
Economia agro-alimentare / Food Economy

An International Journal on Agricultural and Food Systems

Vol. 24, Iss. 2, Art. 8, pp. 1-6 - ISSN 1126-1668 - ISSNe 1972-4802

DOI: 10.3280/ecag2022oa14714



Editorial

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The Volume 24, Issue 2 of *Economia agro-alimentare/Food Economy*, features four Special Issue articles, two regular Articles and one Note, all written in English. The articles mainly cover issues related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the agri-food system, which was the focus of the 29th SIEA Annual Conference “#foodrestart-Brexit, New CAP, Covid-19: Italian agribusiness restarts”, held in Verona (Italy), on Sep. 30-Oct. 1, 2021. Manuscript editing for these papers has been curated by the Guest Editors, Roberta Capitello and Diego Begalli. We are happy to host these contributions, which shed light on the consequences of the global pandemic on the Italian agri-food system, and help show the way towards recovery of the food economy. The other two papers deal with functional food in Portugal, Participatory Guarantee Systems in Italy, and a commentary on the peer-review process.

The range of the analysis goes from local to global and covers geographical areas in Italy and Portugal.

The authors are affiliated with Institutions based in Italy, Portugal, and Brazil.

The 29th Annual Conference of the Società Italiana di Economia Agro-alimentare (SIEA - Italian Association of Agri-Food Economics) took place in Verona (Italy) on Sep. 30-Oct. 1, 2021. More than 90 delegates, including food economists and agri-food professionals, attended the conference. The contributions focused on the rapid and profound changes affecting national agri-food systems. The disruptive event of the Covid-19 pandemic, on the one hand, and the continuous challenges of sustainable development goals, international business competitiveness, and European Union policy, on the other one hand, are not only implying new adaptation and resilience processes to the Italian agri-food producers but also modifying their perspective view of the environment, the society and consumer demand. A plenary session, fifteen research contributions, an international workshop on sustainable food consumption, and two round tables with agri-food professionals have animated two intensive days of communications and discussions.

A selection of four studies presented during the conference has been accepted as featured articles for this issue of *Economia Agro-alimentare/ Food Economy*. The guest editors Roberta Capitello and Diego Begalli would like to express their sincere gratitude to the reviewers involved in the manuscript peer review process for their valuable feedback and assistance.

These studies analyse the Italian agri-food system from four different angles: the circular economy, retailer supply of sustainable food, food consumer preferences, and transaction costs. They are complementary in dealing with sustainability and the Covid-19 impact on the agri-food supply chain and offer interesting new perspectives on these current, relevant topics.

Giulia Maesano, Manal Hamam, Biagio Pecorino, Gioacchino Pappalardo, Mario D'Amico and Gaetano Chinnici co-author the article “Trends in consumers’ preferences towards fresh-cut vegetables during the Covid-19 pandemic”. This study started from the observation that the fresh-cut vegetable industry in Italy recorded a negative trend during the period of Covid-19 lockdown. To know more about the causes of this phenomenon, the authors propose a market analysis in Sicily (Italy) involving a sample of 427 consumers. The study analyses the role played by the different attributes in driving consumer purchasing behaviour of fresh-cut vegetable products during the Covid-19 lockdown. Information has been collected through an online questionnaire and then analysed using bivariate and multivariate statistics to evaluate the significance of product attributes in consumer preferences and detect consumer preference heterogeneity. The authors highlight that some fresh-cut vegetable attributes, such as taste, appearance and nutritional contents, together with convenience, are still

relevant purchasing factors for consumers. However, during the Covid-19 lockdown, the difficulty in food procurement, the fear of contagion during purchasing, and higher prices have obliged consumers to change their habits. Three market segments have been identified. They depict the different attitudes that drive consumers in choosing fresh-cut vegetables: pragmatism, highlighting the search for affordability and safety; healthiness, for those consumers focusing on intrinsic cues and convenience (i.e., easy to use and time-saving); scepticism, towards the real benefits that these products can bring to consumers, that conversely represents a barrier to purchase. This article will contribute to increasing the reader's knowledge of consumer preferences for this under-studied type of product. Moreover, it will improve the understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic, acting as an exogenous factor, has combined temporary effects with long-term changes to consumer preferences.

