

Food Style Between Cultural Heritage and a Sustainable Future: An Analysis of Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

The growing public interest in health, the environment, and food sustainability has brought to the forefront the need for a deeper understanding of dietary habits and how consumers perceive and integrate traditional and organic products into their daily diets. This article analyzes the attitudes of Romanian consumers toward these categories of products, in a context where sustainable eating is no longer merely a personal choice, but a strategic direction of public interest. The research methodology used is quantitative, employing a structured questionnaire administered to consumers in Romania. The data collected aimed to highlight the particularities of respondents' dietary styles by investigating consumption behavior: perceptions, frequency of consumption, level of information, and motivations behind food choices. Statistical analysis allowed for the identification of relationships between respondents' knowledge and consumption behaviors, as well as the main barriers to choosing organic and traditional products. The results reveal a growing interest in sustainable foods, but also a series of obstacles such as limited access, higher prices, and lack of adequate information. Clear differences emerge between consumer segments, influenced by demographic and socio-economic factors. Thus, this research provides an original contribution by highlighting the connection between consumer perceptions and market realities, offering a solid foundation for developing educational strategies and awareness campaigns aimed at promoting more responsible and health-oriented consumption.

Keywords

Sustainability; organic products; traditional products; dietary pattern; consumer behavior.

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Introduction

Globally, the food industry represents a key pillar of the economy, supporting the livelihoods of millions of people (Popa et al., 2025). Food markets are undergoing a significant transformation driven by rapid technological advancements, changes in consumer preferences, and growing concerns about sustainability. These transformative forces affect the entire food chain — from agricultural producers and the processing industry to distributors, retailers, and consumers—bringing both significant challenges and opportunities for adaptation and innovation (Gușe, 2025). Cultural heritage is a powerful catalyst for sustainable regional development, acting as the essence that defines and shapes regions. It is a vital driver of sustainable regional growth, contributing not only to the preservation of local identity but also to the social and economic revitalization of a country's regions (Chukwurah et al., 2025). It functions as a defining element that shapes the distinct character of each area, inspiring responsible public policies, attracting investments, and stimulating sustainable development. Vermeir et al. (2020) conducted an analysis of sustainable organic food consumption and observed that, although many consumers hold favorable attitudes toward sustainable products, these attitudes do not necessarily translate into purchasing and consumption behaviors. Changing dietary patterns and food preferences, which are deeply rooted in culture and lifestyle, remains a difficult process. This research explores how sustainability and tradition shape consumer behavior in the agri-food

sector, offering insight into consumer preferences and expectations regarding the authenticity and ecological impact of food.

1. Scientific Literature Review – Contemporary Perceptions and Perspectives on the Relationship Between Agriculture, Food, Cultural Identity, and Sustainability in Consumer Behavior

Sustainability in food behavior is based on choices that integrate the consumption of ecological, traditional, and local products, reflecting concerns for a healthy eating style, environmental protection, and local economic development. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), these products play a key role in supporting local economies by strengthening the resilience of farming communities and raising consumer awareness regarding the origin and quality of food, helping to shape a sustainable eating style. The natural, authentic, but also seasonal and regional character of these products not only enhances the freshness and nutritional value of food, but also strengthens the direct relationship between producers and consumers, promoting a more transparent and equitable food system (Sandri, Broccolo and Piredda, 2025). The integration of cultural heritage into sustainable regional development processes is an evolving approach, reflecting the growing international recognition of its strategic value. The international community increasingly sees it as an essential and innovative element in regional planning, capable of generating sustainable solutions and contributing to strengthening territorial identity, social cohesion, and economic competitiveness (Chukwurah et al., 2025). European consumers define traditional food products as those that are "frequently consumed or associated with specific holidays and/or seasons, passed down through generations, made in a characteristic way, according to culinary heritage, processed naturally, remarkable and recognized for their sensory properties, linked to a specific local area, region, or country" (Vanhonacker et al., 2010, p.454). Similarly, Peulić et al. (2023) believe that traditional food products stand out through unique characteristics and exceptional quality, offering a sensory experience that connects consumers to the cultural heritage, history, and identity of a specific region. In Europe, the only formal definition available for traditional food products comes from the Ministry of Agriculture of Italy (1999), which describes traditional food products as "agri-food products whose methods of processing, preservation, and aging have been consolidated over time, according to consistent and uniform local customs." In specialized literature, there are multiple definitions, but they all converge on the same idea, namely that a traditional product is a food product made from local raw materials, which does not contain food additives, follows a traditional recipe, and a traditional production and/or processing method, distinguishing it from other similar products in the same category (MADR, 2013).

