

Considerations on the Definition of Food Quality on the EU Market

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Abstract

Quality on the EU food market today is a complex concept with a multifold approach. It is defined in terms of the interests of those who use it in order to attain their market goals, i.e. consumer satisfaction, economic interests or food safety and of the interest in having a market that functions according to complex yet clear and balanced regulations. The new context in which the European Union scientifically and economically places food quality urges Romania as one of the youngest members of the EU economic system to get acquainted to mutations that have occurred in this sector and to find means to actively adapt to them at the level of both authorities and market players.

Keywords: quality, demand, consumption, integration, food, European Union.

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1. Introduction

Considering the mutations that have occurred in the definition and practical approach of the concept of quality, we can currently consider that the European Union, in its pre-2004 structure, is a unique example of what one can accomplish when seeks to solve a complex problem such as food, especially in terms of meeting quantitative and qualitative needs. The implications of the solution paths are particularly relevant and can be deemed exceptional: *to create a society in which satisfying basic needs is no longer the main purpose of economic and social activities, but rather satisfying higher order needs (safety, belonging, acknowledgment, self-improvement) by associating the latter with the first.* The changes that occurred in reference to the quality of agro-food products actually mirror this social reality of the EU's developed countries.

The solution found to existing problems was far from perfect, as shown by the reforms applied to EU agricultural policies and food crises in the last 25 years. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that it has achieved the set goal. Neither does it change the performance that it represents in the agro-food sector as well as in an integrated market comprised of several national markets of countries that not so long ago used to be in a permanent state of economic rivalry and deep food crisis. Therefore, the European Union is a unique and particular example for other countries that seek to solve the food issue, be they new entries, candidates or non-EU states.

2. Defining Quality on the EU Market

The most significant trait of the pre-2004 EU food market is *the very high level of satisfying food demand*. This has first and foremost caused the food market to transform into a genuine consumer market and triggered a real revolution in the consumer-producer relationship. This has been outlined in the official definition of quality as regulated by the EU authorities and has triggered a need to *redefine* and revisit the approach on the concept of *food quality*. The complexity of the concept of quality has grown with *the difficulty in uttering and applying a global definition* that would be equally valid to producers and consumers alike, a difficulty which the EU authorities have acknowledged in relevant regulations. If we refer to producers, the problem is technical. If we refer to the end consumer of food products, the problem has to do with the role of decisive economic factor.

The difficulty resides also in the fact that many *elements of the concept's definition* are neither fixed nor invariable. They outline a dynamic, delicate and complex relationship that currently exists between consumers, producers and authorities and undergoes permanent changes which seek to preserve balance between their interests. The most significant elements among them are the following: (a) *meeting nutritional needs and subjective desires of individual consumers* by consuming a certain food product; (b) *meeting the economic interests of agricultural and industrial producers*, meaning first and foremost to provide economic efficiency that would not jeopardize consumer safety; (c) *the wish of national and EU authorities to maintain a fair balance between consumer and producer interests* by setting a proper legal framework that would define, foresee and thwart food-related hazards and implement effective methods of monitoring quality without an involvement that would damage the producers' interests and lead to malfunctioning and misbalance on the market.

Subsequently, *articulating a general definition of food quality is rather difficult and even impossible* given the complexity of the parameters that must be taken into account. The most relevant of them include: (1) *the sanitary aspect of quality* which is difficult to quantify given the influence of other factors that operate on the market and cause a permanent change of relevant values; (2) *the authorities' confining themselves to defining food safety only*, without making any connection between food safety and food quality as a complex notion; (3) *the ecological aspect of quality* which affects the way foodstuffs are obtained and processed and is influenced by both subjective (the consumer's) and objective (the authorities') factors; and last but not least (4) *the complex relations between market players*.

Concurrently, however, producers cannot advertise and/or label food products by referring to the impact that processing methods can have on the consumer's health. This measure ensures a balance between the producer's and the consumer's interests by avoiding unfair competition and enforcing the consumer's right to formulate his/her own definition of product quality depending on his/her subjective and subjective interests. The producers, compelled by food safety and product processing regulations can meet their economic interest by interfering in the consumer's "formulation" of this definition. Here the producers act along two lines. On the one hand, they seek *to influence the consumer's purchase decision by advertising the intrinsic quality features of the food or even by*

proposing new ones. Both emerge as a result of innovation by using new processing methods and by increasing economic performance and competitiveness.

On the other hand, the producers seek to provide *a direct and positive answer to the consumer's demands of personalizing food by using new processing methods or by changing existing ones* so that food quality would meet or be as close as possible to the one established by the consumer.

