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Article

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THE EXPLOITATION OF THE TRADITIONAL COMPONENT IN RESTRUCTURING MODERN FOOD OFFER IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Food and eating habits, together with adjacent agricultural activities have had and an important role in the development of modern society and the individual itself. Besides its nutritional role, food has become a main socio-cultural determinant, food consumption patterns being influenced, on one hand, by psycho-sensory and quality characteristics of the food product and, on the other hand, by the physiological state of the consumer and its main determinants: traditions, religion and culture. These elements, together with economic considerations have a significant share in shaping the modern eating habits.

In this context, the present paper aims to identify and analyze the main capitalization methods of the food's traditional potential in reshaping the modern food offer, starting with a literature review and continuing with an exploratory analyze of the traditional food sector in Romania. Considering the main directions outlined by literature, this article tries to identify a set of specific features of the traditional food sector in Romania both in terms of producer and consumer perspectives. In this regard, an interview and an exploratory based questionnaire study were conducted.

Having as a starting point the wide variety of Romanian food resources, this study aims to highlight how culinary customs have been modeled throughout history in order to establish eating patterns as an assessment method based on the impact of technological progress on the future alimentation.

Keywords: traditional food product, food offer, consumer, eating behavior.

JEL Classification: L66, Q18, Q57, R11.

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Introduction

Traditional food represents a mark of the past into the modern food supply offer that is providing a set of key components regarding the food behavior patterns of each country's history. Nowadays, maintaining the traditional component active in a more and more dynamic food offer can be a real challenge for the country or region that it is distinguished by it. In this respect, the legal and administrative entities try to provide a harmonized framework for enabling better protection of certified products: preserving the culinary identity of a nation on the global market, on one hand, and, on the other hand, protecting consumers from possible fraud maneuvers and local producers in facing big manufacturing companies.

Thus, the main objectives of the present paper are to identify the position of the traditional component in the Romanian food offer, reported both to the production environment and certification standards and also to the consumer requirements. The starting point is identifying the current position of the traditional sector in the food supply commodity chain, based on the various perspectives presented in contemporary literature and dates from Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development (2015).

The study uses the information and expectations provided by the technical director of Sonimpex company (producer of Topoloveni plum jam, product certified as a protected geographical indication at European level) in order to analyze the factors that characterize traditional food in Romania. Therefore, the research results reveal that Romanian producers consider the traditional food sector a strict and rigid sector in terms of flexibility, but consider the certifications related to these products can be used as a guarantee of quality, balancing the lack of the innovative factor implementation.

Beside the results of the interview, a questionnaire-based exploratory research reveals that the profile of Romanian consumers involves an openness to both local and imported traditional foods. Also, the Romanian consumers seek to purchase a wide range of such products (meat, dairy, bakery etc.) based on various reasons such as health benefits, consumption safety for certificated products or meeting other cultures through food.

1. A literature review

The modern food offer represents a defining component of the global market because of the fact that food is essential for human consumption, determining a permanent demand of such products. In this context, the positioning of traditional foods in the modern food supply offer has two main directions, different in terms of how indispensability is approached.

As a starting point, a traditional food product can be defined as a local product, made of local and seasonal ingredients, obtained by conventional methods that were used generations ago (Weichselbaum, Benelam și Costa Soares, 2009).

So, in some authors' opinion, the high stability of consumption determines the food industry to register a slower growth compared to other production sectors, in terms of innovation, factor that applies a big pressure on areas such as constructions or IT (Moskowitz and Hartmann, 2008).

This approach presumes that elements such as regional heritage or cultural identity are common met and strongly promoted in the development process of the food supply chain and that a restrain exists from the consumer's side regarding the acceptance of new food varieties. Also, beside the social impact, traditional food has a strong economic impact, contributing to the sustainable development of rural areas, protecting them from depopulation, promoting variety and differentiation for producers in the food industry (Avermaete et al., 2004). Also, from an economical perspective, commercialization and production development of these products, especially if marketed as brands, lead to augmented demand and sales, higher employment rates and a raised income of the local population (Cerjak et al., 2014).

On the other hand, the literature claims that the new requirements of the modern consumer (such as variety, nutritional intake, the impact on personal health and the environment) determines the need for innovation in the food sector and the traditional food market will lose ground in this context, due to the fact that traditional production practices involve manufacturing low competitiveness and low efficiency of the production process (Guerrero et al., 2010). But in his context, Jordana (2000) states that the situation should be seen by the producers as generating a competitive advantage, if a set of requirements are taken into account (table no. 1).