Promoting the consumption of traditional foods can play a significant role in accelerating progress towards sustainable development goals. These food products, typically made from natural ingredients sourced locally, are not only accessible and easy to distribute on a large scale, but also contribute to strengthening local economies by supporting small producers. Furthermore, traditional foods resonate with the taste preferences and eating styles of a significant portion of consumers, which gives them a high potential for adoption among new generations, thus fostering sustainability both economically and culturally (Kristia, Kovács and Erdey, 2024). On the other hand, according to FAO's definition, ecological products come from agricultural systems that aim to conserve biodiversity, protect ecosystems, and maintain consumer health. These systems exclude the use of synthetic chemical pesticides and genetically modified organisms, focusing on natural agricultural methods such as crop rotation and the use of organic fertilizers. Recent research highlights that organic farming is more profitable, providing food with comparable or superior nutritional value to that of conventional farming. Additionally, ecological farming practices generate important social benefits and ecosystem services (Sandri, Broccolo and Piredda, 2025). Cachero-Martínez (2020) argues that a product can only be considered organic if it is obtained through a process that respects the soil, maintains its nutrient balance, and excludes the use of chemicals. Consuming these products contributes to protecting the health of consumers as well as farmers and workers involved in production, reducing their constant exposure to chemicals. Huang et al. (2023) offer a broader definition, describing organic products as goods or services generated through the interaction between natural ecosystems and human activities, aimed at promoting human well-being through biological processes. Moreover, sustainable diets are dietary models characterized by minimal environmental impact and the ability to support long-term food security, nutrition, and human health, both for current and future generations. These diets promote biodiversity protection and ecosystem conservation, while being culturally adapted, economically accessible, and equitable. They contribute to the efficient and responsible use of natural and human resources and offer adequate nutritional intake, as well as a healthy eating style (FAO, 2010).

The consumption of traditional foods is driven by the diversification of offerings, with the number of traditional products increasing significantly, by about 15.7% between 2020–2024, according to data from

the Catalog of Certified Products and Activities from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR, 2025). To promote unified regional development, additional support measures for small producers in underrepresented counties are necessary to ensure the equitable valorization of national gastronomic heritage. A solid gastronomic culture and the growing interest in certifying local products are aspects that contribute to strengthening the value of regional products. Regarding the number of certified ecological operators, it increased 4.45 times in 2023 compared to 2010, after a decline between 2012–2017 due to high costs and strict certification requirements, according to data from the Government of Romania (2025). The resurgence was supported by market stabilization, improved European subsidies (compensatory payments of up to 620 euros per hectare for land undergoing conversion), and growing consumer interest in healthy foods, both nationally and internationally (MADR, 2019, p.6). Additionally, the area of agricultural land dedicated to ecological crops showed an upward trend, being approximately 3.8 times larger in 2023 than the 2010 reference level (Fibl Statistics, 2023). This evolution can be explained by financial support through subsidies and funds under the Common Agricultural Policy, increased consumer interest in healthy food products, the need to adapt to climate change through sustainable agricultural practices (such as crop rotation and the use of natural fertilizers), and improved access to international markets. Although the area of land dedicated to organic crops in Romania increased between 2008 and 2022, it still remains significantly below the European average, where many countries exceed 10-15% of total agricultural land (European Court of Auditors, 2024). According to specialists and farmers, this gap is attributed to the difficulties encountered in transitioning from conventional to organic farming. Romania is among the eight EU member states where organic farming occupies less than 5% of agricultural land, far from the European target of 25% by 2030, set by the "Farm to Fork" strategy (European Council, 2025). Between 2021 and 2023 (Figure no. 1), the largest increases in organic areas were recorded in the "Pastures and Meadows" (+32.5%) and "Cereals" (+23.6%) categories, while "Fresh Vegetables" saw the smallest increase (+17.2%). This dynamic reflects the economic advantages of less expensive crops, better supported by subsidies, compared to vegetables, which involve higher costs, labor-intensive work, and more complex logistics, as well as higher sensitivity to weather conditions, but also the cumulative influence of major factors: the impact of the pandemic on labor and supply chains, unpredictable weather conditions (such as drought and extreme events), rising input costs, and changes in subsidy policies.

