

# Romania Between Heritage and Certification: Consumer Perception of Traditional and Local Agri-Food Products with Certification Potential

Andreea Virginia Cenușă\*, Felix Horațiu Arion\*\*

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i> Received: January 15, 2026 Accepted: February 12, 2026 Published: March 15, 2026</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i> Traditional agri-food; consumer perceptions survey; quality schemes; territorial identity; Apuseni Mountains branding</p>	<p>Traditional and local agri-food products are deeply embedded in the identity and cultural continuity of Romanian rural communities, contributing to the preservation of culinary heritage, region-specific production practices and local biodiversity. This paper examines Romanian consumers' attitudes and perceptions regarding traditional and local agri-food products with certification potential, with the aim of assessing the expected impact of quality certification schemes on consumption behaviour. Particular attention is given to the potential development of voluntary regional certification schemes for products originating from the Apuseni Mountains, a region with rich gastronomic heritage but limited prior research on certification feasibility. Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire conducted in spring 2025 using Google Forms, with responses from 1,033 Romanian consumers. The survey captured quantitative and qualitative data on consumer awareness, preferences, attitudes toward certification and purchasing behaviour. Data analysis combined descriptive statistics and non-parametric inferential methods. The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated non-normality of Likert-scale responses, justifying the use of the Kruskal–Wallis H test to examine differences across age groups and residence types. Results show that traditional and local products are consumed regularly by most respondents, particularly in rural areas, with strong preferences for dairy, meat and preserved foods. Consumer motivations are closely linked to perceived quality, taste, authenticity and support for local producers, while trust in certified products is primarily driven by formal and institutional guarantees rather than informal promotional cues. Willingness to pay a premium for certified products is generally positive but limited to moderate price increases, with notable differences between rural and urban consumers. Furthermore, the findings reveal strong public openness toward both a regional certification scheme for products from the Apuseni Mountains and a national scheme for the preservation of traditional recipes, especially when certification is linked to authenticity, transparency and gastronomic tourism experiences. These findings highlight the relevance of territorially anchored, voluntary certification schemes as instruments for strengthening consumer trust, supporting rural economies and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, offering valuable insights for policy design and future research on agri-food quality systems.</p>

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, food consumption patterns have increasingly embraced a variety of natural, organic, traditional and local products (GastroArt, 2017). For many consumers, the association with a specific

\*, \*\* University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail addresses: [andreeacenus@gmail.com](mailto:andreeacenus@gmail.com) (A. V. Cenusă – Corresponding author), [felixarion@gmail.com](mailto:felixarion@gmail.com) (F. H. Arion).

place or method of production serves as a marker of authenticity, reinforcing the perceived value of the product. Muriel Faure's 1999 analysis represents one of the earliest theoretical contributions to understanding food products as heritage objects, demonstrating how authenticity (conceived as ideological and constructed) serves as a vehicle for patrimonialization, linking cultural recognition with economic valorisation. Through this process, food products are transformed into patrimonial objects, reflecting an intention to preserve and transmit a legacy over time (Faure, 1999). Patrimonialization refers to the process by which objects, practices or products are elevated to the status of heritage, not because they are inherently valuable, but because society chooses to recognize and preserve them. In this context, authenticity functions as a trigger or justification for patrimonialization. By posing the question "to what extent does the creation of authenticity encourage the heritage status of a food product?" Faure challenges the notion that heritage is simply "discovered" and instead demonstrates that it is often the outcome of strategic and ideological processes, in which authenticity is actively produced and, through this production, heritage value is generated. The creation of authenticity can be understood as a central mechanism in the patrimonialization of food products, as it provides the symbolic capital necessary for their recognition as heritage. In line with Bourdieu's logic of value, which distinguishes between cultural capital (symbolic legitimacy, recognition and prestige) from economic capital (market price and profitability) (Pileggi & Patton, 2003), this cultural legitimacy contributes to the transformation of authenticity into economic value, allowing heritage and market to intersect in the production of both meaning and price.

This body of literature demonstrates that the various interpretations of authenticity held by different actors are embedded in ideological dimensions and contribute to the generation of value, particularly in the form of heritage value. From this perspective, the cultural capital derived from authenticity plays a legitimizing role in the pricing of traditional and local agri-food products, thereby enabling a convergence between heritage and market value (Pato & Duque, 2023). The strategic communication of authenticity's defining elements thus prompts a reconsideration of heritage status, not only as an outcome of valorisation processes, but also as a catalyst for the symbolic elevation and emblematic positioning of certain products and practices (Ossowska, Janiszewska, Kwiatkowski, & Oklevik, 2024). Traditional and local agri-food products are integral to the cultural and economic fabric of many societies, embodying the heritage, biodiversity, and artisanal knowledge of specific regions (Profi Romania, 2024). Characterized by distinctive production methods, geographical origins and cultural significance, these products are increasingly understood as embodiments of intangible cultural heritage, whether at national or local levels. This perspective is supported by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, skills and cultural practices (Herman & Matta, 2025). In this sense, traditional and local agri-food products operate as vectors of vertical knowledge transfer, both within families (from parents to children) and through broader socio-economic networks (from producers to consumers). Within processes of patrimonialization (heritage-making), the formal recognition of such products through labels (such as PDO, PGI, TSG and other quality schemes) reconfigures them as symbols of collective identity, valued mostly within local communities but also by external publics, as demonstrated in the studies of Bessièrè (1998) and Fonte (2008).

Moreover, as argued by Hinrichs (2003) and Brunori and Rossi (2007), the relationship between environmental resources and cultural valuation is constitutive of the heritage process itself. Natural

resources acquire meaning and value only when embedded within systems of technical know-how, local representations and shared social meanings that articulate their distinctiveness. As noted by UNESCO (2011), cultural heritage is inseparable from the contextual knowledge and practices that sustain it, indicating that environmental and cultural heritage are co-constructed through processes of community engagement and value attribution.

Traditional agri-food products are defined by recipes transmitted across generations and are closely associated with specific cultural practices and historical contexts (MADR, 2015). They are typically produced using traditional methods and locally sourced ingredients, reflecting the culinary heritage of a given community (Gheorghe, Nistoreanu, & Filip, 2013).

From an environmental perspective, traditional and local food systems often rely on practices that support biodiversity conservation and contribute to the reduction of carbon footprints (Funk, 2025). Local agri-food products, by contrast, are defined primarily by their geographical proximity to the consumer and are commonly associated with short supply chains. Although the concept of "local" may vary across contexts, it generally emphasizes the support of local economies, the reduction of environmental impacts and the strengthening of community relationships (Espluga-Trenc, et al., 2021).

Local food systems often involve small-scale producers and direct-to-consumer marketing strategies, which can enhance transparency and trust between producers and consumers (Martinez, et al., 2010).

These factors, together with others specific to the production sector, have contributed to the emergence of labelling practices that, although varying in form, are designed to provide consumers with assurances regarding product authenticity (Petrescu, Vermeir, Burny, & Petrescu-Mag, 2022). Such labels primarily seek to validate the link between a product and its geographical origin, thereby offering protection against counterfeiting and fraudulent use of origin claims. In this context, local agri-food products acquire greater significance as markers of territorial and cultural identity rather than as simple tools of marketing differentiation (Amilien, Torjusen, & Vittersø, 2005).

In Romania, traditional and local agri-food products reflect a profound connection between community, environment and gastronomy, often rooted in centuries-old practices and territorial specific knowledge (Teodoroiu, 2015). Concern for product quality intensifies cyclically during major religious holidays, particularly Easter and Christmas. During these periods, adherence to tradition becomes especially pronounced and food assumes a dual role, as an expression of cultural identity and as a medium for its performative enactment (Dragomir, et al., 2024).

Cultural anthropological research highlights that traditional and local food product are symbolically associated with the "sacred time" of festive occasions, whereas standardized or industrial foods tend to be linked to the "profane time" of everyday life (GastroArt, 2017). From this perspective, traditional and local agri-food products emerge as heritage goods par excellence, imbued with both symbolic and material value (Bacter, et al., 2025). Their production and consumption participate in broader processes of social differentiation and cultural reproduction, contributing not only to the affirmation of collective identity but also to the construction of individual identity within what Beck (1992) calls "the process of individualization", whereby individuals increasingly seek meaning through self-selected affiliations and symbolic forms of consumption. In this sense, food heritage operates at the intersection of collective

memory, territorial representation and reflexive self-identification, reinforcing both community boundaries and personal narratives of belonging.

