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Special Issue: Innovative Methods and Approaches in Consumer Behaviour Research in the Agri-food Sector Guest Editorial

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This special issue of *Economia agro-alimentare/Food Economy* is dedicated to the memory of Maurizio Canavari, who served as Editor-in-Chief of the journal during the period 2016-2024. Under his leadership, the journal achieved significant milestones, including its indexing in Scopus and Web of Science (WOS). As an agricultural economist at the Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna, Maurizio Canavari was distinguished by his ability to balance intellectual curiosity with methodological rigor. He firmly believed that, without the exchange and dissemination of knowledge, even the best ideas remain isolated, and that the application of validated methodologies ultimately confers credibility to research. Among the many topics he addressed throughout his career, he devoted particular attention to the study of consumer behaviour and to the development of methodological approaches for its analysis, exploring the broad field of experimental economics. These studies have become increasingly central to the analysis of agri-food systems, which is why the journal has chosen to dedicate this special issue to Maurizio, entitled “Innovative Methods and Approaches in Consumer Behaviour Research in the Agri-food Sector”.

Understanding consumer behaviour is essential to addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities facing the agri-food sector. The current context is marked by rapid changes in consumer values and demands, the emergence of new technologies, and growing attention to sustainability, health, ethics, and information transparency. Consumers, increasingly immersed in a digital environment, are required to choose among products, production systems, and distribution channels that differ not only in terms of

price and sensory attributes but also in environmental performance, ethical implications, geographical origin, social meaning, technological content, and health-related attributes (Kleisiari *et al.*, 2026; Bohen *et al.*, 2025; Sequeira *et al.*, 2026; Tellechea *et al.*, 2025). Researchers are, therefore, called upon to adopt innovative methodologies and approaches to investigate consumer attitudes, preferences, and choices in the agricultural and food sector. This requires methods capable of capturing complexity, heterogeneity, and interconnections with the broader socio-economic context. Over time, the literature has highlighted the need for more flexible, data-rich, and interdisciplinary approaches that integrate, for example, behavioural insights and innovative analytical methodologies (Byrne, 2020; Wuepper *et al.*, 2023; Cecchini *et al.*, 2018; Steenkamp, 1997). This perspective is particularly relevant in agri-food economics, where many of the most pressing issues are complex, applied, and inherently interdisciplinary.

This special issue brings together original contributions that propose or apply advanced methods and innovative, interdisciplinary perspectives in the study of consumer behaviour, aiming to stimulate scientific dialogue on emerging tools such as data analytics techniques, neuroscience, behavioural experiments, innovative qualitative methods, digital approaches, and predictive models. These papers demonstrate how methodological innovation can deepen the understanding of agri-food choices and generate results that are more relevant for public policies, businesses, and society.

A first group of contributions expands the methodological frontier in the analysis of preferences, particularly with regard to willingness to pay. The article by Sergio Rivaroli, Mariagrazia Nitri, and Massimiliano Calvia on “Natural Wine: An Evaluation using the Price Sensitivity Meter and Contingent Valuation” provides a particularly interesting example, both for the product considered and for its methodological design. By combining contingent valuation with the Van Westendorp Price Sensitivity Meter (Van Westendorp, 1976), the authors compare two approaches based on different cognitive mechanisms and distinct modes of respondent engagement. The study not only estimates a premium price for natural wine but also investigates whether, and which, consumer attributes influence economic choices in the surveyed market, and how. The comparison is theoretically relevant as it echoes a longstanding concern in consumer behaviour research: stated values are not neutral outcomes but may depend on question framing, price salience, and whether respondents are asked to reason in terms of social value, personal utility, or acceptable price ranges. The article thus contributes not only to the literature on wine consumption but also to the broader debate on methodological triangulation and the interpretation of stated preferences in food markets. Its strategic and managerial relevance is equally evident, as

pricing decisions in emerging niche markets often need to rely on multiple sources of evidence rather than a single evaluative metric.

A different but complementary perspective is offered by the study of Chaowana Phetcharat, Jeffrey D. Vitale, Pavalee Chompoorat Triditanakiat, Wanlanai Saiprasert, and Weirong Lu, on “Exploring Red Kidney Bean Flour as a Partial Substitute to Rice Flour in Gluten-free Ramen Noodles: Consumers’ WTP in Thailand”, which adopts an experimental auction design (first-price auction) to elicit non-hypothetical willingness to pay. This contribution links product innovation, nutritional aspects, and market behaviour through a method that involves a real economic commitment, as opposed to traditional survey-based approaches. In the agri-food sector, where hypothetical bias remains a recurring concern, experimental auctions, which serve as non-hypothetical and incentive-compatible choice experiments, continue to represent a benchmark for behavioural validity. In this case, the method is used to investigate consumer acceptance and willingness to pay for alternative gluten-free flour formulations, as well as to identify how specific product characteristics and consumer attributes influence bidding behaviour. The study highlights that methodological innovation does not merely consist of increasing sophistication for its own sake, but rather of selecting a research design that is appropriate to the research question, the product context, and the behavioural mechanism under investigation.