Table no. 1: Modern challenges of the traditional food market

Advertising	Legal protection	Quality assurance	Product innovation
A traditional food product should be regarded as an exotic product on the external markets, from other regions, so they should be promoted properly.	Although the European Union has established a legal framework in this area, there still are European countries that cannot provide real guarantees for traditional local foods.	This should be a priority objective for the producer, who is responsible for the insurance and declaration of food quality.	Improving the production and commercial methods, product and process changes, new ways of organizing the company, identifying new forms of distribution.

Source: Jordana, 2000, p. 54

Moreover, traditional food producers have already received advice from industry authorities on the possibility of extending or improving production or commercial techniques with modern management elements and marketing or product promotion through nutrition and health benefits (European Commission, 2015).

These two approaches promote two totally different visions, Hartmann's and Moskowitz (2008) conservative attitude being in conflict with Jordana's (2000) and Guerrero's et al. (2010) idea of innovation.

In this situation, we can question the evolution of the traditional food sector based on the emerging market's new requirements. Furthermore, there is a continuing need for a more detailed analysis of these two approaches, for different geographical areas in order to

identify the dominant one. From another perspective, consumers can influence this approach only based on variables such as regional cultural factors, consumer's educational level, safety and food security issues.

2. Analysis of the traditional food sector in Romania

Because of its natural components (landforms, climate etc) Romania is characterized by a wide variety of food resources, from numerous species of fish and wild animals to a complex vegetal and livestock sector. All these food resources have been available for centuries and have been the source of development for Romanian traditional food offer. Moreover, the country has a wide list of traditional activities that are connected with the territory's cultural identity and represent main producing methods for traditional foods, still being practiced in local communities and small villages (Stroia, 2007):

- Bread baking, based on wheat and rye;
- Wine making traditional activities;
- Meat preparation activities – from wild animals (hunting activities) or livestock in individual households or farms;
- Milk preparation activities;
- Fishing;
- Preserving indigenous varieties of plants and breeds.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Romania has registered at a national level a number of 484 traditional food products (figure no 1), that are obtain in accordance with the legal framework (Order no. 724 from 29 of July 2013 regarding the certification of traditional food products).

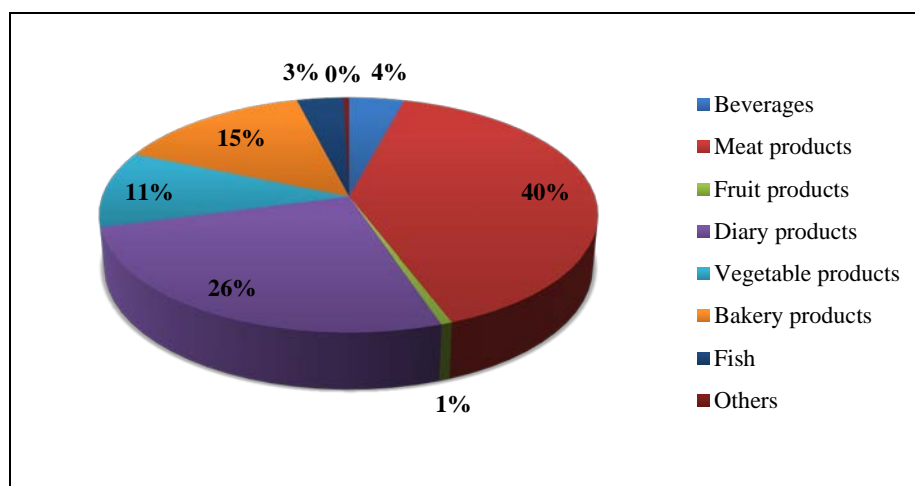


Figure no. 1: Certified Traditional Food Products at national level – by category
Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2015




According to the national legislation these 484 food products are obtain within Romanian territory, using local raw materials and ingredients, excluding food additives, and having a traditional method of production and/or processing and a traditional technological process, that can be distinguishes from other similar products of the same category. The certification process of these products is based on a specification notebook, carefully documented by the producer and closely examined by the food sector specialists.

