

Local agri-food products of women's cooperatives. The 'feminine side' of quality (Greece)

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Abstract: Rural women's small businesses engaged in the production of local agri-food products have been flourishing in the Greek countryside the last years responding to an emerging consumer demand for food of "specific quality". Such successful initiatives have been particularly developed with co-operative form, scattered throughout the country, both in the hinterland and in the islands.

In this paper we examine the motives of consumers in buying local traditional food from rural women's cooperatives and their perceptions for "specific quality" of women's foods with connotations of 'a home made' and so traditional, pure and healthy foodstuff. We explore to what extent visitors to women's co-operatives are influenced in their shopping by the fact that products are prepared by women. The analysis is based on first findings of an empirical research carried out in five women's food-producing cooperatives of rural Greece. The survey was based on random sampling and personal interviews on site using a specific questionnaire addressed to customers of these cooperatives. On-site research indicated that the overwhelming majority of the consumers were influenced "greatly" or "very greatly" by the fact that the foods are prepared by country women; in their opinion these products "are made using pure ingredients" and incorporating "the housewife's care and taste", instilling confidence in the authenticity of the local products, the genuineness of the traditional recipes and the wholesomeness of the food.

Keywords: rural women's cooperatives, local agri-food production, specific quality, Greece

Introduction

The last years have seen a relative flourishing in the Greek countryside of women's small businesses engaged in the production of local agri-food products. Many workshops for traditional sweets, pastas, cheese, drinks, and other comestibles feature 'traditional local recipes', 'pure ingredients' and above all 'home-made' products, responding to an emerging consumer demand for local foods which are both safe and "of special quality". Such successful initiatives have been developed all over the country, both on the mainland and in the islands, where tourism tends to be more developed, typically by rural woman and typically on a co-operative basis. The women make use of tacit knowledge and traditional know-how to start up their businesses, with the small and flexible scale of the production and the co-operative character of businesses minimizing entrepreneurial risk. Foods produced by rural women constitute at some way a separate category of traditional local product "of special quality". Women's artisanal food production is tending spontaneously to acquire the characteristics of a special informal quality labelling, a "female label", with connotations of "home-made" and so traditional, pure and healthy.

In this paper, basing on the findings from empirical research carried out in five women's agritourist food producing co-operatives in rural Greece, we examine to what extent visitors to women's co-operatives are influenced in their shopping by the fact that products are prepared by women. We focus on the socio-demographic profile of these consumers, and more generally, the extent to which local traditional foods are in fact part of the contemporary food consumption habits.

Rural women in local agrifood production: Professionalization of “traditional female skills”.

The recent turn by consumers to local agri-food produce offers significant prospects for small-scale industry and food-production workshops in rural areas. Consumers weary of mass-produced industrial products and sensitive to the nutritional risks of much industrially-processed food are on the lookout for local traditional food of special quality evoking “the word of primordial tastes” (Bourdieu, 1984:79), experiences of good eating and social constructions of “quality” and “health”. What they are seeking is a wholly different type of relationship with farmers and food producers, one based on reciprocity, trust and shared values (Hinrichs, 2000; Marsden et al., 2000).

Some of the connotations of the multi-faceted concept of “quality” pertain to the “local”, with intimations also of the ‘rural’, the ‘once-upon-a-time’, or even ‘the producer that we know’. In other words, the reference to geographical origin or to the producer (the stockbreeder, the small food processing workshop or the women’s co-operative in the village) imparts to the products the virtue of “quality” in the socially-constructed perceptions of consumers seeking the ‘healthy’, the ‘genuine’, the ‘traditional’ (Weatherell et al., 2003; Parrot et al., 2002; Marsden et al., 2000). The recent food crisis has only served to make consumers even more aware of where their food is coming and how is processed. Ilbery and Kneafsey (1998: 217) note in this connection that consumers are interested in finding out about the origins of their food and the methods used in its production, not only for reasons of “health” and “security” but also to satisfy a pervasive nostalgia that harks back to a perceived time of ‘real’ and ‘wholesome’ food. Even if the demand for foods of ‘special quality’ is in general weak (for reasons of price, accessibility, convenience, etc.), consumer interest remains volatile, as the products in question are often associated with real or imagined benefits such as health or environmental protection, not to mention symbolic associations deriving from a specific cultural heritage. The social demand for local traditional food and local culinary traditions illustrates how people aspire for appropriation, however short-lived, of a rural identity through re-invented “peasant food”, testifying to an unspoken desire to find “lost rural roots” through their eating practices (Bessièrè, 1998).

