

Monastic Agrifood Products in Greece: Trends and perspectives

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ABSTRACT: *In recent years, many monasteries throughout Greece using high quality primary production are able, either via traditional ways and new technology applications to produce outstanding boutique final products for the consumer, usually sold in urban niche conventional, and/or e-markets. The aim of the present original research is to examine the main purchasing trends of monastic agri-food products by a sample of 112 consumers in Northern Greece, as well as to investigate their views on the market prospects of these products. The research findings showed that consumers bought monastic agri-food products on the account of their high quality and because they sought authentic, traditional taste. In addition, the majority of study participants expressed the belief that the demand for monastic agri-food products will increase significantly in the near future.*

KEY WORDS: Monasteries, agri-food products, consumers, trends, market perspectives

INTRODUCTION

Monasteries, built over the course of centuries, have always been the bastions of Orthodox Christianity. During the Byzantine era, the various monastic communities that had been established across Greece were actively engaged in activities involving agriculture and animal husbandry, not only to cover a significant part of the residents' nutritional needs, but also that of their visitors (Rodiftsis, 2020). Thus, an important point of reference for the monks and nuns in the monasteries was their undertaking specific agricultural work as part of their duties. After all, agriculture was always connected to culture and religion – laborare est orare (House, J.H., 1904). A historical reference to the Orthodox Christian tradition, is the stipulation in the first charter by Saint Athanasios the Athonite, founder of the monastic community of Mount Athos, that each monastery must have its own vineyard, as its produce – wine - was used in the sacrament of Holy Communion (Koios, 2014). Since then, viticulture has been practiced systematically not only on the 'Holy

Mountain' but also in many other monasteries throughout Greece, as according to Psalm 104:15 (*"wine makes the heart of man glad"*). Besides viticulture, over time, many monastic communities also developed other branches of plant production, such as vegetable gardening, tree crops, pulses, grains, etc., as well as branches of animal production, such as dairy cattle, sheep and goat farming, and poultry rearing (Mastora, 2023). Nowadays, in many monasteries, monks and nuns, as part of their daily physical services, are not only systematically involved in the various cultivation practices, but in the processing of the products as well, mainly by setting up small units/workshops within the monastic compound (Vounatsos, Konstas & Routsis, 2002). With special care, love, and reverence in addition to being conscious of their historical role as custodians of tradition, most monastic communities produce in an environmentally friendly way, having adopted organic farming practices (Charakopoulos, 2017; Mastora, 2023).

The most common monastic agri-food products and consumer acceptance

As regards the most common agri-food products produced in Greek monasteries, these are: honey, jams, spoon sweets, loukoumi, dairy products (pasteurized milk, cheeses and other fermented milk products), various types of pasta, legumes (lentils, beans, chickpeas), wine, spirits, aromatic plants and herbs such as mountain tea, oregano, thyme etc., as well as olive oil and table olives (Mastora, 2023; Roustas, 2016). Quite a few monasteries sell their products in special areas within the premises, the so-called monastic store or display stand, while others have developed partnerships and niche market networks in order for their products to be sold in shops and grocery stores in various urban centers around the country. In fact, in recent years, some of these monastic products can be found not only on the shelves of well-known specialty shops but are also available in foreign markets abroad (Mastora, 2023). It is also worth noting that a growing number of monasteries actively participate in food and beverage exhibitions, presenting their agri-food products to the thousands of people who visit these public events (Psarrou, 2018). Furthermore, an increased number of monasteries provide the possibility for consumers to purchase products without actually having to visit the monastery, at special outlets outside the geographical boundaries of the monastic compound. The example of the Monastery of the Holy Forerunner, Anatoli is a good example. During the Covid-19 pandemic, when the monastery remained closed to the public and consequently the agricultural products could not be sold, the nuns took the initiative to operate a stand on the side of the 21st kilometer of the Larissa-Agia provincial road in mid land, Greece (Roustas, 2022). Another noteworthy initiative that many monasteries have recently taken is their active and consistent online presence, where their products are advertised on specially designed sections of the monastery's official website. The websites function as channels of communication providing information to consumers who, in this way, are introduced to the monastery's small, but high-quality, and often specialty, products. And in some cases, consumers can put in an online order through these websites. It is thus that in recent years monastic agri-food products have become better known to the wider consumer public.