Starting from definitions that depend on the specific interests of involved players in close connection to their concrete needs, assessing food quality is random and utterly subjective. Thus, on the EU market today, the officially accepted objective way of defining food quality is to define it *in reference to the processing method*, specified for each category of goods and each and every food product. For a marketed food product to meet the minimum required quality level the producer has to follow regulations and specifications for each processing method, however, without obligations as to the result.

Therefore, in the European Union today, food quality is defined *through the needs that food consumption satisfies and also through the way in which agro-food products are processed.* The mutations in agro-food quality in the European Union can be therefore found in those typical for demand that is represented by consumers and in those that are typical for offer that is represented by the agro-food production system and are a result of the relationships and interactions of these two sides of the market.

3. Defining Quality for the EU Consumer

The significance of food quality has undergone a radical change for the European consumer, which has been acknowledged in the definition given by EU regulations in the field. This significance refers to the satisfaction of complex needs characterized by four main components, i.e. (a) *nutritional security* which aims at reaching the best level of providing for the nutritional needs of the body; (b) *food security* which seeks to provide complete access to food products; (c) *food safety* in point of foodstuff innocuousness, and (d) *meeting the consumer's subjective requirements.*

The economic development and the good satisfaction of nutritional needs, which have practically resulted in the complete satisfaction of the needs pertaining to the first and second components, have boosted the relevance of components number three and four. Subsequently, when it comes to the EU consumers, *food quality is first and foremost tantamount to providing for their subjective needs.* In terms of food, the disappearance of nutritional constraints means the possibility to satisfy the needs underpinned by individual, subjective preferences which pertain to higher order needs: belonging, individualization, safety, etc. Subsequently, in the eyes of the consumer, *a better quality food product is the one that complies with the individually established conditions for the satisfaction of higher needs.*

Thus, the features of the food product do no longer have a strictly technical relevance but also a symbolic one, according to each consumer's individual perception in point of subjective higher order needs. Although food quality is the same in view of standardization, regardless of the product trademark, it ceases to be the same in the eyes of the consumer who will interpret it according to his/her own set of requirements and individual needs. We can therefore speak of a *personalization of the concept of food*

quality which is justified if we take into account the fact that quality has become the main element in the individual purchase decision process.

A particular case is the case of *food safety*. The consumer's attitude towards it has undergone a significant mutation triggered by the food crises that occurred on the EU market. Their main consequence was a radical and sudden drop in the perception on food safety. The result was that the consumer became increasingly selective in his/her attitude towards producers and processors in terms of guarantees of food innocuousness and a better communication, i.e. providing full description of the product. The mere protection ensured by EU and national regulations is no longer enough for the EU consumer. The issue is no longer to guarantee a certain level of food safety, but rather to articulate and provide the most thorough product description possible. This description should offer the consumer the possibility to choose for himself/ herself depending on his/her own image about health and nature of the products as well as depending on his/her preferences determined by the product's sensory properties.

Relying therefore on personal preferences, the EU consumer seeks to choose for himself/herself what he/she believes to be good for his/her health and body. Thus, consumer protection is not longer focused exclusively on product innocuousness but also on the viability and credibility of the information about the product. Nevertheless, the consumer still demands less standardized and less uniform products and more varied goods that would allow him/her the opportunity of independent choice.

To sum up, if we look through the eyes of the EU consumer, food quality can be defined as *the capacity of the food product to meet the requirements in terms of the opportunity to choose depending on features that the consumer deems important, amidst a high-level food safety*.

4. Defining Quality in the EU Agro-Food Sector

In defining the quality of their products, the producers and mostly the industrial processors in the EU agro-food sector have long used the principle according to which *quality is a concept designed mainly for the definition and identification of the product*. This vision of quality that focuses on the product is rather restrictive. During the last decade, it has been replaced by a larger one that focuses on the consumer. According to this vision, quality would be *the ability of a good or service to satisfy expressed and potential needs of the user*.

Such approach implies also new methods of managing and achieving quality. Subsequently, quality in the EU food industry does no longer focus exclusively on the food product and rather integrates its conception and design as well as the entire logistic system. Therefore, the focus shifts on the foodstuff quality and on manufacturing with its intermediate stages (methods that are typical for the quality guarantee system and quality management in the non-food sector). Thus, the EU implements management methods that have initially characterized high-risk economic sectors that are subject to reliability and conformity restrictions. Subsequently, *the focus of the processors' action has shifted from the product towards the consumer in terms of providing a quality level that suits or even anticipates the consumer's expectations*.