Within this general context of seeking out foods offering safety and other specific qualities (e.g. those of protected geographical provenance, organic, ‘peasant’, on-farm processing) it often appears that “rural women’s foods” could in themselves constitute a distinct category of local traditional food (Anthopoulos, 2008). They benefit from their associations with inherited recipes, good housekeeping, pure ingredients. Food produced by women is imagined as being prepared in accordance with long-standing ancestral traditions and artisanal methods. We are thus invited on a “nostalgic trip back to the realms of the food ‘granny used to cook’ ” (Ashley et al., 2005:88). It appears that in the imaginary world of the consumer an ideal image is evoked of a country woman (and mother) who, by virtue of her ‘natural’ position as nurturer and cook for the farming family, acts out a multiplicity of roles within an idyllic rural setting: she takes care of the garden of the family farm, the farm animals that provide us with their fresh, pure, clean, healthy products. She works up the fruits of the annual harvest for use in the home: pasta, sausages, cheese, sweets, etc. She cooks every day in accordance with implicit codes of proper diet and local culinary cultures (freshness, seasonality, fasting and other religious codes, adherence to custom). As characteristically noted by Little and Austin (1996: 106) “the rural idyll has traditionally included very conventional images and expectations of women’s place in rural society: at the heart of the family, which is understood as being the centre of the community”. The notions of so-called ‘traditional’ food and culinary heritage are thus ideologically freighted with social stereotypes of how, within a given rural area or community, skills and tacit know-how are transmitted from woman (older) to woman (younger), even if within the prevalent extension of the urban consumerist model “the daughter or granddaughter no longer inherits secret family recipes, and modern home cooking does not go beyond traditional family dishes” (Bessièrè, 1998: 25).

It must nevertheless be conceded, on the other hand, that the growing trend of rural women in the Greek and the European countryside to start up new small-scale businesses in the agri-food sector reflects a need to generate additional income above and beyond farm income, given that primary production alone is no longer enough to support rural households. According to research on rural women's entrepreneurship it is likely that when informal sectors are taken into consideration women will be seen as playing an even greater role (Minitti et al., 2006). It appears that women are prepared to run the risk of taking up entrepreneurial activity when it can be done from their own familiar surroundings (in the community in which they live) and in familiar occupations (such as cooking and food processing), thus providing themselves with room for manoeuvre in spite of the multiple gender-based constraints, especially in rural areas (e.g. gender-based inequalities of access to developmental resources such as credit, training, information; deficiencies in basic child-care facilities, cultural barriers etc) (Bock, 2004; Tigges and Green, 1994). In other words promotion of women's entrepreneurship in rural areas introduces new role models through professionalization of informal types of employment and tacit know-how within the household and/or the farm. Women tend to transform their domestic skills such as cooking into income-generating "productive labour" in the form of catering for tourists and the processing and sale of food (Whatmore, 1988:244).

In conclusion, the creation of small women's enterprises for the production of local agrofoods answers to a twofold necessity: the demand for special quality foods by an increasing number of selective consumers, and creation of additional income for rural households. The involvement of women in production of local foods through initiation of entrepreneurial activity highlights the "feminine aspect of quality", and takes advantage of it by commercializing the idyllic image of the female nurturer, mother and housekeeper. Nevertheless, we should not overlook that fact that the professionalization of rural women's traditional female skills essentially reproduces gendered social stereotypes of female roles (nurturers, cooks and guardians of traditional values), in the final analysis undermining the same social and economic emancipation that emerges from active employment and a financial contribution to the family budget.