Fischler (1988) argues that food plays a central role in the construction of identity, both individual and collective. The notion that "you are what you eat" is understood as an expression of how food choices articulate and reinforce social belonging, cultural memory and personal values. According to Fischler, Food operates as a powerful marker of identity insofar as it embodies continuity with the past while also enabling differentiation in the present. Traditional and local foods, in particular, provide individuals with a means of anchoring themselves in shared histories and territorial narratives, rendering them especially meaningful in contexts of cultural fluidity or perceived loss of rootedness (Muchnik, Biénabe, & Cerdan, 2005). However, within the context of globalization and changing consumer behaviour, these products increasingly face challenges related to visibility, market competitiveness and intergenerational transmission (Sanz-Cañada & Muchnik, 2016).

Against this background, the present study aims to examine Romanian consumers' perceptions, motivations and consumption behaviour regarding traditional and local agri-food products with certification potential, in order to assess the expected impact of voluntary quality certification schemes. Based on a nationwide consumer survey, the research focuses in particular on the feasibility and relevance of a regional certification scheme for products originating from the Apuseni Mountains, an area characterized by strong cultural identity but limited prior empirical research on agri-food certification. By providing consumer-based empirical evidence, this study contributes to the literature on food patrimonialization and quality schemes, while offering policy-relevant insights for the design of territorially anchored certification strategies in Romania.

## 2. Literature review

The increasing standardization of food systems, driven by industrial production and mass distribution, tends to marginalize traditional and local products, which often lack the economies of scale, marketing capacity or distribution infrastructure required to compete effectively (Fonte, 2008). As global food brands dominate supermarket shelves and consumer preferences shift toward convenience and novelty, traditional products risk being perceived as outdated or irrelevant, particularly among younger generations who may be less familiar with or less invested in preserving ancestral food practices (Bessi ere, 1998; Fischler, 1988).

Moreover, the erosion of local knowledge and artisanal skills resulting from rural depopulation, migration and the decline of smallholder farming further threatens the intergenerational transmission of food-related know-how. As noted by Bowen and De Master (2011), the loss of culinary knowledge and production techniques undermines product authenticity as well as the long-term sustainability of food heritage systems.

Without targeted support through public policy, education and marketing, these products risk becoming "heritage without heirs" (Lafert e, 2006), celebrated in discourse yet absent from everyday practice. Patrimonialization through official recognition notably via quality schemes such as TSG, PDO and PGI, may provide both symbolic and market-based protection, provided that it is accompanied by active strategies aimed at engaging producers and consumers alike (Andreghetto, Ferreira, & Kourgiantakis, 2025).

Over the past two decades, the European Union (EU) has developed a comprehensive legal framework designed to recognize and protect traditional and geographically linked agri-food products through official geographical indications and quality schemes (European Commission, 2024).

This framework encompasses geographical indications as well as other EU quality schemes (**Figure 1**) that emphasize traditional production methods or products originating from areas with natural constraints, such as mountainous or insular regions, as defined under Regulation (EU) No. 2024/1143 (European Parliament and Council, 2024):

- **Protected Designation of Origin (PDO)**

Applies to products whose production, processing and preparation take place entirely within a specific geographical area, using recognized know-how, with a particularly strong link between product quality and origin.

- **Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)**

Refers to products that are closely associated with a given geographical area, where at least one stage of production, processing or preparation occurs in the region and whose reputation or specific characteristics are attributable to that origin.

- **Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG)**

Recognizes products distinguished by a traditional composition or method of production, without requiring a specific geographical origin, as it protects the recipe or production method rather than the place.



**Figure 1. Logos of PDO, PGI and TSG**

*Source: The European Food Information Council website (EUFIC, 2021)*

- **Mountain Product (Quality Term)**

A voluntary quality term applied to products derived from raw materials and/or processing operations carried out in mountain areas, highlighting the added value of production in environments characterized by natural constraints.

- **Product of EU's outermost regions**

In addition, a dedicated EU logo has been introduced to promote agricultural and food products originating from the Union's outermost regions, which face structural challenges related to geographic isolation, insularity and demanding environmental conditions.

These schemes contribute to the preservation of traditional know-how and culinary heritage while simultaneously enhancing the visibility, market value and legal protection of agri-food products with distinct regional characteristics. Beyond the official EU quality schemes, a wide range of voluntary certification systems operates at both national and private levels (European Commission, 2024). Managed by individual operators or public institutions, these initiatives aim to strengthen consumer trust by signalling product quality and specific production attributes, ranging from business-to-business certifications to labels addressed directly to end consumers.

Alongside the European Union’s quality framework, Romania has developed a national legislative system for agri-food quality schemes (**Figure 2**) designed to safeguard and promote local culinary traditions and production practices (Todirica, 2018). Implemented under the auspices of the Romanian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), these schemes complement EU instruments by offering recognition and market valorisation to traditional and region-specific products that may not fully meet the eligibility criteria of European-level certification.



**Figure 2. Logos of Romanian voluntary quality schemes, regulated through national legislation**

*Source: MADR website (MADR, 2013; MADR, 2014; MADR, 2021)*

Among the most prominent national schemes is the “**Produs Tradițional Atestat**”, regulated by National Order No. 724/2013 (MADR, 2013). This scheme certifies agri-food products manufactured in accordance with traditional recipes, using established processing methods and locally sourced raw materials. Eligibility requires producers to demonstrate the product’s historical continuity, authenticity and distinctive characteristics derived from traditional knowledge and techniques.

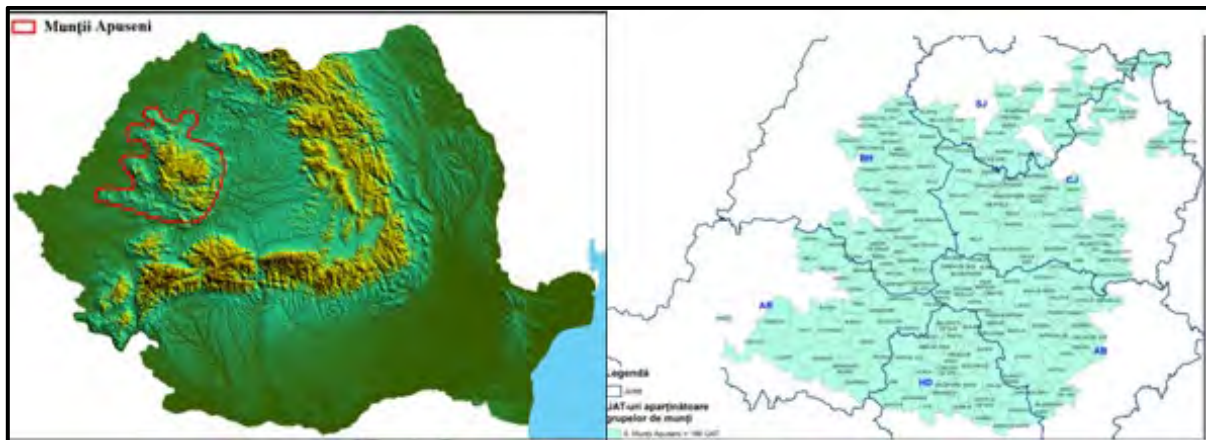
Another significant instrument is the “**Rețetă Consacrată**” scheme, established under National Order No. 394/2014 (MADR, 2014). This scheme recognizes standardized recipes with a documented production history of at least 30 years in Romania and applies primarily to agri-food products that have achieved long-standing consumer recognition. Its objective is to ensure the preservation and promotion of traditional recipes within contemporary, including industrial, production frameworks.

The “**Produs Montan**” (Mountain Product) quality term, established under Regulation (EU) No. 2024/1143 and implemented nationally through Order No. 174/2021 (MADR, 2021), applies to agri-food products originating from mountain areas characterized by significant natural constraints. By formally linking products to their geographical origin, this quality term supports product differentiation and contributes to the sustainable development of structurally disadvantaged rural regions, including the Apuseni Mountains, while also offering producers a mechanism to enhance market visibility and consumer trust.

The Apuseni Mountains (**Figure 3**), located in western Romania and encompassing parts of Bihor, Sălaj, Cluj, Arad, Hunedoara and Alba counties (MADR, 2022), constitute one of the country’s most distinctive ethnocultural regions, traditionally inhabited by Moți communities (Dobocan, 2024).

These highland settlements are characterized by deep-rooted traditions, subsistence-oriented agriculture and household-scale food processing practices, often conducted with minimal technological intervention (Surd & Turnock, 2000). The region’s natural constraints and historical isolation have contributed to the preservation of authentic production methods and a rich culinary heritage. Representative products include household cheeses such as “caș”, “urdă” and “telemea”, smoked meat products, jams, syrups and forest-derived foods, prepared according to traditional methods based on non-formalized, intergenerational transmission of knowledge specific to the local cultural context.