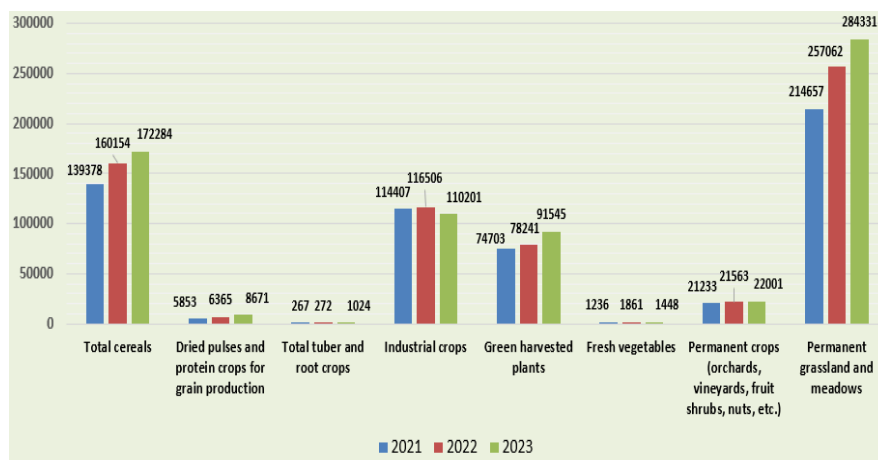


Figure no. 1. Evolution of areas for the main categories of organic agricultural crops (ha)

Source: GOV.RO, 2025

At the same time, if we were to refer to the value of organic product sales, we can say that it has grown consistently, with periods of rapid expansion, indicating a positive trend in their adoption. This growth is due to the increasing demand, consumer awareness of the ecological benefits for health and the environment, shifts toward sustainability, and favorable economic measures. In parallel, strategic investments and appropriate policies could significantly contribute to strengthening Romania's role in European agriculture, supporting the expansion of the supply and increasing the accessibility of organic products on an increasingly larger market.

2. Research Methodology

This paper analyzes consumer perception of traditional and organic products, aiming to assess the extent to which these products are integrated into daily diets. The main objectives of the paper are: evaluating the

consumption behavior of these products, gathering consumer opinions on quality and value for money, identifying influencing factors in purchasing decisions, analyzing the perceived advantages and disadvantages of organic and traditional products, and investigating consumer interest in additional information about sustainability. To obtain the necessary data for the research, the quantitative survey method was used, applied through a structured investigative technique, specifically the self-administered questionnaire, distributed online using the Google Forms platform. Sampling was carried out using the convenience method and the "snowball" technique. The research instrument included a total of 27 questions, seven of which addressed socio-demographic aspects. Data collection took place between February 17–24, 2025. The analysis aimed to establish the relationship between independent variables (residence environment, education level, and the influence of information from the media) and consumption habits of organic and traditional products, treated as dependent variables (perception of availability, frequency of purchase, and the importance of labeling). The obtained data were processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel, applying the CORREL function to determine correlation coefficients for hypothesis testing. Based on these specific objectives, three main research hypotheses were formulated:

- **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** There is a strong positive correlation between the residence environment and the perception of the availability of organic products compared to traditional ones.
- **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** There is a weak positive correlation between the influence of information from the media and the frequency of purchasing organic products.
- **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** There is a strong positive correlation between the education level and the importance given to reading product labels before purchasing.