In addition, various seminars, workshops and promotional events are also held under the auspices of local government bodies and university institutions, with the aim of making the consumer public aware of the special quality attributes of monastic agri-food products (Tzortzi, 2022; Charakopoulos, 2017). In many cases, raising consumer awareness and promoting these products, coupled with an increase of visitors to the monasteries through religious tourism, has been linked to the wider context of regional development (Tzortzi, 2022).

On the other hand, as regards modern consumers, research has shown that not only do they have a high level of product awareness, but they also demand that there is food product quality (Boccia et.al., 2023). The recent market demand for high-quality food has put pressure for the adoption of a quality-driven approach by both food producers and retailers (Etale & Siegrist, 2021), and there has been an increase in the number of speciality shops and brands with natural products (Kumar et al., 2021). Concerning the global market, Allied Market Research (2020) has predicted that consumption of natural food and beverage products will grow at a rate of 13.7% in the near future, while it was estimated that over 60% of consumers search for food that has a “natural” label (Boccia et.al., 2023). Research has also shown that consumers usually perceive foods which have been produced using traditional methods and resources as being of better quality (Etale & Siegrist, 2021).

In Greece, it is becoming more and more apparent that there is a steady increase in the recognition and acceptance of monastic agri-food products by a significant number of consumers, who now consciously and systematically buy these products (Mastora, 2023). It is now a fact that the search for traditional and authentic tastes and the choice of small/niche producers who place particular emphasis on quality, are gaining a significant momentum in the agri-food niche market (Charakopoulos, 2017).

Motivation and originality of research

A key motivation for conducting the present study is the fact that no extensive scientific research has been done in this area in recent years. To the best of our knowledge, this is an original study that examines the purchasing behavior of consumers regarding monastic agri-food products. In addition, this study also asks consumers to estimate what they perceive future demand of monastic agri-food products to be in Greece.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used an exploratory sequential mixed methods research design with a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies for data collection (Robson, 2010). This type of mixed method research has two phases: the first involves collecting and analyzing qualitative data, the results of which form the basis of the second phase of quantitative data. Its aim is to explore a research phenomenon and then decide which variables need to be measured quantitatively (Jose F. Molina-Azorin, 2016).

In this way, the understanding and interpretation of the research topic under examination is maximized, and simultaneously, the weaknesses of using a single research paradigm are minimized, on account of the advantages of one data collection method outweighing the disadvantages of the other (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, the research study is strengthened by ensuring validity, since issues can be clarified, as opposed to a single method which might yield plausible but inadequate results (Cohen et al., 2000).

Purposive sampling was chosen for both the qualitative (interview) and the quantitative (questionnaire) research as it was judged by the researchers to be the most appropriate for the specific situation. Purposive sampling presents several advantages as it utilizes the experience and network of acquaintances of the researchers, selects cases typical of the topic under study and saves time and cost during the implementation of the research (Campbell et al., 2020; Kelly, Bourgeault & Dingwall, 2010). On the other hand, the weaknesses of purposive sampling are the subjectivity of researcher (-s), and the non-generalizability of results which may not always be representative (Robson, 2010).

In the first phase of the methodology, as part of the qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted in June 2023 on a purposive sample of five (5) consumers in Northern Greece each lasting 50 to 60 minutes. The interviews constituted a first documentation of consumer opinions and perceptions, which formed the basis for the design of the questionnaire to be used in the quantitative research (second phase). The interviews were structured on two thematic axes, investigating demographics and opinions. To ensure reliability, all the interviews had the same structure and sequence of questions for all the respondents. Finally, the interview data was processed through content analysis which has been established as one of the best research tools in the social sciences (Cohen et al. 2000). Participants' responses were studied intensively, and then, interpreted by categorizing them into coded concepts (Cohen et al. 2000).