The territorial distinctiveness of the Apuseni Mountains is further reinforced by the overlapping presence of the Apuseni Nature Park, a protected area of karst landscapes, high biodiversity and endemic species spanning Bihor, Cluj and Alba counties (ANP, 2014) and the recently established Ecomuzeul Țării Moților, an initiative aimed at preserving and promoting the ethnographic and cultural heritage of the Moți communities (TVR Info, 2024; Bihor Media, 2023; Radio Romania, 2024). This convergence of natural and cultural conservation efforts contributes to a coherent territorial framework for the development of regional branding strategies rooted in the valorisation of both biodiversity and intangible cultural heritage, thereby strengthening the rationale for origin- and tradition-based product certification.



**Figure 3. Geographical position of the Apuseni Mountains (left picture-red line) and their 186 Territorial Administrative Unit (right picture-blue colour)**

*Source: MADR website (MADR, 2022)*

The inclusion of the Apuseni Mountains as a case study is motivated by both their potential for regional branding and the current absence of formal institutional recognition for their food heritage. Despite this potential, no systematic assessment has been conducted to date regarding the certification of traditional and local agri-food products from the region under voluntary national quality schemes, positioning the Apuseni Mountains as a relevant and underexplored territory for quality valorisation. The region represents a particularly valuable yet underexplored territory from the perspective of quality. Collectively, these national quality schemes function as instruments for preserving Romania’s

culinary heritage, stimulating rural economies and enhancing consumer trust through transparent labelling and traceability mechanisms. They contribute to the valorisation of traditional knowledge, encourage the development of short supply chains (Tanasă, Benefits of short food supply chains for the development of rural tourism in romania as emergent country during crisis, 2014), and support gastronomic tourism initiatives (Tanasă, 2015). Despite their increasing visibility within the agri-food sector (Glogovețan & Pocol, 2024), academic research highlights the need for stronger institutional support, improved consumer education and closer integration of these schemes into regional development strategies in order to ensure their long-term sustainability.

While a number of Romanian products have successfully obtained registration under voluntary quality schemes, both at EU level and within national frameworks (Chifor, Arion, Isarie, & Arion, 2022; MADR, 2023; MADR, 2024; MADR, 2025; MADR, 2025a), the broader impact of these certifications on consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviour remains insufficiently explored (Soare, Zugravu, & Zugravu, 2023). In particular, empirical evidence is limited regarding how Romanian consumers assess traditional and local agri-food products in terms of perceived quality, trust, authenticity and willingness to pay a price premium, especially in relation to the presence or absence of quality certification.

As noted by anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu in *“Scutecele națiunii și hainele împăratului”*, the designation of "traditional product" and to a lesser extent "local product", functions in the consumer's perception as a marker of added value (Mihăilescu, 2013). Such labels evoke associations with naturalness, authenticity, childhood tastes and aromas, health and freshness, carrying affective and symbolic meanings that are deeply embedded in the collective imaginary. Rather than operating merely as commercial identifiers, they function as intimate cultural markers that mediate consumers' relationships with food.

Similarly, findings from the 2012 Cultural Consumption Barometer (National Institute for Cultural Research and Training, 2014), indicate that, in response to the question *“In your opinion, what are the defining characteristics of a traditional Romanian product?”*, tradition is primarily understood in terms of intergenerational transmission, specific place of origin and traditional production methods. These dimensions were consistently identified as core attributes of traditionality. By contrast, respondents assigned less importance to formal certification or official recognition, suggesting that perceived authenticity is grounded more strongly in cultural memory and production context than in institutional frameworks and labelling mechanisms.

To advance understanding of how traditional and local agri-food products are perceived and valued within the collective consumer mindset, and to explore Romanian consumers' perceptions of quality certification schemes, a self-administered questionnaire was designed and implemented. The study aims to generate empirical evidence on consumer interpretations of tradition, authenticity and product origin, as well as on the extent to which official quality schemes are understood, valued and trusted. Beyond mapping consumer preferences, the research examines the potential of national traditional and local products for integration into formal valorisation frameworks. Its findings are intended to inform policy development, support sustainable rural economies and strengthen the cultural positioning of Romanian culinary heritage at both national and regional levels.

By addressing these objectives, the study fills an identified empirical gap by providing data-driven insights into consumer attitudes, expectations and knowledge gaps. It thereby offers a foundation for the design of more effective quality certification strategies and communication tools aligned with market dynamics and heritage preservation goals, while also capturing the symbolic and emotional meanings that consumers attach to traditional and local products, dimensions often overlooked in economically or technically oriented policy and marketing approaches. The inclusion of a secondary focus on products from the Apuseni Mountains provides a distinct territorial perspective for examining underexplored opportunities related to rural valorisation and the construction of gastronomic identity. In this way, the research not only addresses an existing gap in national-level empirical evidence, but also contributes to the broader European discourse on the role of localized food systems in sustainable development, cultural resilience and regional branding (Zafra, 2021; Chukwurah, et al., 2025; Guerrieri, Borchardt, Listorti, Marelli, & Vittuari, 2025).

### 3. Methods

To investigate Romanian consumers' perceptions of traditional and local agri-food products, as well as their awareness of and trust in quality certification schemes, the study employed a self-administered online questionnaire comprising of 27 items. This approach was selected for its efficiency in reaching a broad and geographically diverse audience without interviewer involvement, thereby reducing potential interviewer bias (Saunders & Kulchitsky, 2021; Bodine, 2022). Self-administered questionnaires are also widely recognized for their cost-effectiveness and capacity to collect data from large populations within a relatively short timeframe (Bhandari, 2021).

The questionnaire was developed following a structured, sequential five-step approach to ensure methodological rigor and conceptual coherence (Leon, Lapkin, Fields, & Moroney, 2022 ):

1. The consumer profile section captured demographic characteristics and consumption patterns, including age, place of residence and frequency of consumption, and comprised five items: three nominal variables, one dichotomous variable and one ordinal variable.
2. The section on awareness of certified products assessed respondents' familiarity with European Union and national quality schemes and comprised four nominal variables.
3. The section on perceptions of quality certifications examined consumer trust, perceived value and reasons for scepticism or lack of engagement, and comprised four items: one ordinal variable and three nominal variables.
4. The fourth section addressed market preferences and willingness to pay, focusing on purchasing behaviour, price sensitivity, preferred retail channels, packaging formats and the influence of certification on consumer choice. The section comprised four items, three nominal variables and one dichotomous variable.
5. The fifth section examined tourism and regional branding by assessing the role of territorial identity, trust-building elements and consumer openness toward a regional certification scheme for products from the Apuseni Mountains, as well as support for the certification of traditional Romanian culinary dishes; this section included ten items: seven nominal variables, one open-ended question, one dichotomous variable and one ordinal variable.

The questionnaire combined closed-ended questions, intended to support quantitative analysis, with open-ended questions aimed at capturing qualitative insights into consumer attitudes and beliefs. The online digital format facilitated the integration of multiple question types and the use of skip logic, thereby enhancing respondent experience and improving overall data quality (Salvatori, 2003).

Subsequently, the questionnaire underwent expert review to establish content validity and inter-rater reliability. To further ensure the reliability and validity of the collected data, the instrument was subjected to a pilot testing phase, during which respondent feedback was solicited and used to refine question wording and overall structure (Belisario, et al., 2015). Following this stage, the final version of the questionnaire was distributed online, targeting a broad sample of Romanian consumers.

The self-administered nature of the questionnaire enabled participants to respond independently and without external influence, thereby supporting the authenticity of the data collected (VisioChart, 2025; Guelph University, 2025). This methodological approach is consistent with established survey research practices, in which self-administered questionnaires are commonly employed to obtain unbiased and comprehensive data on consumer perceptions (Wolf, 2011; Zimmerman, 2024).

The questionnaire was distributed via e-mail, a data collection method widely employed in consumer behaviour research due to its efficiency, broad reach and capacity to support voluntary participation in an asynchronous and non-intrusive manner (Palmieri, Perito, Macrì, & Lupi, 2019; Palmieri, Suardi, & Pari, 2020; Skalkos, et al., 2021). Participants received an email invitation outlining the purpose of the study, its academic relevance and the voluntary nature of participation. Each invitation included a direct link to the online questionnaire. All responses were collected anonymously, with no personal identifiers requested or stored, in full compliance with ethical standards for data protection and participant confidentiality. This procedure ensured adherence to the principles of informed consent and safeguarded respondent privacy throughout the research process.