3. Results and Discussion

Following the outline of the socio-demographic profile of consumers (men, aged 18-24, with university education, from urban areas, with monthly incomes between 2001-4000 RON, from the capital and nearby areas), as shown in table no. 1, it was found that one-third of them buy organic products weekly, while a quarter purchase them once a month. The majority of consumers (73%) prefer supermarkets for their accessibility, variety, and good prices. Online stores and local fairs attract 9% each, proximity stores 5%, while alternative sources (bio vending machines, eco restaurants, health food stores) each attract only 1%, indicating low interest in these options. The majority of respondents (45%) do not perceive significant quality-price differences between organic and traditional products. However, 29% consider organic products superior in terms of quality, while 26% prefer traditional products for a better quality-price ratio. Additionally, most respondents (57%) consider organic products as accessible as traditional ones, while 35% find them harder to locate, indicating differences in accessibility depending on location or sales channel.

Table no. 1. Socio-demographic profile of respondents

Variables	Percentage (%)	Variables	Percentage (%)
Gender		Monthly Income	
Female	43	Below 2,000 RON	18
Male	55	2.001-4.000 RON	40
Prefer not to answer	2	4.001-6.000 RON	28
Age		6.001-8.000 RON	6
18-24 years	73	Over 8,000 RON	8
25-34 years	18	Geographic Region	
35-44 years	8	North-East	8
45-54 years	1	South-East	12
Highest Level of Education		South Muntenia	17
High School	30	South-West Oltenia	8
Post-secondary School	2	West	7
University	60	North-West	1
University (Master's/Doctorate/Post-doctorate)	8	Center	11
Residence Area		Bucharest-Ilfov	36
Urban	67,7		
Rural	32,3		

For the evaluation of traditional and organic products, as well as for the analysis of the frequency of organic product consumption, the Likert scale was used, adapted according to the context. In the case of evaluating the attributes of the products (flavor, taste, appearance, smell, health), a scale from 1 to 5 was used, where each point reflected the perceived level of appreciation. The scores were calculated by multiplying each rating on the scale by the number of responses received, and the resulting values were summed and divided by the total number of respondents. In the analysis of consumption frequency, the Likert scale was used with four levels: "never," "occasionally," "frequently," and "always," coded numerically from 1 to 4, following the same methodology for calculating the average scores.

In evaluating organic products by consumers (Figure no. 2), the criterion "health" recorded the highest score (4.19), ranking first among the five criteria analyzed, highlighting the major importance placed on health benefits in the consumer decision-making process. In the secondary plan, sensory determinants were rated in a clear sequence, with "taste" (3.81) in the immediate next position, followed by "appearance" (3.72), "flavor" (3.41), and "smell" (3.32). These results indicate that, although health is the primary criterion in consumer perception, the sensory characteristics of organic products remain significant elements in the evaluation and selection process.

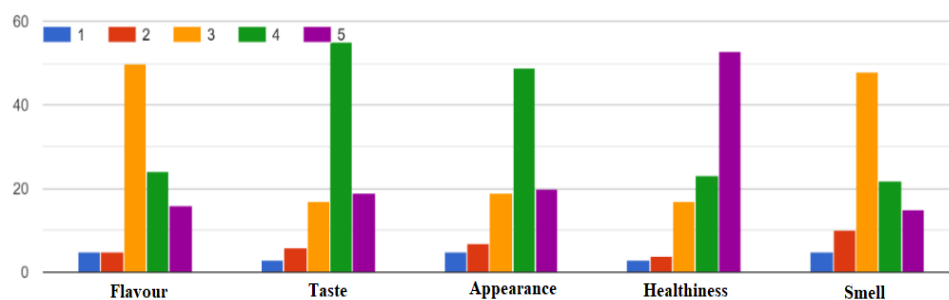


Figure no. 2. Evaluation of organic products by consumers

In the evaluation of traditional products (Figure no. 3), the score analysis reveals that "taste" (average score of 3.87) is the most appreciated criterion by consumers, with this preference being associated with the pleasure of consumption and the perception of an authentic flavor characteristic of traditional products. The aroma (3.73) and visual appearance (3.67) of traditional products are also well regarded, while the smell (3.53) receives more moderate ratings, possibly due to variations between products or the more pronounced intensity typical of traditional preparations. In contrast, the "health" dimension recorded the lowest score (3.36) for traditional products, suggesting that, despite their high taste value, they are not perceived as particularly healthy food options, possibly due to the presence of ingredients that do not contribute favorably to a balanced diet.