Local agrifood production in Greece. The flourishing of women's small businesses

The rich and varied regional dietary heritage of Greece (specific local foods and gastronomy, culinary traditions), as indeed of all of the Mediterranean basin, continues to be a vital part of contemporary food culture¹. Insofar as links with one's place of origin and with the countryside have not been radically severed in Greece (relatively recent rural exodus in the 60s and 70s) and the sense of "belonging to a place" remains relatively strong (retention of the family home and kinship networks in one's place of origin), the recent "return to the land" in the context of a new perspective on "traditional, home-made, village (and thus 'quality') food" activates memories and, in the case of those city dwellers lacking "living" roots in the countryside, shapes invented cultural reference points and lifestyles.

In recent years, on the other hand, a noteworthy level of activity is observable in local communities in relation both to promotion of their natural and cultural riches and to their specific products and cuisines. Local authorities and rural societies have come together around programmes for reviving and promoting traditional agrifood products and cuisines as a way of drawing attention to their area and its attractions and ultimately attracting tourists, in the expectation of development. In this favourable context,

¹ It is no accident that in Southern Europe the number of agrifood products registered as traditional or of protected geographic origin (PDO/ PGI under the European Directives) is significantly higher than in the more northerly countries of the EU. Discussing the "practical aesthetics of traditional cuisines", Miele and Murdoch (2002) argue that Italy, France and other Mediterranean countries are still dominated by more traditional food consumption patterns and regional cuisines, in contrast to the UK and other northern countries, which are characterized by a growing trend to internationalization and a new aesthetic of food consumption ('creolization', 'McDonaldized cuisine' and so on).

numerous small businesses were established with assistance from EU developmental programmes (e.g. Leader) and economic activity was generated both in agritourism and in food production. Country women, as specialists in hospitality and food preparation, responded positively to these new trends, displaying particular dynamism and creativity in the establishment of small businesses on both an individual and a co-operative basis.

Past empirical research on the entrepreneurial dynamism of country women running small workshops for production of traditional local foods (Anthopoulou, 2008; Iakovidou, 2007) indicates that these are small businesses with low levels of invested capital, staffed essentially by the producer herself (self-employment) with some other members of the family (spouse, parents, children at peak work times) contributing in an ancillary capacity. The small and flexible scale of production and the family character of the business mean low entrepreneurial risk in the context of family ties and kinship networks.

According to local surveys (Iakovidou, 2002; Koutsou et al., 2009) women engaged in rural tourism and food processing prefer to work in teams. It is possible that their choice is heavily dependent on the fact that group entrepreneurship makes available a variety of skills and provides the possibility for there to be a balanced management team, combining the strengths of individual women and providing psychological support of a kind that is particularly necessary when one is starting up. Women's agrifood/agritourism co-operatives in Greece provide a good example of this tendency among women entrepreneurs in rural areas. According to the latest figures (Ministry of Agricultural Development and Food, 2008) 140 women's agritourist co-operatives are in operation today, scattered throughout the country: in the islands, in coastal areas and in the hinterland, and without around 3,000 country women organized in them. The great majority of these co-operatives produce traditional and local food products, with some (18.6%) manufacturing cottage industry products and a lower number (6.4%) making available bed and breakfast accommodation (at the same time preparing food that is marketed through the hostels). In almost all cases the premises of the co-operative (whether it was the workshop and exhibition centre or the hostel) is a public building that has been put at the disposal of the co-operative by the local authorities (typically it is the building of the public school –of usually typical local architecture- that is no longer in operation). Quite apart from the fact that it makes possible a significant reduction in the amount of investment capital required by the women, this cession of public property is indicative of the recognition accorded by the local authorities to the social function exercised by these co-operatives, both in generating workplaces in rural communities and in promoting local products and the local culture.

Taking into account the relative importance acquired in Greece in recent years by the production of local agrifood products in the more general context of developing agrotourism, country women who, given the present-day requirements of the labour market, are more or less excluded from it (isolated in small farming villages, relatively advanced in age, of a low educational level, lacking in capital, reluctant to run economic and personal risk) have been able to become professionally active. They have taken advantage of opportunities (subsidy schemes, assistance from local authorities) and have transformed their latent skills into professional qualifications responding to the new challenges of the consumer market for "special quality" local food.

The products of the co-operatives, as products made by women, meet with a greater demand among the hard-to-please consuming public that is in search of traditional local products of "special quality". This higher degree of market penetration is not unrelated to the fact that particular emphasis is placed on the products' feminine character: it is made clear to the consumer that these are products made by farming women. This is emphasized both on the shop signs and on the product labels, and the people serving the customers are always members of the co-operative, not just employees working for a daily wage. It is this that serves to differentiate these products from the products of other (individual) businesses, whether run by women or men, that are making similar articles for consumption.