To maximize respondent outreach and participation, a snowball sampling method was employed (Palmieri & Perito, 2020; Skalkos, et al., 2021). This non-probability sampling method is particularly suited to exploratory research involving broad target populations that are difficult to access through conventional sampling frames. By relying on initial respondents to further disseminate the questionnaire within their personal and professional networks, the approach enabled the rapid and cost-efficient collection of a substantial number of responses. Snowball sampling is especially appropriate for studies focused on consumer perceptions and attitudinal patterns, as it facilitates access to heterogeneous respondent profiles while maintaining voluntary and anonymous participation. Although this sampling strategy limits statistical generalizability, it is well suited to perception-based surveys in which the primary objective is to identify trends, associations and exploratory insights rather than to generate nationally representative estimates.

Given the digital format of the questionnaire, participation was limited to individuals with internet access and a basic level of digital literacy. Although this represents an inherent limitation in terms of full population representativeness, the resulting sample nonetheless displayed substantial demographic diversity, encompassing a wide range of age groups and both urban and rural residential settings. While electronic distribution enabled rapid dissemination, it may have favoured respondents familiar with digital technologies, potentially underrepresenting older or less digitally connected population

segments. The sample was intentionally inclusive, comprising respondents both familiar and unfamiliar with quality certification schemes. This heterogeneity strengthened the analytical value of the data by capturing a broad spectrum of consumer experiences, awareness levels and purchasing behaviours. As a result, the findings offer insights that reflect general consumer attitudes rather than those of a narrowly defined or pre-informed subgroup.

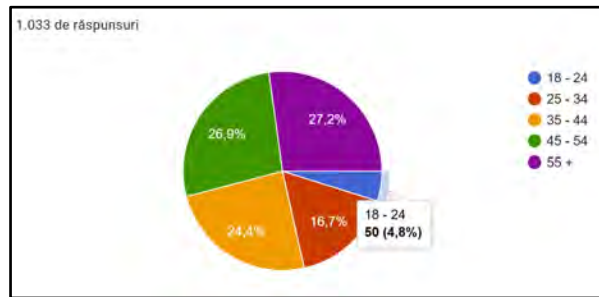
The survey was conducted between February and May 2025 and yielded a total of 1,033 valid responses. It was developed and administered using the Google Forms platform, selected for its accessibility, user-friendly interface and integrated functionality allowing direct export of responses into Excel format for subsequent statistical analysis. The data were statistically processed using **IBM SPSS Statistics** for Windows, Version 23.0 (*IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA*).

#### 4. Results and discussions

Based on the methodological framework described above, the following section presents the empirical findings of the study. The results are organized in accordance with the structure of the questionnaire and the research objectives. The analysis begins with an examination of general consumption patterns and socio-demographic differences, followed by an assessment of the motivational factors underlying the consumption of traditional and local agri-food products. This is complemented by an analysis of consumer perceptions regarding quality certification schemes and the level of trust associated with them. The final part of the results addresses consumer openness toward newly proposed quality certification schemes for products and traditional culinary preparations originating from the Apuseni Mountains, with the aim of assessing the degree of endorsement and acceptance of such initiatives.

Although the questionnaire comprised 27 items, the results section focuses on those questions considered most representative for each thematic section, in order to capture the core patterns and relationships relevant to the research objectives.

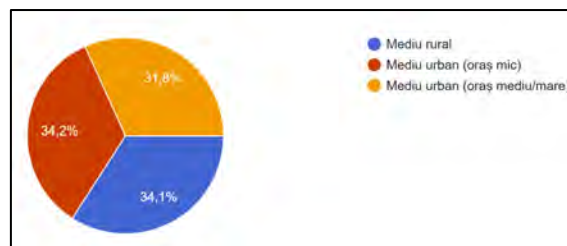
The presentation of results begins with a descriptive overview of the sample characteristics, starting with respondents' age distribution. Regarding age distribution (**Figure 4**), the sample demonstrates a balanced representation across adult age groups. The largest share of respondents belonged to the 55 and over category (27.2%), closely followed by those aged 45–54 (26.9%). Participants aged 35–44 accounted for 24.4% of the sample, while 16.7% were between 25 and 34 years old. The youngest cohort (18–24 years) was comparatively underrepresented, comprising 4.8% of respondents, which may indicate lower engagement of younger adults with the research topic or reflect limitations associated with the chosen digital distribution method. Overall, this age stratification enhances the robustness of the analysis by incorporating a broad range of generational perspectives relevant to food traditions, consumption patterns and trust in quality certification schemes.



**Figure 4. Age distribution pie chart**

*Source: Google Forms Results from own survey*

With regard to geographical distribution (**Figure 5**), the sample exhibits a broad, albeit urban-skewed, representation. Respondents from small urban areas accounted for 34.2% of the sample, while those residing in medium or large urban areas represented 31.8%. Rural respondents comprised 34.1% of participants. Overall, approximately two-thirds of the sample (66%) resided in urban environments, a distribution that may influence patterns of product access, exposure to marketing channels and levels of awareness regarding quality certification schemes.



**Figure 5. Geographical distribution of the sample of respondents**

*Source: Google Forms Results from own survey*

Although rural consumers are adequately represented, the predominance of urban respondents should be taken into account when interpreting the results, particularly with respect to traditional food purchasing behaviours and information sources.

Exploratory analysis of the collected data was conducted using descriptive statistical techniques, with the objective of identifying key patterns, distributions and associations within the respondent group.

**Questions 1 and 2** collected demographic data regarding respondents' age group and residential environment. These variables were treated as independent categorical variables and were used to segment the dataset for comparative statistical analysis across groups.

Descriptive statistics for age distribution and place of residence are presented in **Table 1** and **Table 2**, respectively. No standalone inferential tests were applied to these variables, as their primary role was to support stratified analyses of behavioural and attitudinal items included in subsequent sections of the questionnaire.

**Table 1. Number of respondents / age group**

Age Group Frequency Table		
	Age group	Respondents
1	55 +	281
2	45 - 54	278
3	35 - 44	252
4	25 - 34	172
5	18 - 24	50

Source: own development

**Table 2. Number of respondents / residences**

Residence Frequency Table		
	Residence type	Respondents
1	Mediu urban (oraş mic)	353
2	Mediu rural	352
3	Mediu urban (oraş mediu/mare)	328

Source: own development

**Question 3** ("How often do you consume traditional/local agri-food products?"), assessed respondents' self-reported frequency of consumption (daily, weekly, monthly, rarely or never) and was analysed using cross-tabulations by age group and place of residence. Overall consumption patterns indicate a high baseline level of engagement with traditional and local products, with the majority of respondents reporting daily (54.3%) or weekly (30.7%) consumption, while only 0.1% indicated that they never consume such products (**Table 3**).

**Table 3. Frequency of consumption**

Frequency of Consumption	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Daily	561	54.31
Weekly	317	30.69
Monthly	94	9.1
Rarely	60	5.81
Never	1	0.1

Source: own development

**Table 4. Frequency of consumption -age group**

1. Care este	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Never
18 - 24	42.0	26.0	18.0	14.0	0.0
25 - 34	53.49	26.74	12.21	6.98	0.58
35 - 44	71.43	15.48	8.33	4.76	0.0
45 - 54	41.01	46.04	7.91	5.04	0.0
55 +	54.8	32.38	7.47	5.34	0.0

Source: own development

Age-related differences in consumption frequency are presented in **Table 4**. The highest proportion of daily consumers was observed among respondents aged 35–44 (71.4%), followed by those aged 55 and over (54.8%) and the 25–34 age group (53.5%). By contrast, younger respondents aged 18–24 reported substantially lower daily consumption (42%) and displayed a more evenly distributed pattern across weekly (26%) and monthly (18%) consumption frequencies. These results suggest that middle-aged and older adults are more likely to integrate traditional and local agri-food products into their regular diets, whereas younger individuals tend to consume such products less frequently and in a more episodic manner.

Consumption frequency varies substantially by type of residence (**Table 5**). Respondents residing in rural areas report the highest proportion of daily consumption (91%), followed by those living in small urban localities (48.5%), whereas only 21% of respondents from medium and large urban areas report daily consumption of traditional or local agri-food products. Urban respondents are considerably more likely to consume such products on a weekly (47%) or monthly basis (18.9%) and also exhibit the highest shares of rare (12.5%) and never (0.3%) consumption. These patterns indicate a strong association between residential environment and consumption frequency, likely reflecting differences in access, habitual exposure and cultural attachment to traditional and local agri-food products.