A specification notebook must include a list of elements like: the name of the traditional product, the description of its characteristics (main organoleptic, physio-chemical and microbiological characteristics), the description of the raw materials and ingredients used, the description of the production method, specificities regarding product packaging, the description of the items that define the specifics of the traditional products, minimum requirements and procedures for verification and control, production capacity (that must respect the limits stated by the national legislation), data, documents, bibliographical references that attests the age of the product. All the products that receive a favorable response are listed in the National Register of Traditional Products and can be commercialized using the national logo for traditional food products.

Beside traditional food products, Romania has a different category of food products, that can be somehow considered traditional, but due to production volumes, cannot be certified in this category. According to the Order no. 394/2014 regarding the certification of food products as based on acknowledged Romanian recipes, a food product recipe can be added in this category if the product is obtained in accordance with the composition used for more than 30 years before the date of effectiveness of this order.

The national legislative framework (Order no. 724/2013; Order no. 394/2014) includes only the notions of traditional food products or acknowledged Romanian recipes, not including the three certification categories available at European level. The European Union has set up a system of indications different from existing national frame, which includes three main components, namely: Protected Designation of Origin, Protected Geographical Indication and Traditional Specialty Guaranteed. The European system has as a main objective protecting registered traditional foods and enabling producers to market distinctive high-quality regional products (Costa Soares, 2010).

But the lack of harmonization between European and national frameworks doesn't restrain a Romanian producer to certify its product as Protected Designation of Origin – PDO, Protected Geographical Indication – PGI or Traditional Speciality Guaranteed – TSG. This is demonstrated by the data of the European Commission on the designation of origin database (figure. no 2).

Țara	Denumirea	Tipul cererii	Date	Stare:
RO - România	... [ALL Product Classes]
România	Cârnați de Pleșcoi	IGP	04/07/2016	Depusă
România	 Telemea de Ibănești	DOP	15/03/2016	Înregistrată
România	 Salam de Sibiu	IGP	19/02/2016	Înregistrată
România	Novac afumat din Țara Bârsei	IGP	20/11/2013	Depusă
România	 Magiun de prune Topoloveni	IGP	08/04/2011	Înregistrată

**Figure no. 2: Romanian Traditional Products registered or applying
for European Certification**

Source: European Commission (Database of Origin and Registration), 2016

According to figure no. 2, three Romanian traditional food products are certified at European level (2 of them as a protected designation -IGP and one as a protected designation of origin - PDO). Besides these, another two products are under review process by the European Commission. The certification process at European level of Romanian traditional food began in 2011, with the application of Topoloveni plum jam and continues till today for the other two products that are still in the process of accreditation (Plescoi sausages and smoked fish from Barsei country).

3. Research methodology

The central objective of this paper involves understanding Romanian traditional food sector, according to the two approaches identified in the contemporary literature. In order to achieve a more detailed analysis, the researched aimed to identify the most appropriate approach, both from the point of view of the Romanian producer and consumer of traditional food.

Thus the question that was raised involved finding the reason why a producer of traditional food would accept to spend so much research, time and financial resources in integrating the innovative factor in the process of production / distribution / sale of its products. In this regard, an interview was conducted with the technical director of Sonimpex Company, in order to identify the main determinants of Topoloveni plum jam, the first product certified as the Protected Geographical Indication at European level, since 2011. The Interview took place in the production factory from Topoloveni in January 2015.

Qualitative market research techniques such as interviews primarily take into consideration solving issues related to the proper diagnosis of the motivations that underlie certain decisions (Anghel, 2004).. The interview was organized as a structured one and the result analysis was made not only on the surface, but also in depth, by determining types (nature) and intensity.

The second part of the research involves identifying the market approach in terms of consumer awareness and acceptance, an exploratory research based on a structured questionnaire being performed, based on 6 questions. Thus, the questioner aimed to identify: the level of acceptance of the innovation factor / novelty in the food supply chain, the main traditional food sources (local or imported), the specific recipe for processed products, categories of products purchased and respondents' structure by gender and age. The questionnaire was completed on a voluntary basis in an electronic format by 140 respondents from urban areas, all respondents within higher education.

In the documentation process of this paper, contemporary literature materials were studied regarding traditional food sector at European and national level as well as the data provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2015) and the European Commission (2016) on key indicators of the sector.

