



To the Rescue of European traditional foods

Industrial association and consumer organisation representatives joined the European scientific community in Spain at the EU/CSIC conference 'Improved Traditional Foods for the Next Century'¹ to discuss general issues and technical solutions for the advancement of the European traditional foods sector.

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As food markets have developed, the fate of European traditional foods has become uncertain. Some have become the 'ideal example' from which modern industrial foods derive (Spanish chorizo; Italian Parma ham; some French cheeses; some German breads, etc). In other cases, the originating small business has managed to develop internationally, sometimes through a collective effort of several small businesses (e.g., Norwegian salmon, Spanish sherry; ref.1). Others, however, have disappeared or probably soon will if nothing is done. With them would go an important part of European cultural heritage, but also a specially palatable part of artisanal foods and a source of 'proven' inspiration for mass-produced industrial foods. National governments and the European Union are devoting considerable research effort to help rescue this endangered future.

The traditional foods in question are those deriving from artisanal production, often from small family businesses (SME's³). These are particularly abundant in the Mediterranean countries, where they have an important national economic contribution. Because of their small degree of market penetration and production scale, such businesses often have too limited resources to solve the complex technological, commercial and legislative challenges that survival in the modern European market represents.

Major challenges facing traditional food businesses were reviewed by Mr. Jorge Jordana, secretary general of FIAB, the Spanish industrial association for food & drink (1). These challenges are found in the areas of market communication, legal protection, quality assurance & food safety, and innovation (e.g., technological development to reduce production costs and standardise quality; recipe adaptation to decrease caloric content as required by the more sedentary modern life-style, and to increase health focus and convenience). Initiatives to collectively face these challenges have often uncovered a great underlying problem: a fierce individuality which often blocks the road to solutions.

To review present EU research efforts to advance the technical aspects of this sector, the international congress 'Improved Traditional Foods for the Next Century' was organised by the *Spanish Council for Scientific Research (CSIC) - Institute for Agro-Chemistry and Food Technology* and the *Research Directorate General of the European Commission*, under sponsorship of the EU 5th framework programme "Quality of Life and Management of Living Resources". The latest developments from EU funded projects in the FAIR programme were presented by speakers from all EU countries.

Special focus was given to sensory quality and measurement, nutritional properties, food safety, biotechnology and innovation. Products studied included cheese, wine, oils, sausages and hams, fruits and vegetables. Health aspects were dealt e.g., for vegetables (vitamins), wine and spirits (redox, clotting, monocyte adhesion), dietary fibre, olive oil (diversity of beneficial effects, North-South comparisons). Selected examples of projects presented are given in Table I.

Communication of R&D results to industry as well as the establishment of future research collaborations with the industrial sector were important objectives of the congress. It is recognised that this needs to improve considerably in the future, particularly towards SME's. Increased attention will be put to communication and consumer information in EU research programmes. Project evaluation takes into account not only excellence in science & technology but also quality in project management and partnerships. These 'soft aspects' are important contributors to the usefulness, implementation and impact of EU research efforts, whose final aims are to reassure the consumer, enhance the competitiveness of the European food industry and contribute to the economic value and social well being of the community.

For more information

on this congress, please contact Dr. Fidel Toldrá at the Institute for Agro-Chemistry and Food Technology (CSIC) in Spain
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Reference

1. Jordana, J. 1999. "Alimentos tradicionales: Los retos para la industria alimentaria Europea" (Traditional foods: Challenges for the European food industry). FIAB lecture presented during the congress. October 1999.

Footnotes

¹ This conference took place in Valencia, Spain on October 28-29, 1999

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³ SME = Small and medium enterprises

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Table I.

Examples of R&D projects presented

New sensory methods for quality and safety assessment of sausage production

Relation between raw material quality, level of endogenous enzymes and flavour quality in Spanish cured ham

Dynamic flavour analysis and its use in product development

Comparison of health impact of vitamin intake as supplements or naturally contained in vegetables

Clinical studies on the beneficial effect of wine in relation to cardiovascular disease

Role of fermentation and physico-chemical properties in the beneficial effect of dietary fibre to intestinal function

Overview of factors affecting the quality of hard cheeses

New electronic olive classification equipment

High pressure processing of cheese and other milk products

High oxygen modified atmosphere packaging for fresh fruit and vegetable products