Local agri-food products of women’s co-operatives. The ‘feminine aspect’ of quality (Greece).

Methodology

The study was conducted in five women’s agritourist co-operatives producing traditional agroalimentary products, selected on the basis of their geographic dispersal in the country so as to be in regions with different characteristics. Questionnaires were administered to consumers who were making purchases in the co-operative shop. All in all, 477 questionnaires were completed by the interviewees in the period between June and November 2009; the sample is considered representative for the purposes of this study. Related literature and previous research were used as the basis for our questionnaire, which included multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was anonymous and included questions pertaining to the social and demographic characteristics of the consumers, their overall consumer behaviour and their attitude to these specific products.

Reliability and validity tests, followed by descriptive statistics of basic research variables, were the first steps in the statistical analysis. Frequency and cross-correlation tables were assessed; a likelihood-ratio chi-squared for each of the preference questions and in relation to the independent variables of classification was also implemented as well as analysis of adjusted standardised residuals. Further statistical analysis involved Two-Step Cluster analysis in order to reveal natural grouping of cases in terms of basic variables.

Results from the empirical research study

According to the findings from the field research, most consumers spent relatively small amounts; not exceeding 20 euros, on purchases from the relevant women’s co-operative (on the day of completing the questionnaire). Specifically, 29.1% of the total number of consumers spent less than 10 euros and 40.5% spent between 11 and 20 euros. Most of the consumers (80.7%) bought products to cover household requirements for food, with the remaining 19.3% buying products as souvenirs or presents.

The majority of sample seems to be in a more or less regular relationship with the women’s co-operative since they visit the shop one or more times a week (12.3% and 6% of the total respectively), one (19.8%) or more (14.0%) times a month. Some (17.4%) purchase goods once a year (e.g. on their holiday visit to their place of origin). The others (30.5%) were visiting and shopping for the first time (excursions into the wider region). This shows that stable relationships of confidence and fidelity are being established with the women’s co-operatives, based on perceived quality and the reputation of the products.

In any case, to the question to the consumers: “How did you find out about the shop?” the most frequent answers had to do with the quality of the products that was ascertained from personal experience (“I live in the same village/nearby and I know the co-operative”: 38.4% of the sample; “I have got to know it, because I shopped here another time”: 22.2%), but also with the positive experience of another person (“I got to know the co-operative from friends and I am coming for the first time”: 13.8%). In other words the answers highlight the benefits of a short food supply chain using “the language of regard” through personal interactions (Marsden et al., 2000; Sage, 2003), spatial proximity and face-to-face contact with the producers/ processors.

“Chance discovery” of the co-operative in the context of a visit to the area corresponds to a relatively less frequent contingency (“I came on an excursion and I saw the shop by chance”: 14.9%; “They brought me with the excursion group”: 5.9%) but there is minimal response, in the form of visits to the outlet of the co-operatives in question, to a potential marketing strategy by the co-operatives themselves (2.3% of consumers replied that “they found out about the co-operative from advertising leaflets, internet, etc. and are coming for the first time.” Thus the basic means for promoting agritourist products was word of mouth and not the employment of classical marketing methods.

To the question of how far they were induced to shop from the specific outlets by the fact that “the items on sale are traditional local products”, “are from co-operatives”, “have been prepared by women”, the relevant answers presuppose their being “traditional local products” and “produced by women”. Specifically, 88.9% of the consumers answered that they had been influenced “greatly” or “very greatly” by the fact that the items in question were “traditional local products” and 81.1% by the fact that they were “food produced by women” (while 54.9% of the sample put them in the category of “co-operative products”).

