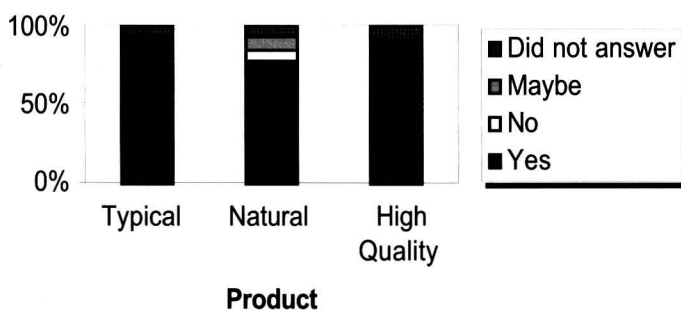
Graph 2. *TAS prices*



Source: Survey results

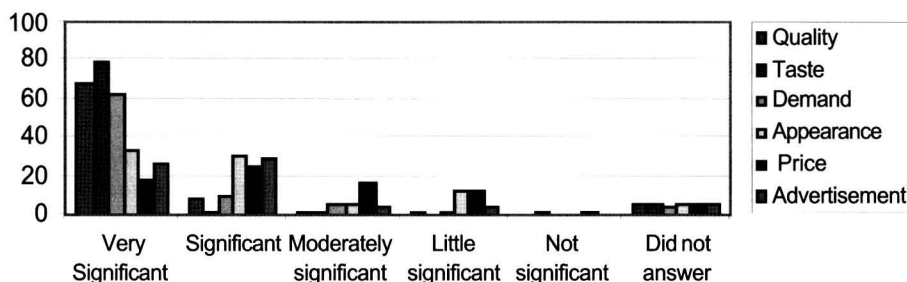
cent consider it to be “very significant” and “moderately significant” and another 45.2 percent consider it “little significant” or “not significant”. The existing prices are considered adequate by 65.6 percent of the inquired, while 21.5 percent consider them to be high. Regarding the price variable, 52.7 percent would accept higher prices, 28 percent think that the prices should stay the same, and only 4.3 percent think that they should be lower (Graph 2). That is, the majority of the retailers are willing to pay more for TAS that are guaranteed to have been made according to the traditional process, implicitly recognising that a higher price

Graph 3. *Attributes of TAS*



Source: Survey results

Graph 4. *Characteristics that differentiate TAS from similar products*



Source: Survey results

can be a sign of higher quality and thus increase sales.

Graph 3 shows that the majority of retailers (more than 90 percent) accept TAS products as Typical Regional Products and as High Quality Products. The variable that presents greatest doubt amongst the retailers is Natural Product, where 9.7 percent answered in the “Maybe” category and 6.5% in “No”. The main differentiating characteristics of TAS in relation to other sausage products are price, advertisement and appearance (Graph 4). Also the quality, taste and demand variables are noteworthy as the most important in the TAS differentiation. Still in this context, 87.1 percent of the surveyed can distinguish a TAS product from one identified as such, and more than 60 percent refer salt, garlic and red pepper paste (67.7 percent of affirmative answers) as intrinsic quality characteristics of TAS, while 28 percent also referred to black pig meat (Graph 5).

In the remaining variables i.e. price, appearance and advertisement, the opinion of the retailers are divided. As far as appearance and advertisement are concerned, the “Very significant” and “Significant” obtained more than 50% of the responses. Regarding price, only the sum of the responses in categories “Very significant”, “Significant” and “Moderately significant” add up to more than 50 percent. Nevertheless, as the sum of the affirmative categories is higher than that of negative, price is also considered as a differentiating characteristic.

For a greater acceptance of the TAS by the consumers, the surveyed ones suggest (with answers in the categories between “very significant” and “moderately significant”), the variables 1) greater advertisement for better acceptance; 2) improved characterisation for better acceptance; 3) certification of the products for better acceptance; and 4) lower prices for better acceptance (Graph 6).