In the article “The Circular Economy in the Agri-food System: A Performance Measurement of European Countries”, Brunella Arru, Roberto Furesi, Pietro Pulina, Paola Sau, and Fabio A. Madau analyse the level of circularity of agricultural and food sectors in Europe and their contribution to the single Member State's circularity. Considering the central role played by the agri-food industry in achieving sustainable development goals, this study focuses on how this industry can save resources. The authors measured the circular economy performance in the 27 European Union countries by gathering data from the EE-MRIO database EXIOBASE v3.7 and estimating, through a set of indicators, the level of circularity of the whole economic system, the agricultural sector and the agri-food sector. The outcome of the analysis is severe for Europe: the level of circularity is low and significant differences emerge between countries. It is apparent from research findings that more recycling and reusing actions should be done in EU countries. Interestingly, agriculture plays a role of high relevance for the whole economic circularity. The added value of agricultural production explains the differences in performance between EU countries. The contribution of this study is noteworthy. It offers evidence of how the agricultural and food industry is pivotal for the circularity and sustainable development of the entire economy. The comparison between EU countries offers further insights for European and national policymakers.

The article “Does the Covid-19 affect food consumption patterns? A Transaction Cost Perspective” by Bianca Polenzani and Andrea Marchini analyses the drivers and barriers for consumers in buying groceries online. It deals with a topic of increasing relevance for both food consumers and producers after the sudden changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on

food retailing. Referring to the transaction cost theory and making use of information gathered by a survey questionnaire from a sample of 199 Italian online food purchasers, the authors have modelled the role played by transaction costs and their antecedents (i.e., uncertainty, asset specificity, consumer interest) in determining the willingness to buy online in a scenario characterised by Covid-19 pandemic effects. The PLS-SEM model allowed the authors to show some interesting relationships between willingness to buy online and its antecedents. Discomfort caused by the pandemic has increased the willingness to buy food online, which has been slightly reduced by transaction costs. The study is relevant today in that it explores, in a theoretically-based manner, online grocery purchases in Italy, and it provides new insights to food producers and policymakers. Interventions should reduce user uncertainty in online shopping and ensure easy accessibility and a comfortable experience. The changes in consumption and purchasing patterns, also stimulated by the Covid-19 pandemic, have highlighted the opportunity of the online channel for consumers and the logistic and network issues for producers. This article deepens the knowledge of this very promising type of retailing channel for the food market from the consumer's viewpoint.

In the article “Differences between Italian specialty milk in large-scale retailing distribution”, Valentina Merlino, Stefano Massaglia, Simone Blanc, Filippo Brun and Danielle Borra analyse the speciality milk market in Italy. The market is characterised by producers investing in milk speciality portfolios based on environmental and health attributes and consumers interested in these types of milk. This trend represents a new opportunity for food retailers to increase supply width, attractiveness, and profitability. Intending to analyse the composition and relationships of speciality cow milk products, the authors have gathered a large dataset of information, including the assortment of 52 points of sale belonging to eight different large-scale retailers in the North-West of Italy. Using bivariate and multivariate statistics, they analytically describe assortment width and depth. Results highlight that brand and origin are the most significant drivers of speciality milk portfolios. Other segmentation characteristics include prices and product features (e.g., green packaging). The article is of interest to both producers and retailers in illustrating a promising market segment in which product positioning depends on a careful combination of multiple features such as brand reputation, health- and environment-related attributes, packaging and origin, together with retailer marketing and pricing policies. The article, therefore, contributes to increasing the knowledge about the negotiating power between producers and retailers and, at the same time, the opportunity for cooperation. The article also offers an understanding of the scenario in which consumers make

their milk product choices today, considering the increasing diversification of diets, benefits sought from the products, contexts of consumption and perceived qualities.

