



Consumer satisfaction with dry-cured ham in five European countries

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ABSTRACT

The objective is to investigate consumer satisfaction with dry-cured ham in five European countries. A logistic regression model has been fitted using data collected through a cross-sectional web-based survey carried out in Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Poland and Greece during January 2008 ($n = 2437$ of which 2156 were dry-cured ham consumers). Satisfaction was evaluated as overall satisfaction, as well as specific satisfaction with healthfulness, price, convenience and taste. The findings show that the main determinant of overall satisfaction is taste satisfaction, hence, producers are recommended to focus on matching sensory acceptability of dry-cured ham. No significant between-country differences were found, reflecting the wide availability of this product in all countries. Consumer characteristics influenced their level of satisfaction. Men, older (age > 52 years) and frequent consumers of dry-cured ham consumption were more likely to be satisfied with dry-cured ham. Consumers trust the butcher's advice and they preferred purchasing dry-cured ham at a butcher shop rather than in a supermarket.

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1. Introduction

Dry-cured ham has been produced in Europe for centuries. The origin of dry-cured ham is unknown, but there is evidence that Greek and Roman civilizations used to salt ham for improved preservation. Specific hedonic properties have conferred dry-cured ham with a high level of acceptance among consumers. It is one of the essential components of the "Mediterranean diet" and, although the risks and benefits of the consumption of processed meat products are still being pondered (Santarelli et al., 2010), moderate consumption of dry-cured ham has commonly been included as part of a balanced diet (Jiménez-Colmenero, Ventanas, & Toldrá, 2010a), especially for teenagers and elderly people. Since salt is the main ingredient for curing hams, the presence of high sodium levels has to be taken into account (Jiménez-Colmenero et al., 2010a), even though the intake of sodium associated with a medium to high frequency of ham consumption may not be considered worrying. A recent study suggested that the consumption of three portions of dry-cured ham per week (1 portion = 30 g) would imply an equivalent daily sodium intake of less than 8% of the recommended intake (Jiménez-Colmenero, Ventanas, & Toldrá, 2010b).

Spain is the main producer and consumer country of dry-cured ham (Resano, Sanjuán, Cilla, Roncalés, & Albisu, 2010). Apart from Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Poland and Greece are major producer and consumer countries of dry-cured ham in Europe (Sarmiento, 2005). The highest yearly per capita consumption of dry-cured ham and shoulders is found in Spain (4.4 kg), followed by Italy (2.4 kg), France (0.9 kg), Belgium (0.6 kg) and Germany (0.4 kg) (Toldrá, 2002). In 2009 the per capita consumption of dry-cured ham, in the strict sense in Spain was 2.4 kg (MARM, 2010), with France, Germany, Belgium and Italy being the main destinations for Spanish exports (Cruz, 2010).

Consumer satisfaction has been defined as an emotional or cognitive response based on personal experience with a particular product (Giese & Cote, 2000). Consumers compare their pre-consumption expectations and post-consumption experience to form their satisfaction response (Oliver, 1993). When the post-consumption experience is satisfactory, it can trigger repeated purchase and, eventually lead to loyalty towards products or brands (Grunert, 2002).

Taste, healthfulness (including safety), convenience and price characteristics of food products have been found to influence consumer perceived food quality (Grunert, Bredahl, & Brunsø, 2004; McCarthy, O'Reilly, Cotter, & De Boer, 2004; Olsen, Scholderer, Brunsø, & Verbeke, 2007; Verbeke, Frewer, Scholderer, & De Brabander, 2007). Price is an example of a so-called search characteristic that can be perceived at the moment of purchase. On the contrary, taste is an experience characteristic that can only be ascertained at the moment

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of actual intake, whereas the healthfulness of a product, which is considered as a credence characteristic, cannot be perceived directly by consumers even after eating the product. Consumers typically form their own quality expectations before purchasing and consuming the product, which may match their perceived experience at the moment of consumption or not.

Quality expectations are formed mainly based on the quality cues available for consumers. Quality cues can be intrinsic or extrinsic attributes of the product. Intrinsic attributes include the physical characteristics of the product (Grunert, 2002). In the case of dry-cured ham some examples can be colour, visible fat, salt content or texture. In contrast, extrinsic attributes cover the remaining characteristics, e.g. price, brand name, origin, packaging, or the indication of an extended period of maturation. Both intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics have been shown to be crucial in shaping pork purchasing decisions (Verbeke et al., 2005) and the structure of cross-cultural dry-cured ham markets (Hersleth, Lengard, Verbeke, Guerrero, & Naes, 2011).

Consumer satisfaction has received great attention in the literature, and has been studied with different food products, such as pork (Grunert et al., 2004) and olive oil (Espejel, Fandos, & Flavian, 2008). Notwithstanding, there are few studies analysing consumer satisfaction with dry-cured ham. Previous studies have mainly focused on consumer acceptability (Resano, Sanjuán, & Albisu, 2007) and willingness to buy as an indirect measure of consumer satisfaction (Cilla, Martínez, Beltrán, & Roncalés, 2006a; Cilla, Martínez, Guerrero, et al., 2006). On the contrary, the present study focuses primarily on post-purchase satisfaction. It addresses overall satisfaction together with consumer satisfaction related to the perceived healthfulness, price, convenience and taste of dry-cured ham.