This conceptual shift of quality has also meant the quest for new manufacturing methods especially in agriculture. They are significantly determined by the integration of agriculture and the EU food industry. The aim is to eliminate consumer risks and offer a better answer to consumer food safety benchmarks, i.e. the identity of the product. The latter element offers better consumer security and higher consumer confidence in the means of certifying product quality, such as labelling or marking.

Moreover, considerable efforts have been made in the EU food industry these last decades in order to improve food safety. Processing technologies have been adapted to increasingly tougher hygiene requirements. Monitoring quality throughout the production process has been substantially improved. Modern analysis technologies have improved and accelerated controls against contaminants.

Essentially, from the point of view of the EU producers in the agro-food sector food quality can be currently defined as *the capacity of food products to meet the consumers' increasingly complex requirements, including economic ones as well as the producers' efficiency and profitability needs through their properties*, in the context of a high satisfaction of food demand on the EU market which is a strong constraint for producers considering the implications it has for the functioning of the market.

Therefore, the 'good product for a good price' principle is but one of the dimensions of food quality for the EU food producer as well. Moreover, this principle is just an immediate aspect of quality while the real issues, i.e. manufacturing food products, go beyond it. The most important is to adapt food quality to the completely changed requirements of the consumers. From this point of view, diversity and variety are no longer the only ones important. It is also important to satisfy to the fullest extent possible specific, subjective and particularized needs by integrating numerous and complex data in product processing as part of industrial innovation.

5. Implications and Prospects

Therefore, the transformation of food markets in the EU's developed countries as a result of the high level of satisfaction of food demand has triggered *a radical change in the way food quality is defined*, i.e. mainly in reference to *the consumer's particularized needs*. The transformation of the EU agro-food sector has triggered a surge in its economic growth, with its subsequent advantages for producers, consumers and economy of the EU, in general. Furthermore, however, it has also had a series of negative consequences with a strong impact on food consumer, agricultural production and food industry. The interaction of these effects and the consumer's perception of quality have triggered a change in the producer's definition of quality by integrating consumer needs. Moreover, a reference to the action of producers and processors has been subsequently introduced into the definition of quality. The result was *an increase in the consumer's role in terms of his/her power of negotiation in the relationship with production*, which concretely meant a series of specific developments on the food market. These developments have been manifest ever since the 1990s either as phenomena with a significant PR impact over this sector or as profound conceptual changes that underpin current trends within it. Consequently, the tendencies within the EU agri-food sector

appear as *feedback* mostly to the *EU consumers’ concern with food safety and food quality in its subjective and objective aspects*.

Essentially, the main mutation that occurred in the conceptual definition of food quality in the EU is *its transformation into a concept that resulted from the direct relationship between offer and demand*. This change occurred in a context in which *the EU food market functions as a consumer market following a very high level of the satisfaction of food needs and of economic development*. These two aspects have allowed *the consumer to associate food needs to higher order needs*. Moreover, they have allowed the diversity of food offer to increase as a result of increasing competitiveness among producers. Thus, for the EU food producers and processors today *quality* represented by the features of food products *has become the most important answer to the requirements of demand*, which is a must for them to remain on the market and increase economic competitiveness.

The prospects of the EU food market as described by the tendencies in production and food offer helps identify the paths of future change and development for the food markets of recent members of the European Union, including Romania. Moreover, it is important for these countries to get insight into the tendencies in food production and offer on the EU market for them to acknowledge the way their own food markets and the consumer-producer relationship operate today.

As to the development of the food market in Romania we can consider that currently the legal approach on quality has largely adjusted to the EU benchmarks. Legislation has been amended in its essential points. A new way of setting the definition has been adopted to match the EU one. Institutions have been created and assigned to implement and oversee the measures designed to ensure food innocuousness. A series of elements requires improvement and not necessarily in terms of adapting to the EU system. The most significant such elements include the increase of the effectiveness of relevant food safety bodies and institutions; closer monitoring of the way licenses are granted to relevant economic agents, especially to small-sized enterprises; the integration of all legal acts that regulate the food sector into an integrated program that would render the authorities’ efforts more unified; strengthening the traceability mechanism by enforcing it to all agricultural producers and agro-food processors; the improvement of communication systems between companies and consumers on food safety and food quality issues; the development of clear policies according to the EU policies in increasing sanitary security and food safety that should be based on compulsory measures and also on efforts to inform, encourage and co-opt companies and mostly consumers in this process.

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