**Table 5. Frequency of consumption by residence**

2. Unde locuiesti?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Never
Rural area	90.91	6.82	1.99	0.28	0.0
Urban area (medium/large city)	21.34	46.95	18.9	12.5	0.3
Urban area (small town)	48.44	39.38	7.08	5.1	0.0

Source: own development

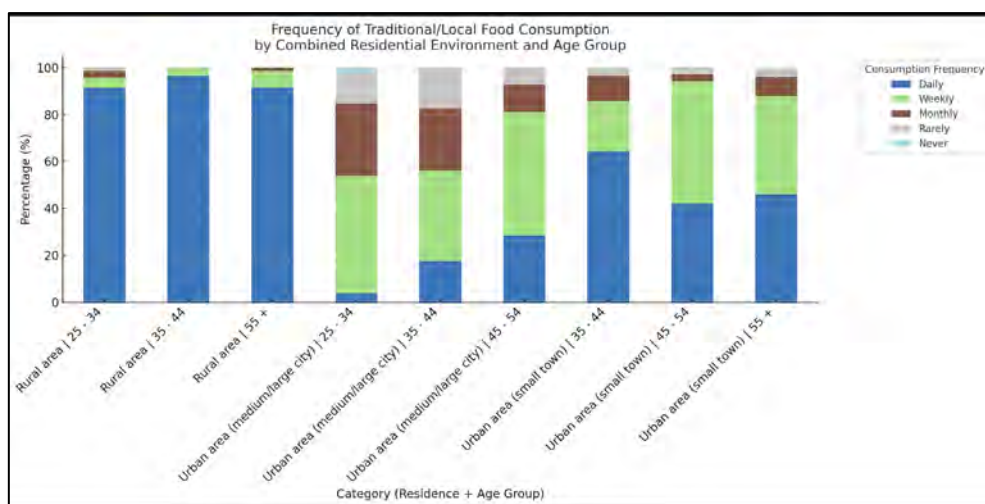
**Table 6. Chi-square Test Results ( $\chi^2$ )**

Comparison	Chi <sup>2</sup>	p-value	Degrees of Freedom
Age group	85.58	< 0.000001	16
Residence type	359.03	< 0.000001	8
Age + Residence	488.96	< 0.000001	56

Source: own development

To examine the association between consumption frequency and the selected demographic variables, the Chi-square test of independence ( $\chi^2$ ) was applied. The results indicate statistically significant differences in consumption frequency across both age groups and residential environments (**Table 6**).

Consumption frequency differs significantly across age groups and types of residence, as well as for their interaction. The associated p-values were below the conventional significance threshold ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a strong statistical association. The significant interaction effect between age and place of residence suggests that these variables do not operate independently, but jointly shape patterns of consumption of traditional and local agri-food products (**Figure 6**).



**Figure 6: Frequency of consumption by age + residence**

Source: own development

**Figure 6** displays a stacked bar chart illustrating the percentage distribution of consumption frequency levels (daily, weekly, monthly, rarely and never) across combined categories of age group and place of residence. The x-axis represents nine aggregated age–residence groups, defined by three residence types (rural, small urban localities and medium/large urban areas) and four age groups (25–34, 35–44, 45–54 and 55+), while the y-axis indicates the percentage of respondents within each category. Although the dataset contains multiple age–residence combinations, only the nine most populated groups are presented in the figure in order to enhance clarity and interpretability.

Rural respondents across all age groups consistently report very high levels of daily consumption, with proportions exceeding 90% in most cases and only marginal representation of other frequency categories. This pattern confirms that rural environments strongly support sustained engagement with traditional and local agri-food products, largely independent of age.

In small urban localities, daily consumption is noticeably lower and displays greater variation across age groups. Respondents aged 35–44 and 45–54 exhibit more diversified consumption patterns, with substantial shares reporting weekly and monthly consumption, while those aged 55 and over tend to consume traditional products more frequently, though still at levels below those observed in rural areas.

Medium and large urban areas show the most fragmented consumption patterns. Among younger adults (25–34), daily consumption declines markedly, accompanied by increased shares of monthly and rare consumption. Even among older age groups residing in large cities, daily consumption remains substantially lower than in rural contexts, indicating a persistent urban disengagement from traditional food practices across generations.

Overall, the figure illustrates a clear interaction between age and residential environment in shaping consumption behaviour. While age-related differences are evident, the residential context emerges as the more influential determinant. Irrespective of age, rural residents maintain high levels of daily engagement with traditional foods, whereas increasing levels of urbanization, particularly in medium and large cities, are associated with less frequent and more sporadic consumption.

Pairwise Chi-square comparisons between residential environments further reinforce the strong association between place of residence and the frequency of traditional and local agri-food consumption. Statistically significant differences were observed across all pairwise comparisons. The most pronounced contrast was found between respondents residing in rural areas and those living in medium and large urban areas ( $\chi^2 = 337.71$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), indicating substantial variation in consumption patterns across these residential contexts.

A similarly strong effect was observed in the comparison between rural areas and small urban localities, which also yielded highly significant differences, albeit of a slightly lower magnitude ( $\chi^2 = 151.69$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Moreover, meaningful disparities were identified even within urban contexts, as consumption patterns differed significantly between small towns and medium/large cities ( $\chi^2 = 67.97$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results suggest that not only residential type but also urban scale and density influence access to, and engagement with, traditional and local agri-food products. Overall, the findings confirm that residential context plays a critical role in shaping consumer behaviour related to traditional food consumption.

The results of the pairwise Chi-square tests confirm that residential environment is a strong determinant of the frequency of traditional and local agri-food consumption. Respondents residing in rural areas report consistently high levels of daily consumption, exceeding 90% across age groups, reflecting both greater access to traditional food sources and stronger continuity of food-related cultural practices. By contrast, individuals living in medium and large urban areas are significantly less likely to consume such products on a daily basis, with approximately one in five respondents reporting daily intake. Urban residents instead display higher proportions of weekly, monthly and rare consumption, suggesting the influence of urban lifestyles, reduced product availability and a comparatively lower cultural salience of traditional foods.

Notably, substantial differences are also evident within urban areas. Respondents residing in small towns report daily consumption levels nearly twice as high as those living in large cities, suggesting closer proximity to rural supply chains and stronger continuity of food-related traditions. These patterns indicate that urban scale and infrastructural characteristics may mediate both cultural and practical access to traditional and local agri-food products.

In addition, preliminary trends suggest that younger respondents in rural areas continue to report high levels of daily consumption, pointing to generational continuity in traditional food practices within rural settings. By contrast, younger individuals living in large cities appear to be the least frequent consumers, which may reflect a gradual weakening of engagement with traditional food practices among urban youth.

**Table 7. Consumption by product category**

Product Category	DA	NU
Dairy products (cheese, butter, yogurt, etc.)	98.1(1013)	1.9 (20)
Meat products (sausages, ham, smoked meats, etc.)	95.6 (988)	4.4 (45)
Mushrooms / non-timber forest products	73.9 (763)	26.1 (270)
Preserved foods (jams, syrups, pickles, etc.)	78.7 (813)	21.3 (220)
Teas / herbal remedies / wild medicinal plants	64.6 (667)	35.4 (366)
Preserved fruits and vegetables (dried, frozen, etc.)	55.4 (572)	44.6 (461)
Baked goods / traditional pastries	81.0 (837)	19.0 (196)

*Source: own development*

**Question 4** examined the frequency of consumption across several categories of traditional or local agri-food products. The results, presented in both percentages and absolute frequencies in **Table 7**, indicate that dairy products (98.06%) and meat products (95.64%) recorded the highest levels of consumption among respondents. This pattern suggests a deeply rooted preference for these categories within local dietary practices, with their near-universal consumption underscoring their central role in traditional diets as well as their widespread availability and cultural acceptability.

By contrast, preserved foods (78.70%) and mushrooms and other non-timber forest products (73.86%) exhibit moderate levels of consumption, potentially reflecting the influence of seasonal availability, knowledge related to preservation practices and region-specific culinary traditions. These product categories are often linked to self-sufficiency and household-based food practices, suggesting a partial revalorization of rural foodways within contemporary consumption patterns.

Teas, herbal remedies and wild medicinal plants record the lowest consumption rate (64.57%), with more than one-third of respondents indicating non-consumption. This lower uptake may be associated

with the niche character of these products, limited consumer knowledge regarding their therapeutic uses, or reduced trust in informally produced herbal goods compared to standardized commercial alternatives. Overall, this gradient in consumption patterns provides relevant insights for the design of future policy instruments and certification schemes, highlighting product categories with stronger cultural anchoring and market penetration. At the same time, the comparatively lower consumption of forest-derived and medicinal products points to potential areas for targeted awareness-raising and educational initiatives, particularly in relation to sustainable foraging practices and the transmission of traditional health-related knowledge.