4. Results and discussions - the harmonizing of innovative factor with food tradition

In order to highlight a better picture of the subject, the results and discussions are divided in two parts according the main areas of the research: interview with the Technical Director of Sonimpex Company; Romanian consumer's perception on traditional food – questionnaire.

• **Interview with the Technical Director of Sonimpex Company**

Closely linked to the objectives of this research, the interview was based on a guide consisting of six questions covering the following structure: Introduction questions, opening questions, key questions and closing questions. In short words, the results of the interview with the technical director of Sonimpex Company seek to shape the image of the traditional food manufacturer's perspective, involving the optimization of the production process in relation with innovation and quality requirements.

The question regarding the motivation behind choosing plum jam as a representative traditional Romanian food product and the strategy of building product standards around such a simple product, the technical director highlighted that the most important factor in the context of traditional food industry is the cultural heritage behind a product, regardless of the simplicity of its recipe. Topoloveni plum jam is produced based on an old traditional recipe, Sonimpex Company has brought out efforts to prove the product exists for at least 100 years and that its place of origin is Călinești – Topoloveni region. After a long period of documentation in libraries, museums, regional institutions and national authorities we have demonstrated that the product dates back to 1714, the first official decree being identified in the charter of Stefan Cantacuzino, and this allowed us start certification process at European level.

Another question is related to the main determinants that differentiate the company's traditional product from any other similar product obtained in a conventional system. In this context, the production method is a defining factor, Topoloveni jam being obtained based on an old traditional recipe, combining well established amounts of the following varieties of plums, picked at full maturity: Stanley, Piteștean, Tuleu timpuriu, Tuleu gras, Grasă ameliorată, Grasă Romanesca, Bistrițeană, Vânăta Românească, chosen Brumării, Vâlcean, Centenar, Pescăruș, Dâmbovița, Tomnatici de Caransebeșul, Silvia. These varieties and their harvest time are extremely important aspects, because there are a number of quality attributes that must be met by the final product and those attributes depend on these items. We can include here high carbohydrate content (natural sugar) and the optimal level of vitamin C requirements, which are met at the point of full maturity of the fruits, after a long period of exposure at a moderate temperature. Moreover, in order to preserve the nutritional qualities of fresh plum, the jam is prepared using a traditional boiler, with double walls, involving controlled temperatures not exceeding 68 degrees Celsius, for 12 to 14 hours.

The next question addressed to the technical director is related to the integration of the innovative factor in the improvement process of the product itself, in order to gain consumer loyalty. According to her, the trend identified by the market studies is based on a single element, namely quality. Although quality can be subjectively defined, in principle, if a set of expectations regarding the product are met (like ingredients, pleasant taste, nutritional intake, price), then the consumer will repeat the action of purchasing the product. The main competitive advantage of Topoloveni plum jam is the recipe. Although traditional production methods involve strict observance of this process, for Topoloveni plum jam, the traditional component is characterized by a simple recipe that is in line with the new trends of the modern consumer, like health and nutritional benefits. The recipe includes 100% plums and no added sugar. Also, the production method of double-walled boiler eliminates the need of added chemicals or preservatives. But the company is aware that for more complex products

in terms of energy intake, respecting the traditional component would represent a barrier in shaping the product according to the market's new requirements.

Going forward, the question regarding the main challenges that a traditional food producing company is facing both on the domestic and external market, the technical director highlights that, from procuring raw materials to obtaining the final product in optimum quality conditions, all stages represent challenges for the company. What is essential for the process itself is procuring the raw material. Achieving this step is not easy, because the traditional component determines the raw material to be supplied by local producers from Topoloveni – Călinești region and given the fluctuations in weather conditions (temperature, humidity), the production of fruit registers fluctuations each year, and the production is influenced directly. Also, penetration of foreign markets can often be a challenge for areas where the legal framework does not provide protection and security of such products.

Not least, when it comes to promoting a traditional food product, the technical director explained that all certification requirements regarding the protected geographical indication are promoted to consumers through campaigns, in order for them to understand the strict quality control that exists behind the production process, but also the traditional component which describes a rustic area of Romania. The image that the company has built for Topoloveni plum jam is based on the idea of a quality product, both in terms of taste and health benefits, produced from a single ingredient and involving the use of a special recipe, which eliminates the necessity of adding sugar or other sweeteners. Thus, Topoloveni plum jam is one of the few sweet products that can be included in a diet for diabetics. The proportion of 5 tons of fruits for 1 ton of jam determines a pleasant sensory perception, eliminating the need for additional sugar content, and this recommendation is also stated medically by the Institute of Diabetes, Nutrition and Metabolic Diseases "N. Paulescu".