For those consumers who said that they had been influenced (to a greater or lesser extent) in their purchases by the fact that that “the food is prepared by women”, the reason for this influence was that “it is made with pure ingredients” (55.4% of consumers gave a positive response); “it is embedded with the taste of the woman- housekeeper” (51.7%); “it is home-made; with the care of the woman” (46.3%). Following this, at a considerable distance, came “they remind me of village life” (30.5%) and “they remind me of my childhood” (16%). We note that food safety and the authenticity of the product (“the ingredients are pure”, an authentic recipe handed down in the context of family tradition), that they are safeguarded by being made by housewives who are care providers for their families, (they embody women’s “taste” and “good housekeeping”) exerts more influence over consumer attitudes than factors pertaining to a perceived place and time of ‘real’ and ‘wholesome’ food (the image or the experience of the village and of childhood). It is nevertheless worth noting that the co-operatives in question, and many small food production workshops in the Greek countryside, do not have any established quality certification for such products, whether certifications of control/insurance of food safety (in accordance with so-called objective indicators of quality), such as the ISO and the HACCP or designations of geographical origin such as PDO and PGI (in accordance with the EU food quality regulations). Consumers’ conceptions of quality are, in this cultural context, based on notions of trust in the actors who are involved in the food production. In other words it is a socially constructed quality based on ‘what have been traditionally described as subjective indicators of quality’ (Ilbery and Knafsey, 2000).

Further analysis of how far consumers are influenced by the fact that “the products are prepared by women” focuses on the significant relationship between this variable and the “age” ($a=0.000$ $df=20$), the “marital state” ($a=0.000$ $df=4$), the “existence of children” ($a=0.000$ $df=4$) and the “profession” ($a=0.019$ $df=20$).

As far as age is concerned results show that the significance of the “feminine” character of the food to the purchase of products from the co-operatives in question is growing as we move from younger to older age categories. Thus, whereas in the total sample of interviewees 80.9% were influenced “greatly” or “very greatly”, in the 41-50 age bracket the corresponding percentage rises to 88.8%, in the 51-65 age bracket it rises further to 91.1%, and finally in the >65 age bracket it comes to 92%. These are the generations of consumers with potentially “primordial tastes” from their childhood and their youth “in the village”, for the most part as the place where they were born and grew up but also as a place of origin (for those relatively younger) who returned regularly as children and adolescents in the course of “holidays with grandma and grandpa”.

Regarding the marital state, that is to say whether married or have children, the proportion of those who replied that they are influenced “greatly” and “very greatly” by the fact that “the products are prepared by women” is higher among those who are married (86.4%, as against 67.4% for those who are unmarried) and among those who have children (86.4% as against 71.5% for those who do not have). These tendencies are evidently to be interpreted as part of a need to find the “good housekeeping” that is embodied in “women’s food” in the conceptions of these consumers, whether in the sense of “pure ingredients” or in that of “authentic family recipes”.

With regard to the profession, we note that among manual workers and more generally the lower socio-economic strata (working farmers, housewives, pensioners) the proportion of those who answered that they are “greatly” or “very greatly” influenced by the “feminine” character of the foods is higher than

among white-collar workers and the self-employed. Specifically the percentages are 91.7% for manual workers, 89.1% for farmers, 90.7% for housewives, and 92% for pensioners. With 81.5% of the total sample population “greatly” or “very greatly” influenced, the corresponding percentage for the other segments of society is lower”: 78.6% for civil servants, 77.9% for private sector employees and 74.7% for the self-employed. This quest for “women’s food” which, as already noted, reflects the quality of the “local” and “traditional” and products that are “pure” is interpretable in terms of the fact that these foods are a response to “popular taste”, matched with the traditional cuisine and peasant food consumption patterns (Bourdieu, 1984:184-190) of the first-mentioned group of consumers.

From overall statistical analysis, two distinct groups emerge of consumers who consciously buy “women’s food” insofar as they state that they are influenced to some extent, greater or smaller, by the fact that it has been made by women. More concretely, the results of two-step cluster analysis for the classification visitors – buyers of women’s agri-food products into different types led to two clusters, as the optimum solution based on the Schwarz criterion. From the total of 477 cases, 23 were excluded due to missing values. Furthermore, the ‘by variable’ importance charts, produced with a separate chart for each cluster, showed the relative significance of all variables used to create each one of these clusters.