The level of familiarity with a product category affects quality expectations and perceptions of consumers (Bredahl, 2003; Verbeke, Van Wezemael, et al., 2010). In this study, several countries with different gastronomic heritage and dry-cured ham consumption habits have been included, and thus consumer groups with different levels of product familiarity are involved. Most studies concerning dry-cured ham analysed within-countries differences (Cilla, Martínez, Guerrero, et al., 2006), and to the best of the authors' knowledge, the present study is the first that analyses between-country differences in terms of satisfaction with dry-cured ham. Investigating this issue may be especially relevant for food and nutrition policy makers, and processed meat producers who want to ascertain if they have to target a different (marketing) policy depending on the country.

Meat products, including dry-cured ham, may experience a high level of natural variation, depending, among other factors, on the animal feed or the curing process, which can cause a low consistency in its hedonic or sensory characteristics. In this context, consumers trust in information and reassurance provided by the butcher is often used as a decision-making cue (Issanchou, 1996). Purchasing at the butcher shop diminishes the perceived risk of buying an unsatisfactory product (McCarthy & Henson, 2005). This effect is especially powerful in the absence of other quality cues such as a known brand. However, the trend in meat purchasing is changing. The incorporation of women into the labour market and the high value conferred to leisure time are some of the factors contributing to having less time for shopping. Nowadays, consumers are demanding a more convenient product and service when purchasing food products. They prefer buying all the items in the same shop and reducing the overall time needed for shopping. Accordingly, the brand name is becoming more relevant for consumers than the personal relationship with the butcher (Vlachos, 2009). As a result, in most European countries, some supermarkets have opened butcher shops inside their establishments. This strategy attracts consumers who prefer reducing the effort for shopping, but at the same time, want personal contact with a butcher. In the case of dry-cured ham, consumers in Mediterranean countries prefer to buy dry-cured ham in the butcher shop rather than

in the self-service section of supermarkets (Morales, Guerrero, Claret, Guàrdia, & Gou, 2008). In line with this, the impact of the place of purchase on consumer overall satisfaction with dry-cured ham was analysed.

The objectives of this study are fourfold. First, to identify the main drivers of consumer satisfaction with dry-cured ham based on a sample of European dry-cured ham consumers. The second is to investigate between-countries differences in the patterns of satisfaction with dry-cured ham. The third to examine the influence of consumer characteristics like gender, age, household size, education, self reported financial status, and frequency of consumption, on their satisfaction with taste, health, convenience and price, as determinants of overall satisfaction. Finally, the fourth objective is to evaluate the effect of the preferred place of purchase on consumers' overall satisfaction with dry-cured ham.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data collection

The overall survey methodology has been described in detail elsewhere (Verbeke, Pérez-Cueto, De Barcellos, Krystallis, & Grunert, 2010). Briefly, information about socio-demographics, frequency of pork consumption (including dry-cured ham), preferred place of purchase, and satisfaction was collected through a web-based cross-sectional consumer survey in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece and Poland in January 2008. Participants were selected from representative TNS European Online Access Panels. The samples were predetermined according to quotas on gender (50% males), age (50% in the group of 20–44 years and the other half 45–70 years), and locality of residence (urban and rural). The sample was equally distributed across the five countries (around 20% of the total sample in each country). A total of 2437 respondents participated in this survey, including 2156 respondents who stated to be dry-cured ham eaters. The latter were asked to report their degree of overall satisfaction with dry-cured ham, as well as their degree of satisfaction with specific dry-cured ham characteristics, like taste, health-giving qualities, convenience, and price. Respondents evaluated overall satisfaction and satisfaction with dry-cured ham characteristics using a 7-point interval scale ranging from “not satisfied at all” to “very satisfied”.

2.2. Data analysis

To accomplish the objectives of this paper, a binomial logit model has been specified and estimated. Consumers' overall satisfaction scores have been converted into a dummy variable, which accounts if the consumer's score is above or below the median of the satisfaction scale. In the same way, consumer satisfaction with taste, health-giving qualities, convenience, and price of the dry-cured ham were also recoded into a dummy variable, which reflects if the score is above the median or not. The latter variables were included into the analysis as explanatory variables.

Consumers' overall satisfaction was used as the dependent variable in the logistic regression model. Logistic regression modelling is more suitable in our empirical application than a multiple linear regression (in spite of the continuous character of both the dependent and independent variables) because we aimed at investigating the preferences of consumers with a high level of satisfaction versus consumers with a low level of satisfaction. Using a dichotomized variable helps to find stronger relations between the explanatory variables and the dependent variables in this case. A dichotomized variable is more suitable than a continuous one when the purpose is to highlight the differences between two extreme groups of participants, as occurs in the application of DeCoster, Iselin, & Gallucci (2009).

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