Concluding the interview with the last question regarding the importance of traditional food products in shaping the modern food offer, Sonimpex Company believes that beside the main contribution of traditional food to preserve the cultural identity and heritage of a region or country, traditional products bring added value to the rural development process, by supporting environmental conservation, biodiversity and local community cohesion. Also, certified traditional food can provide guarantees and transparency regarding all consumer's necessary information: ingredients, production methods and origin of the product.

Therefore, we can say that a traditional food product can be at the same time, a "complex" food product in terms of a strict recipe, a clearly defined production method and a set of restrictions imposed by the legal framework and by the traditional component. Furthermore, from the information provided by the technical director of Sonimpex we can affirm that the innovative factor is somehow limited in the context of the market of Romanian traditional foods, because one of the certification conditions is represented by applying the original recipe and production process. This limits very often the production process at high volumes or an extended validity period of the product on one hand and, on the other hand, it can result in products with a high energy content, which cannot be recommended for frequent consumption. Thus, we can affirm that Guerrero's approach characterizes the traditional food market in Romania. Of course exceptions exist, such as Topoloveni plum jam, which can use the traditional factor as an advantage, meeting the requirements of the modern consumer in terms of health and nutritional intake.

• **Romanian consumer's perception on traditional food – questionnaire**

Traditional food products have recently gained ground among consumers throughout the world, because of the new ways of reshaping the food common needs towards more complex concerns, such as food safety or environmental protection.

Taking into consideration the consumer's perspective, recent studies have pointed to a general definition of traditional food, consumers perceiving traditional food as a product frequently consumed or associated to specific celebrations and/or seasons, transmitted from one generation to another, made in a specific way according to gastronomic heritage, naturally processed, and distinguished and known because of its sensory properties and associated to a certain local area, region or country (Vanhonacker et al., 2008; 2013).

Taking this definition as a starting point and also reporting to the theoretical approaches, this study aims to identify the Romanian consumer perception regarding traditional products through a questionnaire, validated only for respondents who answered affirmative to the question - *Accustomed to eating traditional food?*

According to the results of the first question, regarding the distribution by gender of consumers in age groups (figure no 3), we can see that in each age group, the percentage of men is double that the percentage of female consumers.

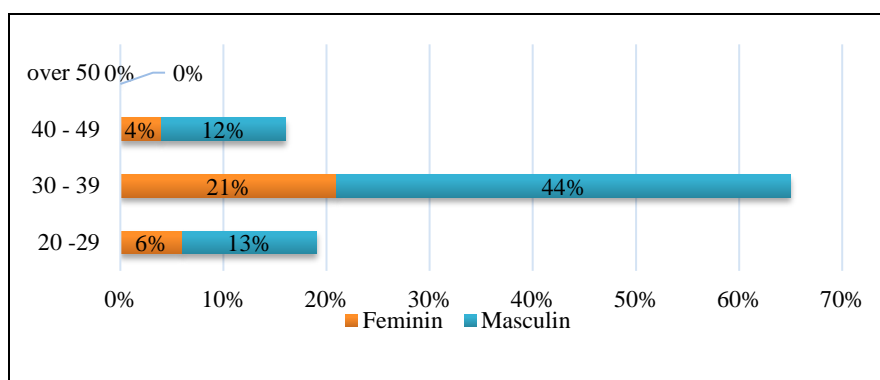


Figure no. 3: Sample division by gender and by age groups

Regarding the second question, referring to the frequency of consumption, 93% of the respondents said that the consumption rate of traditional food is 2-3 times per week, which means that the consumer's interest for traditional food is growing and that the Romanian market offers multiple assortments of such products that meet the consumer's modern requirements (figure no 4).