In the first group, which was designed as comprising “keen and faithful consumers”, a percentage of 40.6% of the cases was assigned. In this market of those that are “very greatly” influenced by the fact that the foods are “produced by women”; they buy them regularly from the co-operatives in question “one or more times a month” but also in general frequently purchase “traditional products”, specifically “once a month” or even “once a week”. In any case, the fact that the products of the co-operatives in question are “traditional local products” influences them “very greatly” in their purchases. They have got to know the specific shop because they live “nearby or in the village itself” and because they “have shopped there before”, so that they are in a relationship of confidence based on direct contact with the women of the co-operative in their shop (which is often also the production workshop).

As for their social and demographic characteristics, they are the middle aged and up consumer group (over 41 years of age), of low education level (only compulsory schooling), predominantly corresponding to the household model of “married with children”. In any case, the products they purchase have to do primarily with the family’s food requirements. They are not souvenirs or presents. The majority of consumers are in the low-to-medium-income category (annual income of less than 10,000 euros or between 10 and 20,000 euros), have grown up in the city and many of them “dream of life in a village”.

All in all they are predominantly popular social strata: pensioners, housewives, blue-collar workers and low income white-collar workers in the private sector. Low-to-medium income range, as indicated, for whom traditional local products continue to be a vital part of their daily diet. Even if they are of urban origins they are in search of “the values of the countryside”, via the flavours of “local traditional foods” produced by the women of the co-operatives in question.

The second group is characterized by consumers of more distanced orientation, occasional consumers as far as their relationship with the co-operatives is concerned, despite their declarations that they are “greatly” influenced by the foods being “produced by women” (59.4% of the cases was assigned). The majority of these consumers are “first-time buyers” of the co-operatives in question or “buy once a year”. Generally speaking they rarely purchase “traditional local products” but in spite of that, the fact that the products of the women’s co-operatives are “traditional” has influenced them “greatly” or “very greatly” in their purchases. They got to know the shop in question by chance, on an excursion.

As far as the social and demographic characteristics of these consumers is concerned, they are younger than the previous group (31-40 years of age) and of a higher educational level (with university education). With them the “married with children” family model is less in evidence. For this second group also, items purchased from the co-operatives are more likely to be in the category of souvenirs and/or presents. Most of the consumers are people in middle-and-upper-income brackets (with an

annual income of between 10-20,000 euros and 20-30,000 euros). They generally live in the city, having grown up in a rural area. Those who are urban dwellers have no particular dreams of “living in a village”. For these consumers, for whom the urban consumption model seems most pertinent, the relationship with “women’s food” is not the result of a reversion to alimentary experiences of childhood or adolescent years (a lived relationship with the countryside) but has more to do with a desire to be a part of “the values of the countryside” in a context of relinkage with “rural roots” but above all a new emerging lifestyle that is centred on traditional and healthy living.

Conclusion

In this article we have investigated how far the foods successfully produced in small rural workshop enterprises run by women can serve a niche market for local traditional products. In particular, and taking the case of the women’s agritourist food producing co-operatives in Greece that have enjoyed a vogue over the last fifteen years, our aim has been to investigate to what extent the discriminating consumers of local traditional agrifood products are influenced in their purchases by the “feminine side” of food quality in women’s agritourist co-operatives.

On-site research indicated that the overwhelming majority of the consumers at the co-operatives in question were influenced “greatly” or “very greatly” by the fact that the foods are prepared by country women. The reason for this was that in their opinion these products “are made using pure ingredients” and incorporating “the housewife’s care and taste” even if there was no certification of this through institutionalized labelling. It appears though, that in the imaginary of the consumers an active influence is exerted by the image of the country woman provider for the farming family and household, instilling confidence in the authenticity of the local products, the genuineness of the traditional recipes and the wholesomeness of the food (pure ingredients, good housekeeping).

This quest by consumers for the “authentic” and the “traditional” is to be encountered in all social strata. But two chief groups of consumers can be distinguished: first those who purchase the products of the women’s co-operatives in the context of “lifestyle” options that have emerged in recent years, something that applies for relatively young people, city dwellers with relatively high incomes and educational levels. Secondly, those who buy them because they are an element in their way of life, representing a continuity with their childhood years. These are necessarily people relatively advanced in years, from the popular strata, of relative low economic status and educational levels. In either case, mobilization of this niche market offers country women the opportunity to become professionally active, taking advantage of a latent capital of local knowledge and expertise to supplement their household income.

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