For the “Preserved fruits and vegetables” category, Chi-square tests of independence ( $\chi^2$ ) were applied to examine differences in consumption patterns across types of residence (**Table 8**) and age groups (**Table 9**). This analytical approach facilitated the identification of demographic segments in which consumption was either more prevalent or comparatively underrepresented, thereby providing insights into residence- and age-related consumption patterns.

**Table 8. Consumption according to residence**

Product	Rural - Yes (%)	Urban (small) - Yes (%)	Urban (large) - Yes (%)	Rural - No (%)	Urban (small) - No (%)	Urban (large) - No (%)
Dairy	98.9	98.6	96.6	1.1	1.4	3.4
Meat	98.6	96.9	91.2	1.4	3.1	8.8
Mushrooms/non-timber	88.4	75.6	56.4	11.6	24.4	43.6
Jams, pickles	93.2	76.2	65.9	6.8	23.8	34.1
Teas	81	60.3	51.5	19	39.7	48.5
Preserved fruits/veg	53.2	53.9	59.5	46.8	46.1	40.5
Pastry	92.9	85.6	63.4	7.1	14.4	36.6

		2. Residence			Total	p-value
		rural	urban (large)	urban (small)		
Preserved fruits and vegetables	NO	-46.8 (165)	40.5 (133)	46.1 (163)	44.6 (461)	>0.05
	YES	(53.2) 187	59.5 (195)	53.9 (190)	55.4 (572)	
Total		352	328	353	1033	
		0.46875	0.405487805	0.461756374	53.9	
		53.2	59.5			

Source: own development from SPSS and Excel programs

Among all product categories assessed in **Question 4**, “Preserved fruits and vegetables” was distinctive due to its relatively balanced distribution of responses, with 55.4% of respondents reporting regular consumption and 44.6% indicating non-consumption. This near-equal split contrasts with other categories, such as dairy or meat products, which were consumed by more than 90% of respondents. Owing to this balanced distribution, the category was selected for further analysis, as it allows for a more nuanced examination of demographic differences in consumption behaviour. Moreover, the even response distribution enhances the discriminatory capacity of the Chi-square test, rendering this category particularly suitable for assessing the influence of age and residential environment on consumption of traditional and local agri-food products. As shown in Table 8, the Chi-square test did not identify a statistically significant association between type of residence and the consumption of preserved fruits and vegetables ( $p > 0.05$ ). Although the proportion of consumers was marginally higher in medium and large urban areas (59.5%) compared to rural areas (53.2%) and small towns (53.9%), these differences are insufficient to support the existence of a meaningful residential pattern.

Accordingly, consumption of preserved fruits and vegetables appears to be relatively evenly distributed across residential environments within the analysed sample.

**Table 9. Consumption according to age**

		1. Age group					Total
		18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 +	
Preserved fruits and vegetables	No	42 (21)	34.3 (59)	48.4 (122)	43.1(120)	49.4 (139)	44.6 (461)
	Yes	58 (29)	65.7 (113)	51.6 (130)	56.9 (158)	50.6 (142)	55.4 (572)
Total		50	172	252	278	281	1033
		0.42		p-value			
		0.343023	65.7	<0.05			

*Source: own development from SPSS and Excel programs*

By contrast, **Table 9** indicates that consumption of preserved fruits and vegetables (dried, frozen) varies significantly across age groups ( $p < 0.05$ ). The highest consumption rate was observed among respondents aged 25–34 (65.7%), followed by those aged 18–24 (58%). In comparison, respondents aged 55 and over reported the lowest consumption level (50.6%), closely followed by the 35–44 age group (51.6%). These results suggest that younger adults are more likely to incorporate preserved fruits and vegetables into their diets, whereas older respondents may consume these products less frequently, potentially reflecting a preference for fresh or traditionally prepared alternatives. The observed differences are statistically significant, indicating that age constitutes a relevant factor in shaping consumption behaviour for this product category.

By contrast, the remaining product categories exhibited a highly unbalanced distribution, with affirmative (“Yes”) responses overwhelmingly predominating (often exceeding 90%) and negative (“No”) responses limited to a small minority of participants. Given this pronounced skewness, further inferential testing using Chi-square statistics was not pursued for these categories, as the limited variability in responses would constrain the potential to detect meaningful differences across demographic groups.

**Question 5** comprised a set of Likert-type items designed to measure respondents’ level of agreement (on a five-point scale) with key motivational statements underlying the consumption of traditional and local agri-food products. These statements addressed perceived taste superiority, health and naturalness, support for small producers, preference for local over imported products, associations with childhood traditions and perceived product quality. In line with standard practice in social science research, responses to the Likert-scale items in Question 5 were treated as ordinal-level data. To assess whether the response distributions met the assumptions required for parametric testing, the Shapiro–Wilk test of normality was applied separately to each item. As reported in **Table 10**, Likert responses were first coded numerically (1–5), and the Shapiro–Wilk test was conducted on all valid responses for each statement ( $N = 1,033$ ).

**Table 10. Shapiro-Wilk Test**

	Shapiro-Wilk	p-value	N
They taste better	0.5962	0	1033
They are healthier	0.5766	0	1033
Support producers	0.6073	0	1033
Local over imported	0.6014	0	1033
Remind of childhood	0.5216	0	1033
High-quality products	0.6186	0	1033

*Source: own development*

**Table 11. Motivation according to residence**

Motivational Statement	H Statistic	p-value	Statistically Significant (p < 0.05)?
They taste better than mass-produced foods	51.633	0	YES
They are healthier/more natural	44.397	0	YES
I want to support small-scale producers	35.468	0	YES
I prefer local products over imported ones	45.966	0	YES
They remind me of childhood/family traditions	69.294	0	YES
I consider them to be high-quality products	56.57	0	YES

*Source: own development*

The results of the Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that the response distributions for all Likert-scale items included in Question 5 deviated significantly from normality. Shapiro–Wilk statistics ranged between 0.52 and 0.60, with associated p-values below 0.001 for all items, falling well below the commonly accepted threshold indicative of normal distributions. As a result, the assumption of normality required for parametric statistical procedures was not satisfied. Consequently, non-parametric methods were deemed appropriate for subsequent analyses, and the Kruskal–Wallis H test was applied to examine group differences across the selected demographic variables.

The Kruskal–Wallis H test was applied to each motivational statement included in Question 5 to examine whether levels of agreement differed significantly across types of residence (rural areas, small urban areas and medium/large urban areas). This non-parametric test was selected due to the significant deviation from normality observed in the Likert-scale response distributions, as indicated by Shapiro–Wilk statistics ranging from 0.52 to 0.60, with p-values below 0.001 for all items.

The results of the Kruskal–Wallis H tests revealed statistically significant differences across all six motivational statements ( $p < 0.00001$ ), indicating that place of residence (**Table 11**) exerts a meaningful influence on consumers’ motivational orientations toward traditional and local agri-food products. The most pronounced differentiation was observed for the statement “*They remind me of childhood/family traditions*” ( $H = 69.294$ ), highlighting that emotional and cultural attachments to traditional foods vary substantially depending on residential context.

Relatively high H values were also recorded for motivations related to perceived product quality ( $H = 56.570$ ), taste superiority ( $H = 51.633$ ) and preference for local over imported products ( $H = 45.966$ ). Collectively, these findings suggest that motivations associated with identity, sensory experience and ethical consumption (such as support for small-scale producers) differ significantly along the rural–urban continuum.

These findings underscore the importance of differentiated communication and policy strategies, highlighting the need to tailor promotional initiatives, certification frameworks and rural development interventions to the distinct motivational profiles associated with different residential contexts.

The Kruskal–Wallis H test was subsequently applied to assess whether levels of agreement with the motivational statements in Question 5 varied significantly across age groups (**Table 12**). While no statistically significant differences were observed for most motivational dimensions, two factors (support for small-scale producers and preference for local over imported products) exhibited significant variation across age categories ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 12. Motivation according to age group**

Motivational Statement	H Statistic	p-value	Statistically Significant ( $p < 0.05$ )?
They taste better than mass-produced foods	6.628	0.15689	NO
They are healthier/more natural	4.815	0.30681	NO
I want to support small-scale producers	11.074	0.02574	YES
prefer local products over imported ones	12.097	0.01665	YES
They remind me of childhood/family traditions	7.986	0.09209	NO
I consider them to be high-quality products	6.955	0.13833	NO

*Source: own development*

Taken together, the results indicate that age influences certain ethical and territorial motivations, although its overall effect is less pronounced than that of residential context.