A second area addressed in this special issue concerns the analysis of consumer decisions with multiple attributes using discrete choice experiments. Three papers confirm their role not only as highly versatile and theoretically grounded tools but also demonstrate the richness and flexibility of their applications, made even more interesting by their implementation in substantially different ways. The contribution by Vera Ventura, Achille Amatucci, and Chiara Tomasoni on “Ecosystem Services in Food Labels: the Role of Different Information Layers in Shaping Consumers’ Preferences” stands out for moving beyond the generic treatment of sustainability claims as simple binary attributes. Instead, it examines how different levels of information shape preference formation, ranging from broad, relatively abstract references to ecosystem services to more specific and measurable representations. One of the persistent challenges in sustainability communication is that consumers often respond not only to the content of the information, but also to its level of abstraction, complexity, and perceived credibility. By analysing alternative information architectures, the article shows that methodological innovation in consumer research is closely linked to innovation in communication design. Furthermore, by situating labels within a broader informational environment that includes complementary explanations external to the packaging, the contribution acknowledges that

labels rarely operate in isolation. These insights are relevant for both policy and practice. From a methodological perspective, the article presents an innovative and integrated approach, linking values and preferences while maintaining interpretability.

The study “Balancing environmental benefits and agricultural technologies – perspectives from German consumers”, proposed by Johanna Garnitz, Agnes Emberger-Klein and Andreas Gabriel, extends the discrete choice experiment approach to the analysis of agricultural systems that are complex from both a social and environmental perspective. Rather than focusing on a single food product with a standard set of quality attributes, the article investigates consumer preferences for alternative agricultural scenarios, translating production system attributes into dimensions of consumer-relevant welfare. The paper highlights the difficulty of making production characteristics, often distant from the direct consumption experience, meaningful at the point of choice. It addresses an increasingly important issue, namely how consumers perceive the interaction between ecological outcomes and technological innovation, offering insights that are also relevant for communication strategies and policy support. The analysis shows that consumer responses to technology are not uniform: some consumers value environmental improvements even when associated with less familiar technologies, while others are more cautious or price-sensitive.

The article by Giulia Maesano, Roberta Spadoni, Andrea Baroni, and Katia Laura Sidali on “High-Altitude, High Value? Consumer Preferences and Willingness to Pay for Mountain Wines” provides a further contribution, focusing on geographical labelling, sustainability perceptions, and territorial identity. The study shows that consumers are willing to attribute value to a potential extension to the wine sector of the EU optional quality term “mountain product”. The “mountain” designation generates positive utility independently of organic certification, suggesting that the two labels convey distinct meanings rather than redundant information. From a methodological perspective, the article illustrates how discrete choice experiments can be used not only to estimate marginal willingness to pay, but also to test whether different trust-related attributes reinforce each other, overlap, or remain independent in consumers’ minds.

The special issue also includes contributions that more directly address consumer heterogeneity through segmentation analysis and multivariate methods. The study proposed by Kristína Predanócyová, Peter Šedík, Cristina Bianca Pocol, Mihaela Mihai, and L’ubica Kubicová, on “Consumer segments and determinants shaping meat consumption in Slovakia”, employs principal component analysis and cluster analysis to identify four distinct consumer segments and three broad classes of influencing factors. The study highlights that consumer behaviour is rarely homogeneous and that even

within apparently stable markets, there is considerable variability. From a methodological standpoint, the paper also shows how aggregate results often conceal precisely the diversity that is most relevant for designing effective policies and market strategies.

Another theme explored concerns digitalisation and the evolving nature of expertise in agri-food markets. The conceptual contribution on “AI and Consumer Perception of Expertise: A Conceptual Framework for Studying Algorithmic Trust in Wine Recommendations”, proposed by Jochen Heussner and Jon H. Hanf, examines how artificial intelligence may influence trust, authority, credibility, and perceived authenticity. The article proposes a conceptual framework integrating information asymmetry, signalling, and source credibility, identifying key constructs such as transparency, explainability, perceived expertise, and cognitive effort. This is a particularly timely topic, as AI systems are increasingly entering the market as intermediaries that aim to reduce uncertainty and information asymmetry by recommending, classifying, personalizing, and, at times, mimicking the judgment of actors.

Taken together, the studies included in this special issue illustrate, albeit not exhaustively, the richness of methodological approaches currently available. They show that innovation does not mean abandoning established methods, but rather refining, combining, and extending them, improving choice designs, modelling heterogeneity more carefully, and exploring new contexts of consumer action. Moreover, they highlight that methodological progress is strongest when it remains connected to real-world issues, thus reflecting one of the core principles of Maurizio Canavari's work. We hope that this special issue will enrich the dialogue among researchers, bringing together different generations of scholars in a multidisciplinary perspective on agri-food consumer analysis, while also highlighting the importance of engaging practitioners and public institutions.

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