The current issue continues with three regular submissions that resulted in two articles and a note.

In the article “Functional food consumption by Portuguese university community: knowledge, barriers and motivators”, Paula Moutinho, Inês Andrade and Angela Macedo focus on a critical component of health at the centre of sustainable food systems: Functional Food (FF). The study investigates the most significant determinants of FF consumption: knowledge about the concept of FF, perception of barriers as well as food choice motivators, and socio-demographic characteristics. A web-based survey collected information from a sample of 467 respondents selected from all Portuguese universities. Using SPSS and FACTOR software to analyse the data of this sample of consumers from the academic community, the authors provide the FF consumer profile in the Portugal university context, showing their main attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions towards FF. Findings from the study indicate a low level of knowledge concerning FF, maybe due to the relatively recent introduction of FF in Portugal. Authors suggest educational and regulatory strategies in addition to short-term marketing and advertising strategies: a better level of communication (advertising and correct labelling) should help overcome the major obstacles in developing the FF market in Portugal.

In their paper “Sustainable transition and food democracy: The role of decision making process in Solidarity Purchasing Groups”, Gustavo Magalhães De Oliveira, Gaetano Martino, Chiara Riganelli, and Michela Ascani address a relevant topic: the organisational mechanisms implemented by Solidarity Purchasing Groups (SPGs) to coordinate multiple and conflicting objectives. SPGs are a specific kind of Alternative Food Network whose goals are to provide food to group members, whilst contributing to the environment, health protection, social and ethical goals such as the pursuit of democracy and social justice. Through an internet survey with 121 valid questionnaires, the authors highlight the importance of decentralising decision rights to form democratic participation in SPGs. In particular, engagement, expectations and trust, reinforced by a routinised process, are important drivers that allow a group to promote and practice democracy effectively. This work opens a debate and new research trajectories about the linkages between the organisational forms of SPGs and the coordination of agri-food value chains.

Finally, in the Note “Fostering the debate among scholars to support the advancement of knowledge in the food-related consumer research: A commentary” Riccardo Vecchio raises the issue of author-reviewer dynamics in the peer-review process. He suggests that the attempt to please reviewers may affect the quality and impact of published research. In this opinion paper, starting from his own experience in publishing research articles, he wants to stimulate a debate among the academic community of food economists on whether and how the current peer-review practices and habits allow the authors to exploit the potential of their research efforts fully. He finally advocates the dissemination of guidelines for the peer-reviewing process of consumer-related manuscripts, providing practical instructions on how to act as a reviewer that can strongly support inexperienced reviewers and provide a term of reference for all.

We have some updates regarding the journal’s indexing and abstracting. *Economia Agro-alimentare* is now listed in CABELLS JOURNALYTICS (www2.cabells.com/about-journalytics), a curated list of over 11,000 academic journals spanning 18 disciplines. Its purpose is to guide researchers and institutions in getting the most impact out of their research. They use several metrics to compare journals and provide information such as published articles, editors, acceptance rates, and invited article percentages. In addition, the journal has been indexed in the ICI Journals Master List database for 2021 after having passed the evaluation process positively. The Index Copernicus Value (ICV) calculated by the ICI experts for 2021 is 119.05. The journal is indexed in ICI since 2012; the previous evaluations are available at the Index Copernicus website: <https://journals.indexcopernicus.com/search/details?id=32678&lang=en>.

This news confirms the journal as a well-known and respected outlet for high-quality research. More than ever, we appreciate the support of our community of authors, reviewers, and readers, and we express our heartfelt gratitude to the SIEA Presidential Board for the unconditional support and for granting us full autonomy in the editorial management. We heartfully thank the publisher’s staff and all those who contribute to maintaining and improving the quality and impact of the journal for the work done despite the difficulties created by the global pandemic.