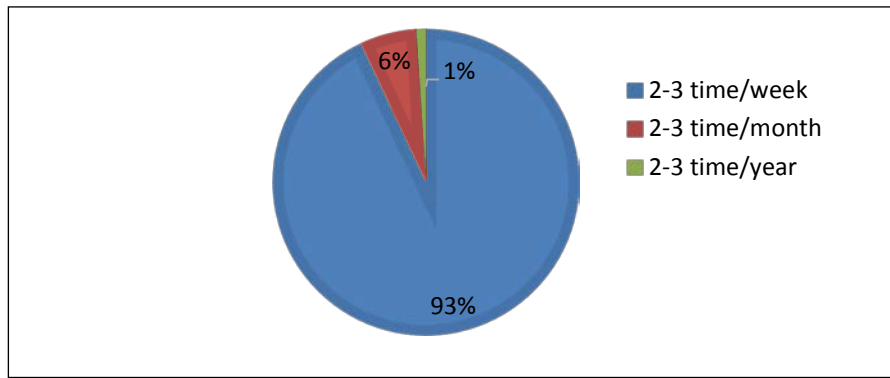


Figure no. 4: Frequency of consumption of traditional foods

The next question aims to identify if the consumer's behavior tends to variety (as a modern market requirement) or tends to be conserving (involving limitations to traditional local food products). Thus, identifying the origin of traditional products consumed was tracked, with reference to the local indigenous products or imported ones. The responses to this question highlighted that 77% of respondents tend for diversity, consuming both traditional local food and products that come from other countries (figure no 5). Thus we can say that the Romanian traditional food consumer is open-minded and accepts the innovative factor in the food supply chain by introducing in their eating plan traditional products that are specific to other countries or geographical regions.

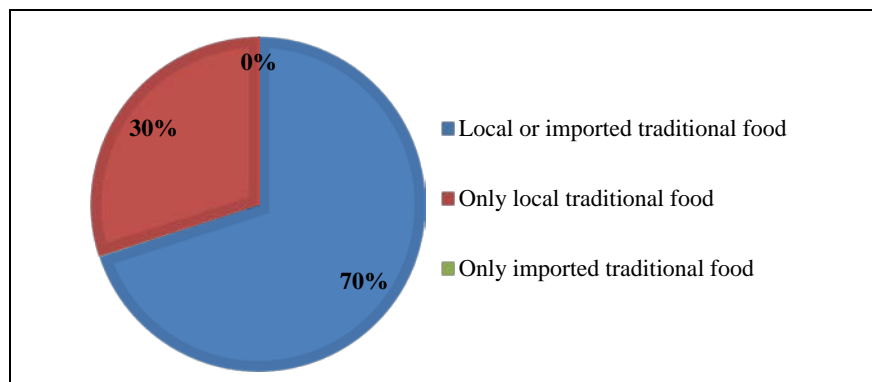


Figure no. 5: Source of origin of traditional food

The forth question aimed to identify the main reasons that determine the decision of consumption of traditional food products and revealed that the most relevant factor influencing consumption is represented by the health benefits that these products bring (39%). Another important element is quality and the guarantees that certified traditional products involves (37%). In addition to these reasons, 15% of the respondents said that these products (if they are imported) satisfy their curiosity about cultural diversity or bring a nostalgic feeling about different moments in life, such as childhood (7%). The remaining 2% use such products only on certain holidays, having tradition as a main motivation (figure no. 6).

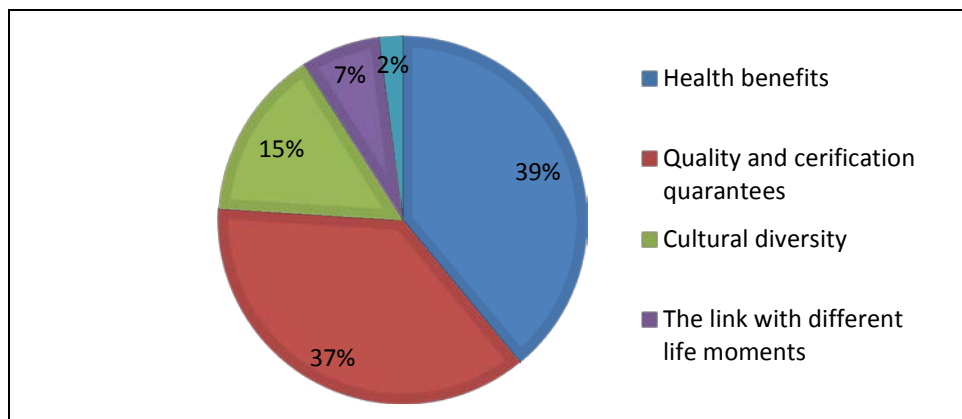


Figure no. 6: Determinants of traditional food consumption

Regarding the type of traditional foods products, Romanians purchase meat products 46%, 37% milk products, 32% bakery products, 17% products based on vegetables, 12% beverages, 3% produced fruit, 3% fish products, distribution being consistent with the market structure according to MARD (figure no. 7).

