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QUALITY ATTRIBUTES OF "ROCHA" PEAR AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR: SENSORY EVALUATION AND WILLINGNESS TO PAY

A.S. Pinto, G. Barreiro, A. Fragata, P. Combris, E. Giraud-Héraud

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Abstract:

Until recent times, fresh fruits such as pears were provided to markets as generic products. However, these products are now differentiated by cultivars, origins and appearances, as well as by private schemes of standards. Therefore, one observes many denominations of origin, retailer label or private brand, which are used in order to signal product differentiation for the consumers, who are often willing to pay large price premiums for products with what they perceive to have the right attributes. In this paper, we used an experimental auction to investigate how information on quality attributes affects consumers' willingness to pay for different types of pears, particularly when choosing the 'Rocha' pear cultivar. The experience conditions were controlled by skin colour and total soluble solids (TSS) measurements as well as sensory evaluations of the fruits. The BDM (*Becker-DeGroot-Marschak*) auction mechanism was combined with sensory analyses in order to develop an integrated approach that was able to evaluate different product attributes. Seventy-four Portuguese consumers took part in the experimental auction. They evaluated four types of pears: a conventional 'Rocha' pear, a retailer label for the same cultivar, and a Protected Designation of Origin using two levels of maturity (concerning different TSS). The consumers evaluated the pears, first in a blind condition, then on the basis of fruit appearance and its label, next on the basis of information on the product's characteristics and, finally, after observing the fruit with the knowledge of its characteristics while tasting. Moreover, the consumers were asked to make a sensorial evaluation of the four types of pears. The main results showed that information on the products' characteristics such as food safety instantly influences the consumers' willingness to pay. However, it appears that the attribute taste, which was directly related with sugar content, was more important than the guarantee of food safety in the buying behaviour.