Consumer Preferences and Certifications of Origin: the Case of dry-cured Ham
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In recent decades, changing attitudes in consumers’ behaviour have led to considerable changes in the meaning of buying and consuming food. These important changes, due largely to the fact that today’s consumers are increasingly aware, informed and demanding, have led to a significant shift in the demand for food (Sabbe et al., 2009). Trends in demand (Nomisma, 2003) confirm that consumers in developed countries are increasingly sensitive to food safety, quality and authenticity and show greater willingness to pay (WTP) for products that have these characteristics.

Certifications of geographical origin, like P.D.O, I.G.P., P.G.I., D.O.C.G., D.O.C., are one of the ways of signaling quality and product differentiation. Serving as a guarantee of food safety and wholesomeness, it provides consumers with positive utility. Lastly, indication of geographical origin evokes environmental values, since it certifies that the product was made in a natural way and according to precise standards.

In this paper, in line with Lancaster (1971), a product is regarded as a grouping of several attributes. Consumers derive utility from the consumption of products according to their preferences and from the set of characteristics that define those products. The reference product in this study is dry-cured Parma ham, a typical local Italian product.

Specifically, the aim of our research is to test empirically the following three hypotheses:

- (HP1) P.D.O. certification significantly influences consumer preferences;
- (HP2) P.D.O. certification of food leads to a higher WTP;
- (HP3) There exist regional differences in consumer perception of P.D.O. certification.

To test these hypotheses, original field data were collected and statistically analyzed using SPSS software.