## 5. Conclusions

The results of the survey should be analysed prudently, as there might be differences in the perception and the concept of quality between the retailers and the consumers and because many consumers buy TAS products directly from the producer and not in retail. The study needs to be complemented with direct information from the consumers. This type of information makes it possible to characterise the profile of the TAS consumer. Although the above-mentioned and other limitations associated with the characteristics of the local market do not make it possible to apply the conclusions to markets of other regions, it is possible to conclude that:

- 1) The consumer has a high awareness and appetite for TAS products, where price is not a very influential variable in the purchasing process, contrary to taste, appearance and origin variables,

which are definitely related to the quality of the products and determinant in their selection and purchase;

2) The perception of quality derives fundamentally from intrinsic characteristics (taste, appearance and origin) which provide functionality to the product. There are no extrinsic attributes that project the image of the product and determine the levels of perception of quality by the customer;

3) For better acceptability of the products, consumers consider that the fundamental factors are: better characterisation, certification and advertisement of the products;

4) The Évora market is receptive to high quality TAS products, produced according to the traditional processes, even if this means higher prices;

5) The communication established between the retailer and the customer is an aspect that should not be ignored and that can be used as means of direct advertisement, channelled through the retailer or other responsible enti-

ties.

It is suggested that a more in-depth study be carried out and be expanded to include other markets, where the perception of the quality of TAS might not be as obvious as in the Évora market. This expansion may also make it possible to obtain the information necessary for the development of food policy measures geared towards promoting quality products and defining the best strategy for each one of them.

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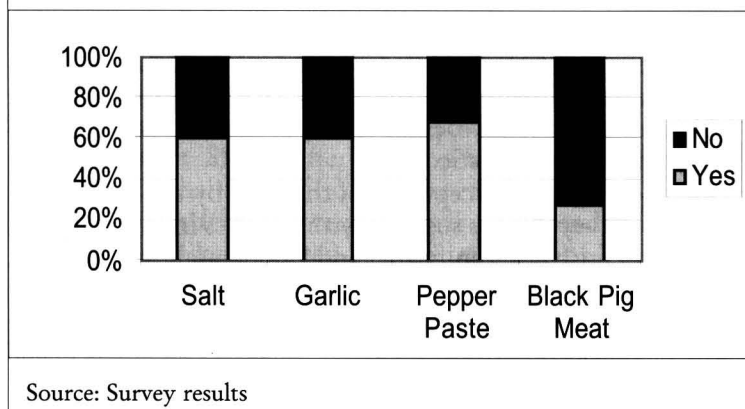
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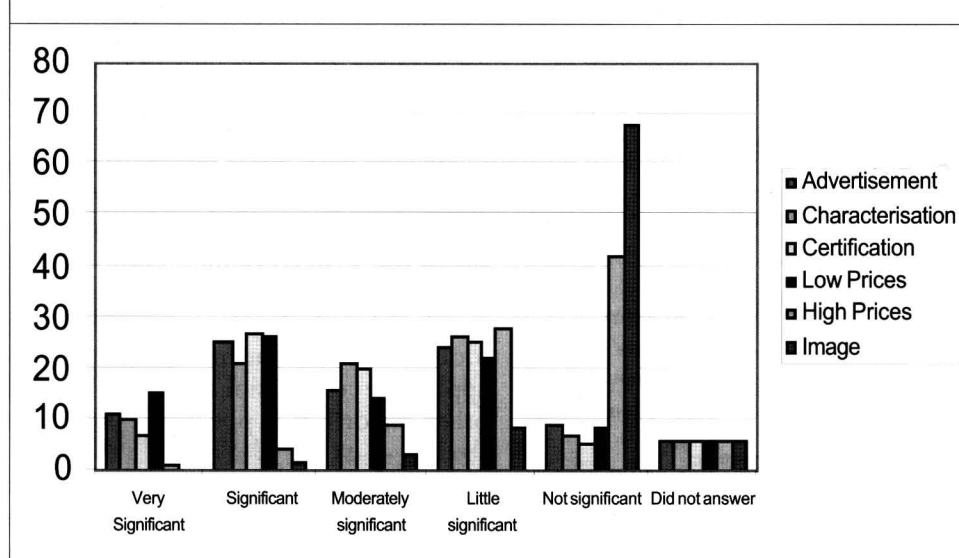
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Graph 5. Intrinsic characteristics of TAS



Source: Survey results

Graph 6. Proposals for better acceptability of TAS



Source: Survey results