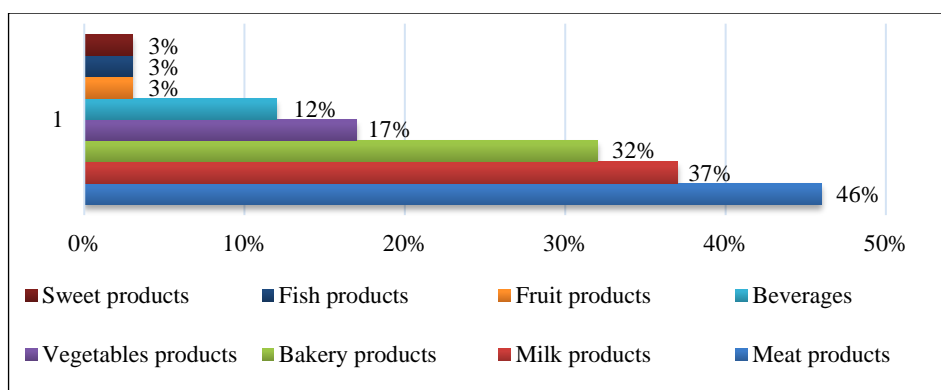


Figure no. 7: Consumption structure of traditional foods

Conclusions

The increased demand of diversity for food products has led to the emergence of numerous new products on the market, part of them resulting from the traditional categories, part of them with modified features or brand new products. Consumer needs have evolved from simple approaches (existential food needs) to more complex approaches, which involves product innovation, food safety and quality. These approaches determine the traditional potential of certain areas to be reinterpreted in order to maintain active this component in the food supply chain.

Thus, studies in the field have identified two main approaches, diametrically opposed on the evolution of traditional food market. On one hand, researches show that there are areas in which the act of nutrition remained unchanged, and the need for best quality food,

already known by the consumer, supporting traditional component in the supply offer. On the other hand, some studies affirm that the traditional food sector will lose ground if the producers will not identify a method of harmonizing the innovative factor with food tradition.

Romania has more than 400 certificated traditional food products, which are produced in accordance with the legal framework for traditional foods and only 3 of them have an international impact, being are certified at European level - Topoloveni plum jam, Sibiu salami and Ibănești cheese. The results of the interview conducted with the technical director of Sonimpex Company highlight the fact that traditional food products are actually complex food products in term of a strict recipe, a clearly defined production method and a set of restrictions imposed by the legal framework and by the traditional component. Even if the innovation factor is somehow limited in the context of traditional food products for Romania, Sonimpex Company states that traditional foods should be integrated and promoted in the food supply chain through the guarantees they offer, as certified traditional foods and the next generation of organic foods can be treated as modern solutions in the present food market context characterized by:

- a highly consumption level of processed food, that is low in nutrients, but rich in chemicals, preservatives, flavor enhancers that extend shelf life and improve taste;
- an expansion of fast-food consumption, including foods with high energetic profile generated by a high intake of fats and added sugars.

Regarding the main characteristics of the Romanian traditional food consumer, the male population consumes more traditional foods than women (almost double) having determinants such as better access to a wider range of products and high interest for other regions' culture, especially those with a recognized health benefit (Mediterranean traditional food), that can satisfy their curiosity regarding cultural diversity (Chinese traditional food) or can bring a nostalgic feeling about different life moments like childhood (traditional food from consumer's country of origin). These motivations causes a high rate of consumption (2-3 times per week) for Romanian consumers who are open-minded to the novelty factor, who prefer equally local and imported traditional foods. The most consumed product groups are traditional meat products, dairy products and traditional bakery products.

In this context, the concern for the nutritional benefits of traditional foods leads food producers to use many resources and traditional manufacturing methods. These concerns must consider the acceptability of such foods by the great mass of consumers (consumer shift from local to general consumption) and their accessibility and availability, too. Therefore, it naturally raises the problem of shaping the limits of the ratio between traditional and untraditional within the evolution of food supply, in a future research.

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