



Influence of *terroir* products meaning on consumer's expectations and likings[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Given the plethora of *terroir* products, local food companies could find an advantage in specifying their positioning by taking into account what the *terroir* represents for consumers. This research contributes to identifying specific attributes of a *terroir* in tune with consumer expectations, and tests their capacity to ameliorate consumer hedonic assessments and judgments for these products. Results show the potential of a positioning based on the environment, which is respected by the practices of *terroir* producers, and which also guarantees the quality of the product.

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1. Introduction

The market for “*terroir*” food products has grown remarkably over the past twenty years, notably in France and the rest of Europe, giving rise to numerous research studies (e.g.: Aurier, Fort, & Sirieix, 2005; Bertozzi, 1995; Bowen & Zapata, 2009; Elaydi & McLaughlin, 2012; Guerrero et al., 2009; Lengard Almlí, Verbeke, Vanhonacker, Næs, & Hersleth, 2011). Marketing is exploiting this growth extensively; in France, for example, there are over 1000 registered trademarks which incorporate the term “*terroir*” (<http://www.inpi.fr>). Given this profusion in supply, the evocation of *terroir* alone soon will lose its capacity to add value to a product. There is thus a critical need to refine positioning strategies through a better understanding of potential differentiation criteria on this market.

After devoting much attention to conceptualising *terroir* products from the point of view of supply, research efforts now are focusing on demand concerns, in particular to propose consumer-driven definitions (Aurier et al., 2005; Guerrero et al., 2009; Guerrero et al., 2010) and to identify the attributes of a product that contribute most to its overall image (Lengard Almlí et al., 2011).

However, these studies consider the *terroir* product as a global entity, while research findings show that important attributes differ markedly, not only according to consumers (Lengard Almlí

et al., 2011), but also according to the products and *terroirs* (Aurier & Fort, 2007). This conforms with the PSO paradigm holding that all human behaviour results from interaction between characteristics of the Person, the Situation, and the Object of the behaviour (Leigh & Martin, 1981). Likewise, the role of extrinsic attributes of a *terroir* product should be compared to the role of intrinsic attributes such as the appearance and taste of this product: a recent study re-confirmed the essential role of hedonic motivations in the formation of overall attitudes towards traditional food products, at least for French consumers (Pieniak, Verbeke, Vanhonacker, Guerrero, & Hersleth, 2009).

This article intends to explore the reasons for the popularity of *terroir* products, and to study the relative role of the following three types of factors that may explain the perceived value of these products:

- *terroir* product meanings for the consumer produced by research focussed on consumer-driven definitions;
- extrinsic attributes, which are sources of positioning specific to a *terroir* product;
- intrinsic attributes that are linked to the taste of a product.

We first describe these factors in detail, then propose a theoretical model of the formation of attitudes regarding a *terroir* product, and lastly test the model using a traditional cheese typical of Abondance valley, an area located in the Savoie region of the French Alps. The methodology followed and analyses of the results are presented. The discussion examines the theoretical and managerial implications of the results, and we close with proposals for new research avenues.

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2. The *terroir* and the consumer

To pursue the objective of this research, we must first clarify the concept, “*terroir*”, and understand consumer’s expectations of *terroir* products.

2.1. The concept of *terroir*

Today, the term, ‘*terroir*’, which has no direct translation in English, is conceptualised in several different disciplines: *terroir* is referred to by historians, geographers, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, and managers. Furthermore, *terroir* food products are confused with closely related concepts such as product of origin (region or country) and local products, and definitions diverge depending on whether they are based on the supply point of view (sector actors) or on consumer expectations.

Despite these differences, the majority of actors appear to agree that there are two general dimensions to “*terroir*”: “*Terroir is linked to the unique biophysical properties of particular places... and is also associated with the cultural practices that have maintained these biological resources over several generations... The cultural concept of terroir is understood as the product of interacting natural and human factors*” (Bowen & Zapata, 2009). The specific attributes of a *terroir* are shaped by natural factors such as the soil, climate, and adaptation of plant varieties to the environment, and by human factors related to history, culture, know-how and tradition.