Question 5 examined consumer motivations underlying the consumption of traditional and local agri-food products through six Likert-scale items capturing sensory, health-related, ethical, cultural and quality-oriented drivers. The analysis highlights the combined role of geographical and generational factors in shaping consumer attitudes. While rural–urban differences emerge as more robust and consistent across all motivational dimensions, age-related variation is concentrated primarily in motivations linked to ethical consumption and preference for locally sourced products, pointing to a potential generational divide in local food attachment.

This observed heterogeneity points to the importance of differentiated policy and communication approaches tailored to consumers’ residential contexts and life stages. Communication and certification strategies could be more effective if they accentuate cultural heritage and ethical considerations in urban and younger audiences, while continuing to foreground product quality and identity-related attributes among rural and older consumer segments.

**Question 6** assessed respondents’ self-reported awareness of national and European food quality schemes, providing a baseline measure of familiarity with existing certification systems. As shown in **Table 13**, the majority of respondents (83.8%) reported some degree of awareness of quality schemes, indicating that certification is not an entirely unfamiliar concept among Romanian consumers. A substantial share (65.8%) stated that they are familiar with many such schemes, suggesting a relatively high level of exposure among survey participants.

**Table 13. frequency level of awareness of quality schemes among respondents**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid <b>Yes, I've heard of them, but I don't know exactly what they mean</b>	185	17.9	17.9	17.9
<b>Yes, I know many of them</b>	680	65.8	65.8	83.7
<b>Yes, I know what they mean</b>	1	.1	.1	83.8
<b>I have never heard of them before</b>	167	16.2	16.2	100.0
Total	1033	100.0	100.0	

*Source: own development*

At the same time, 17.9% of respondents reported only partial awareness, having heard of quality schemes without fully understanding their meaning, while 16.2% indicated complete unfamiliarity. The very low proportion of respondents selecting the option “I know what they mean” (0.1%) suggests a reluctance to claim full conceptual understanding, possibly reflecting uncertainty regarding the formal definitions or guarantees associated with these schemes. Supplementary analyses by age and residence type, conducted as part of the study but not reported in detail here, point to pronounced informational gaps across population segments. Among respondents who had never heard of quality schemes, rural residents were strongly overrepresented, accounting for nearly four-fifths of this group. This pattern points to a significant informational gap between rural and urban areas, despite the strong cultural embeddedness of traditional food consumption in rural contexts. In terms of age, lack of awareness was distributed across all age groups, with higher shares among young and middle-aged adults, indicating that informational deficits are not confined to older populations. Overall, the findings suggest that while general exposure to food quality schemes is relatively widespread, depth of understanding remains uneven. The results underline the need for clearer communication and targeted awareness-raising initiatives, particularly in rural areas, to strengthen consumer knowledge, trust, and effective engagement with existing and proposed quality certification schemes.

**Question 14** assessed consumers’ willingness to pay a price premium for certified traditional or local products, assuming that certification alone guarantees quality, authenticity, and safety. As illustrated in **Table 14**, a majority of respondents (64.6%) expressed a willingness to pay a premium. This willingness, however, was largely concentrated within limited price thresholds.

The most frequently selected option was a premium of up to 10%, reported by 43.7% of respondents, while only a smaller share (20.9%) indicated readiness to accept higher increases, either up to or exceeding 20% compared to the price of uncertified products. In contrast, 12.5% of respondents stated that they would not be willing to pay any additional amount, and 22.9% reported uncertainty. These results suggest that certification generally enhances perceived product value, but for most consumers this effect translates into acceptance of only modest price premiums, reflecting a cautious and price-sensitive endorsement of quality schemes.

**Table 14. Willingness to pay more based on certification**

Willingness to pay more based on certification				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid <10%	451	43.7	43.7	43.7
<20%	149	14.4	14.4	58.1
>20%	67	6.5	6.5	64.6
NO	129	12.5	12.5	77.1
Not sure	237	22.9	22.9	100.0
Total	1033	100.0	100.0	

Source: own development

When disaggregated by type of residence, notable differences emerge. Respondents living in urban areas showed a higher acceptance of price premiums, including moderate and higher increases, whereas rural respondents were significantly more likely to reject any price increase. This pattern suggests that while certification enhances perceived value across the sample, price sensitivity remains markedly higher in rural areas, potentially reflecting differences in purchasing power, access to certified products, or the perceived added value of formal quality labels.

**Question 17** assessed consumer trust in different certification frameworks by examining preferences between nationally regulated voluntary schemes and EU-recognized quality schemes. As illustrated in **Table 15**, nearly half of respondents (46.5%) reported no clear preference between national and EU certification, indicating that trust is primarily anchored in the Romanian origin of the product rather than in the institutional level of certification.

Preferences for EU quality schemes (27.3%) and for national voluntary schemes (26.2%) were almost evenly distributed, suggesting that both certification systems enjoy comparable levels of credibility among Romanian consumers. The neutral option emerged as the modal response, pointing to a generally non-polarized perception of certification legitimacy. When preferences were examined across residential contexts, respondents from medium and large cities showed a stronger inclination toward EU-level certification, whereas rural respondents displayed moderate but consistent levels of trust in EU schemes. In contrast, consumers from small urban areas were the least likely to favour EU certification. This pattern suggests that exposure to EU-labelled products, communication reach, and perceived institutional authority may shape trust differently across residential environments.

**Table 15. Frequency for preference of certifications**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Preference towards National voluntary quality schemes	270	26.1	26.2	26.2
No preference	480	46.5	46.6	72.7
Preference towards EU quality schemes	283	27.3	27.3	100.0
Total	1033	100.0	100.0	

Source: own development

Overall, the findings indicate that while both national and EU quality schemes are regarded as credible, consumer trust is more strongly linked to product origin than to certification level, with notable variation across residential contexts that may warrant targeted communication strategies.

**Question 20** assessed the perceived effectiveness of various actions in strengthening consumer trust in traditional and local agri-food products. As shown in **Table 16**, respondents assigned high importance to formal and institutional trust mechanisms. In particular, the presence of an official certification label received a high mean score ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), confirming that certification itself functions as a strong credibility signal for consumers. Even stronger trust-enhancing effects were attributed to complementary institutional guarantees, such as proper packaging in accordance with food safety regulations ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) and the presence of producer certification and sanitary-veterinary attestation ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ). These findings suggest that certification is most effective when embedded within a broader framework of visible regulatory compliance.

**Table 16. Importance of various promotional actions in strengthening trust in certifications**

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Presence of an official certification label	4.106	0.9822
Recommendation from someone I trust	4.161	0.8943
Positive online reviews or ratings	3.913	1.0250
Media coverage and promotion (shows, news, articles, blogs)	4.015	1.0008
Support from an influencer or chef/cook on social media	3.744	1.1708
Seeing the product sold in a local store	4.191	0.8900
Presence of products at agri-food fairs	4.337	0.8205
Presence of a producer certificate and by sanitary-veterinary attestation	4.483	0.7887
Proper packaging according to food safety regulations	4.539	0.7527
N = 1033		

Source: own development

Context-based cues, including product presence at agri-food fairs ( $M = 4.34$ ) and availability in local stores ( $M = 4.19$ ), were also highly valued, underscoring the role of physical visibility and controlled distribution channels in reinforcing trust. In contrast, softer promotional signals, such as influencer or chef endorsements ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) and positive online reviews ( $M = 3.91$ ), were perceived as less influential. Overall, these results indicate that while certification labels are an important trust anchor, consumer confidence is maximized when certification is supported by additional institutional, regulatory, and context-based assurances.

**Question 21** assessed consumer receptivity to a potential new national quality scheme dedicated to traditional and local products from the Apuseni Mountains, focusing on whether the presence of institutional regional logos on product packaging would influence trust and purchasing decisions. As presented in **Table 17**, consumer openness toward such a scheme is markedly high. A clear majority of respondents (62.7%) stated that the introduction of a dedicated Apuseni certification would increase their trust in the products, while an additional 33.0% expressed conditional support, indicating that their acceptance would depend on other quality attributes or supplementary information. Only a marginal share of respondents (4.3%) reported that such certification would not influence their purchasing decision. Overall, these results indicate a strong endorsement of territorially anchored certification initiatives for products from the Apuseni Mountains. The predominance of positive and conditional

responses suggests that regional certification labels carry substantial symbolic value and trust-building potential, particularly when supported by clear information, visibility, and credible institutional backing. This finding reinforces the relevance of developing voluntary regional quality schemes as instruments for enhancing consumer confidence and valorising local food heritage.