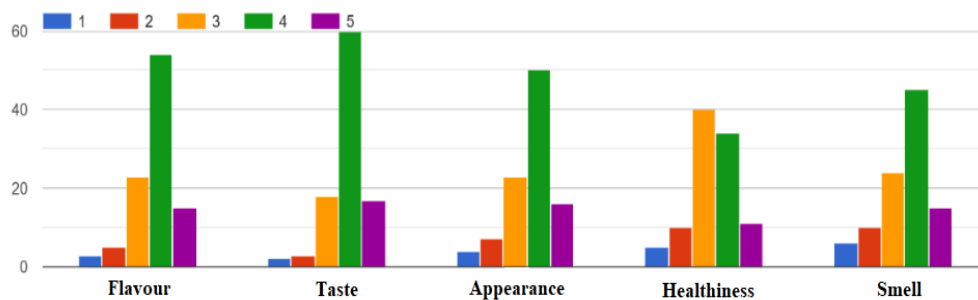


Figure no. 3. Evaluation of traditional products by consumers

As shown in figure no. 4, organic vegetables and fruits are the categories most frequently integrated into the respondents' diet, with average scores of 2.58 and 2.57, respectively. On the opposite end, the consumption of organic bakery products and meat is at a lower level, recording the lowest average scores—2.18 and 2.24. The significant differences observed between the analyzed categories may reflect the presence of limiting factors, such as higher prices for certain organic products, limited availability in local retail networks, or a lower familiarity of consumers with these types of products, due to insufficiently established eating practices.

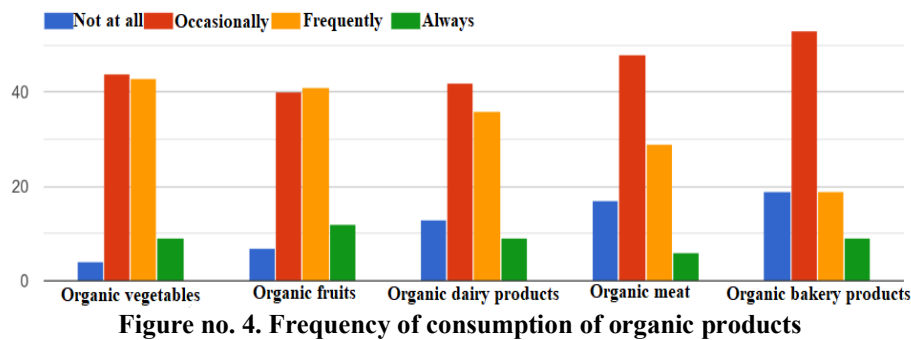


Figure no. 4. Frequency of consumption of organic products

The scores obtained for each category of traditional products indicate a moderate level of integration into the respondents' diet (Figure no. 5). The highest values were recorded for traditional meat products (2.93), suggesting frequent and consistent consumption. The next category with the highest consumption frequency is traditional vegetables (2.91), reflecting their essential role in the daily diet. Traditional fruits (2.87) and traditional dairy products (2.75) are consumed to a slightly lesser extent, but still represent significant elements of the diet. In contrast, traditional bakery products recorded the lowest score (2.67), which may suggest a more limited integration into daily eating habits, possibly due to their replacement by modern alternatives.