The definition of a *terroir* food product also may be elaborated by making a distinction with other closely related concepts. Literature on the effect of country or region of origin generally is evoked when conceptualising a *terroir*. Starting from the idea of distinguishing country and region of origin (Askegaard & Ger, 1998), research has refocused on the region of origin and its effect, which is even more powerful when the territory is homogenous and small (Stefani, Romano, & Cavicchi, 2006), and when there is a high level of congruence between the region and product (Aurier & Fort, 2005; Van Ittersum, Candel, & Meulenberg, 2003). This two-dimensionality (natural and human factors) seem to be shared by products of origin and *terroir* products, but the product-*terroir* congruence is acquired in the eyes of consumers who perceive the specialisation and typicality of *terroirs* and their legitimacy to produce the product (Trognon, Lagrange, & Janin, 1999).

Definitions of *terroir* products finally are very close to those of traditional food products, which implicitly suggest the same bi-dimensional structure: “*a product frequently consumed or associated with specific celebrations and/or seasons, normally transmitted from one generation to another, made accurately in a specific way according to the gastronomic heritage, with little or no processing/manipulation, distinguished and known because of its sensory properties and associated with a certain local area, region or country*” (Guerrero et al., 2009).

The attributes related to natural and human factors form images of a *terroir* such as proposed in consumer-driven definitions, and consequently should influence the perceived value of a product.

2.2. Modelling *terroir* food product consumption behaviour

The attributes of a *terroir* food product are perceived through two types of stimuli:

- When buying or first encountering the product, the consumer is subjected to “informational” stimuli (e.g. price, brand, ingredients, label, nutritional and environmental claims, etc.; Steenkamp, 1989), which shape expectations. These also result from the consumer’s *a priori* image of the *terroir* product.
- The actual consumption of a product then confronts the consumer with sensory stimuli perceived by the five senses, e.g.

appearance, colour, size, shape, texture, odour, aroma, taste, temperature, which leads the consumer to form an assessment of the product.

The consumer’s overall judgement finally will lean towards either the expectations or the assessment produced by tasting alone, depending on the influence of respective types of stimuli and the resulting phenomena of assimilation or contrast (see, for example, Schifferstein, Kole, & Mojet, 1999, for a review). Individual or contextual factors outside the product also can influence expectations, the gustatory evaluation, and the overall judgement, and also moderate relations between expectations and assessments on one hand, and the overall judgement on the other. This classic stimuli-response approach in sensory marketing is diagrammed in Fig. 1.

This base model enables one to assess the role of the perceived sources of a *terroir* product. For economic actors in the *terroir* sector, informational stimuli represent a marketing action variable: it is possible to focus communication on the human factor, the natural factor, the origin, know-how, history, etc. attributes, depending on the positive impact obtained with regard to expectations and overall judgement. A relevant criteria of differentiation is identified when the stimulus carrying it leads to higher expectations (compared to another criteria), and when overall judgment is better compared to when assessment is based on tasting alone (positive deviation due to information). In contrast, consumer images of *terroir* impose on marketing strategies, as do sensorial stimuli, at least when these mainly result from a fixed process (label or specifications, for example).

The model then can be validated empirically by testing the role of potential differentiation criteria for a *terroir* food product, presented in the form of informational stimuli, on consumer expectations and judgement.

3. Materials and methods

An empirical study allowed the proposed model to be applied to Abondance cheese, a food that is emblematic of a Savoie *terroir* and which benefits from a protected designation of origin label (AOC: *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*). The informational stimuli tested were scenarios illustrating certain characteristics of the *terroir* corresponding to two factors (natural and human) identified in the literature. The experimental protocol followed rendered it possible to measure consumer images of *terroir* for Abondance cheese, submit these images to stimuli, and evaluate the resulting expectations, assessments, and overall judgements.

3.1. Material stimuli

3.1.1. Cheeses

The *terroir* product used in this study is a hard pressed cheese that is allowed to mature for at least 100 days on spruce boards. The organoleptic characteristics of this cheese are fairly consistent

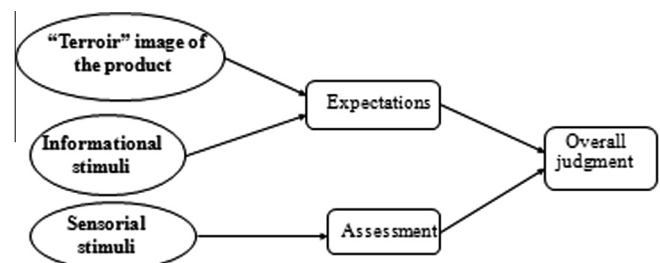


Fig. 1. Base model for the evaluation of a *terroir* food product.

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