**Table 17. Consumer receptivity to a potential new quality scheme**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes, such certifications would increase my trust in the products	648	62.7	62.7	62.7
No, certification would not count	44	4.3	4.3	67.0
Maybe, but it would depend on other qualities as well	341	33.0	33.0	100.0
Total	1033	100.0	100.0	

*Source: own development*

**Question 23**, formulated as an open-ended item, explored the personal motivations that could persuade consumers to purchase traditional or local products from the Apuseni Mountains under a potential new national quality scheme. Although only a limited proportion of respondents provided written answers (approximately one fifth of the total sample), the qualitative responses offered valuable insights that complement the quantitative findings. The thematic analysis indicates that product quality emerged as the most frequently cited motivating factor, followed by taste and price or perceived price fairness. Other recurrent themes included authenticity and regional origin, packaging and presentation, and the need for transparency regarding what the certification guarantees. Several respondents also emphasized the importance of storytelling, traceability, visual information and product availability in retail environments. A smaller number of responses expressed scepticism regarding the effectiveness of certification alone, suggesting that institutional labelling must be accompanied by clear information and tangible product attributes in order to influence purchasing behaviour. Overall, the qualitative findings reinforce the centrality of quality, sensory appeal and fair pricing in consumer decision-making, while highlighting transparency and communication as critical conditions for the success of a future Apuseni Mountains certification scheme.

**Question 26** assessed consumer support for a proposed national certification scheme aimed at preserving traditional Romanian dish recipes at risk of disappearing. As presented in **Table 18**, public support for such an initiative is overwhelmingly high. A clear majority of respondents (84.3%) agreed that certification is necessary to protect traditional culinary heritage, while a further 14.8% expressed conditional support, indicating openness to the scheme pending additional information regarding its implementation. Only a marginal proportion of respondents (0.9%) rejected the idea, suggesting minimal resistance to the institutional formalization of traditional recipes. Overall, these findings indicate strong societal endorsement for heritage-oriented certification policies and highlight a high level of public readiness to support initiatives such as the proposed “**Rețete Naționale Tradiționale**” framework. The predominance of positive and conditional responses underscores both the perceived urgency of safeguarding traditional culinary knowledge and the legitimacy attributed to certification as a preservation instrument.

**Table 18. Frequency for consumer support towards a proposed national certification for dishes**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes, I believe it is important to protect culinary dishes	871	84.3	84.3	84.3
No, I do not believe they need certification	9	.9	.9	85.2
Maybe, but I would like to learn more about this certification	153	14.8	14.8	100.0
Total	1033	100.0	100.0	

Source: own development

**Question 27** assessed consumer openness to engaging with certified traditional culinary experiences in the context of rural tourism. Respondents were asked whether, during a visit to the Apuseni Mountains or a similar rural area, they would be interested in dining at local establishments offering “**Preparate Culinare Tradiționale**” (traditional dishes) prepared in accordance with officially registered traditional recipes, “**Rețete Naționale Tradiționale**”. The results indicate a very high level of receptivity. A clear majority of respondents (87.4%) expressed direct interest in such dining experiences, motivated by the promise of authenticity and cultural value.

An additional 11.9% reported conditional interest, primarily dependent on factors such as price, hygiene standards, or availability, while only a negligible proportion (0.7%) stated a lack of interest. Overall, these findings point to a strong alignment between culinary heritage certification and experiential tourism preferences. Consumers appear highly receptive to certified traditional dishes when they are embedded in meaningful rural contexts, suggesting that gastronomy represents a powerful vector for enhancing tourism attractiveness and reinforcing perceptions of authenticity. When interpreted alongside the strong support expressed for the certification of traditional recipes (Question 26), the results reveal a coherent consumer perspective. Certification is perceived as a mechanism for safeguarding culinary heritage and as a tool for enriching tourism experiences and strengthening trust in traditional food offerings.

This convergence highlights the practical relevance of developing “**Rețete Naționale Tradiționale**” scheme as a heritage preservation instrument as well as a driver of rural tourism valorisation.

## 5. Conclusions

In the context of an increasingly complex and globalized food system, agri-food products extend beyond their primary nutritional function to play a central role in the construction and reaffirmation of individual and collective identities. Food consumption is increasingly imbued with emotional, symbolic and cultural meanings, serving as a vehicle through which shared values, memories and social bonds are expressed and reproduced. Contemporary consumers thus demonstrate a growing preference for products endowed with strong identity markers, whether through the valorisation of emblematic regional products or the reactivation of traditional practices and culinary knowledge. Within this dynamic, authenticity emerges as a key driver of consumer behaviour, reflecting a shift from passive consumption toward more reflexive and meaning-oriented food choices.

The concepts of heritage and territory are intrinsically connected through their shared orientation toward long-term temporal continuity and spatial rootedness. Agri-food products should therefore not be conceptualized as static commodities, but rather as the outcomes of complex socio-technical and cultural processes that mobilize localized resources, embodied know-how and historically situated practices. From this perspective, traditional and local agri-food products function as carriers of identity, as they materialize the interaction between environmental conditions, knowledge systems and collective practices that both sustain community cohesion and differentiate territories within broader socio-cultural landscapes.

Although the research examined consumer perceptions at the national level, it also incorporated a secondary territorial focus on the Apuseni Mountains. This analytical extension enabled a more nuanced exploration of the region's potential for product valorisation through quality certification, within a context where such initiatives had not previously been systematically assessed.

Using a structured questionnaire administered to a nationally distributed sample, the study investigated consumer awareness, preferences and perceptions regarding traditional and local agri-food products and quality certification schemes. The research aimed to generate empirical evidence capable of informing future policy initiatives and supporting the valorisation of regional culinary heritage.

By adopting a self-administered online format, the study leveraged the advantages of digital data collection, including rapid dissemination and access to respondents across diverse geographic contexts.

The findings of this study offer an integrated understanding of how Romanian consumers perceive, value and engage with traditional and local agri-food products in relation to quality certification, trust, and territorial identity. Beyond individual consumption motivations, the results highlight the central role of institutional credibility, territorial anchoring and experiential contexts in shaping consumer confidence and purchasing intentions.

Overall, the analysis indicates that territorial embeddedness is a stronger structuring factor of consumer attitudes than age alone. While generational differences exist, particularly with respect to ethical considerations and support for local producers, the rural–urban divide consistently emerges as the most influential dimension affecting trust in certification, perceived authenticity and openness to certified products. Consumers living in rural areas display stronger cultural attachment to traditional foods, whereas urban consumers, especially in larger cities, exhibit greater reliance on formal certification and regulatory assurances as trust-building mechanisms.

The results further demonstrate that certification functions as a meaningful signal of quality and authenticity, but its effectiveness is conditional. Consumers express a clear preference for certification systems that are transparent and supported by formal guarantees such as sanitary-veterinary attestation, compliant packaging and controlled distribution channels. Trust is therefore not generated by certification labels in isolation, but by their integration into a broader framework of institutional and regulatory credibility.

In economic terms, the study reveals a generally favourable attitude toward certified products, accompanied by moderate price sensitivity. While a majority of consumers are willing to pay a premium for certified traditional or local products, this willingness is largely confined to limited price increases,

with notable disparities between rural and urban contexts. These findings underline the importance of designing certification schemes that balance added value with affordability, particularly for consumers in rural areas.

Crucially, the research provides strong empirical support for the development of territorially anchored certification initiatives, as illustrated by the high level of consumer receptivity toward a proposed quality scheme for products from the Apuseni Mountains. Regional certification logos (such as the Apuseni Nature Park and the Ecomuzeul Țării Moșilor logos) are widely perceived as trust-enhancing, especially when associated with credible institutions and meaningful territorial narratives. The results further show that certification gains additional value when linked to experiential consumption, such as rural tourism and traditional gastronomy, where certified dishes prepared according to officially recognized recipes are perceived as authentic and desirable.

The pronounced public support for the certification of traditional Romanian recipes at risk of disappearance confirms that consumers perceive certification as a legitimate tool for safeguarding culinary heritage. When combined with tourism, storytelling and local gastronomy, the proposed schemes would have the potential to reinforce cultural continuity while contributing to rural economic development.

In conclusion, these findings highlight the strategic relevance of voluntary territorially-grounded quality schemes that integrate certification and cultural heritage. For policymakers and relevant stakeholders, these results indicate that future certification frameworks should place greater emphasis on clarity, institutional credibility and a strong connection to territorial identity, and also take into account issues of affordability and accessibility. When these elements are combined, quality schemes could represent past a solely differentiating role on the market and therefore, contribute meaningfully to consumer trust, sustainable consumption practices and the long-term valorisation of Romania's traditional agri-food systems.

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