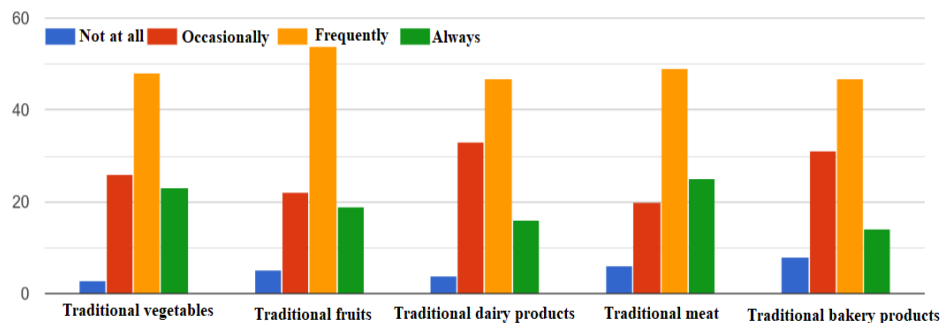


Figure no. 5. Frequency of consumption of traditional products

Organic products are valued for their health and environmental benefits, being perceived as having superior quality and better taste. However, high prices, limited availability, and greater perishability constitute significant obstacles for consumers, limiting their widespread adoption. Additionally, the process of identifying and selecting these products can be time-consuming. On the other hand, traditional products are attractive due to their accessibility, familiar taste, and lower price. They are easy to find, support the local economy, and preserve traditions. However, concerns about their environmental impact and health risks may create hesitation among consumers. The media moderately influences the purchasing decisions of the majority of respondents (57%), while 22% are more skeptical. Most respondents (72%) read product labels, indicating an interest in understanding their composition and origin. However, 28% do not pay enough attention to labeling, which can affect informed and safe purchasing choices. Transparency, certifications, and positive reviews can help increase consumer trust. Organic product producers and retailers should improve the availability of these products by diversifying distribution channels and conducting educational campaigns. A significant number of respondents (71%) show moderate interest in sustainability, while only 16% are very interested in this topic. Also, the season influences consumer preferences, with 13% of respondents being highly influenced by holidays in their consumption choices, associating certain products with specific events. Another 52% are moderately influenced by the season, choosing organic or traditional products more frequently during festive periods, but not exclusively.

To test the three initial research hypotheses, correlation coefficients were calculated to establish the direction and strength of the relationships between the identified variables. The analysis revealed that two of the hypotheses were validated, supported by the obtained and processed data, while one was invalidated, as follows:

- **H1** was validated, highlighting a strong positive correlation between the place of residence and the perception of the availability of organic products compared to traditional ones ($r = 0.8767$); thus, consumers living in urban areas tend to perceive greater availability of organic products compared to traditional ones, unlike those living in rural areas.

- **H2** was validated, indicating a positive but weak correlation between the influence of the media and the frequency of organic product purchases ($r = 0.2344$). This means that as exposure to media information about organic products increases, the frequency of their purchase also increases, but this relationship is weak in intensity, influenced by other relevant factors, such as price, product availability, personal values, or social influences.
- **H3** was invalidated, with no significant correlation between the level of education and the importance given to reading labels ($r = -0.0132$); thus, consumers with a higher level of education tend to pay more attention to label information for better understanding.

Conclusions

Traditional food products continue to be perceived by consumers as authentic and associated with a familiar taste, with their choices influenced by economic, cultural, and social factors. However, in recent years, organic products have experienced a significant increase in popularity globally, marking a notable shift in consumer behavior. This transition, accelerated by the pandemic context, has led to a deeper reflection on eating habits and the environmental impact of individual consumption behavior. The study validates the idea that eco-consumerism is on the rise, as reflected by the one-third proportion of respondents who frequently purchase organic products. This trend highlights the growing interest in a healthy, sustainable, and ethical lifestyle. However, a considerable portion of consumers remains loyal to traditional products, citing reasons such as lower prices, greater availability (especially in areas with a limited supply of organic products), and a familiar taste that has been consolidated over time.

Although many respondents would like to integrate organic products more frequently into their daily diets, they condition this on factors such as lower prices, expanded supply, clear and transparent certifications, recommendations from other consumers, and access to information about the origin of the products. Openness to sustainable consumption is also supported by the high interest expressed in sustainability information, both for organic and traditional products.

To stimulate the consumption of organic and sustainable products, measures such as subsidies for local producers, diversification of distribution channels (including online), public education campaigns, promotion of official certifications, and the development of marketing strategies that emphasize the taste and quality of these products are recommended. The main limitation of the study arises from the small sample size, with the research based on 100 questionnaires, which nonetheless allowed for a better understanding of the addressed issue, generating new ideas and offering depth and flexibility in interpreting the results. A future research direction could involve longitudinal studies that track changes in the consumption behavior of organic and traditional foods over the long term, correlated with economic and social development. Such research could contribute to understanding how urbanization, living standards, and other economic variables influence the choice of sustainable products.

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