Next, the research tool used for the phase of the data collection was a questionnaire. Having taken into account the results of the interviews and based on the objectives of the study, the questionnaire was designed, which sought to be short but comprehensive, so as not to 'tire' the respondents. More specifically, only close-end questions were included in the questionnaire in order to ensure greater accuracy and consistency. It was sent via google forms by email to a sample of 220 people in Northern Greece, of which 196 responded (95 males and 101 females), a response rate of 89% satisfactory for relevant research. The total sample size of respondents who purchased monastic agri-food products was 112 (57.1%; 53 males and 59 females).

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results obtained from the questionnaire survey, are analysed in this section, and the most important indications and reflections that derive from them are presented, accordingly. Table 1 shows the details of the questionnaire respondents. As can be seen, a total of 196 consumers responded, however, 112 (57.1%) stated that they purchase

monastic agri-food products, while the other 84 (42.9%) did not. Of the 112 respondents, 59 were female and 53 male. Regarding their age, the largest group was between 31-40 years at 28.6%, followed by the 41–50-year-old age group at 27.7%. The 21 to 30-year-olds were 18.7%, while the remaining two age groups, 51-60 years and over 61 years was at 12.5% each. Regarding their level of education, the majority (60.7%) stated that they had a higher education degree, 27.7% completed graduate studies, 10.7% were secondary school graduates, while only one participant (0.9%) had primary school education.

Table 1. Research respondents' profile

Gender	M			
Purchase monastic agrifood products	Yes			
Gender	M			
Age	1			
Level of education	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Graduate studies
	1 (0.9%)	12 (10.7%)	68 (60.7%)	31 (27.7%)

Since the frequency of purchase of a product is an important indicator of its acceptance by the consumer public, the questionnaire participants were asked to state how often they purchased monastic agri-food products. It can be seen in Table 2 that 36.6% of the respondents bought agri-food products 2-3 times within a six-month period, and another 31.3% 2-3 times a year. The percentage of respondents who purchased agri-food products from monasteries 2-3 times a month is at 21.4%, while 10.7% did so 2-3 times a week.

Table 2. Frequency of purchasing monastic agri-food products

2-3 times/week	2-3 times/month	2-3 times/six months	2-3 times/year
Respondents (%)	Respondents (%)	Respondents (%)	Respondents (%)
12 (10.7%)	24 (21.4%)	41 (36.6%)	35 (31.3%)

Following, respondents were asked to state how they purchase the various monastic agri-food products. As can be seen in Table 3, the biggest percentage (34.8%) was through online ordering, followed by physical purchase at specialty grocery stores selling monastic products (28.6%), while another 27.7% stated that they mainly bought by

visiting a monastery. The smallest group of consumers (8.9%) purchased agri-food products at food exhibitions held from time to time in various locations.

Table 3. Ways respondents purchase monastic agri-food products

Way/place of purchase	Consumers
Online ordering	30
Physical purchase at special grocery stores	32
Visit to a monastery	31
Food exhibition(s)	10 (8.9%)
Total	112 (100%)

The next questionnaire item the research participants were asked to respond to, was the key question: “*Which of the following reasons draw you to purchase monastic agri-food products?*” They were asked to rate each reason according to importance on a five-point Likert scale (1=not important at all, 2=somewhat important, 3=moderately important, 4=important, 5=very important). It must be noted that the five reasons presented to the respondents to choose from arose from the semi-structured interviews conducted during the qualitative (first phase) of the research. More specifically, as can be seen in Table 4, the reason with the highest mean score is consumers’ belief that monastic agri-food products are of high quality (4.93), closely followed by the consumers’ search for authentic and traditional taste (4.89). The third most important reason which respondents stated with a mean of 3.11 was curiosity to try new products. The last two reasons that led the research participants to purchase monastic agri-food products was religious sentiment and the desire to financially support the monasteries with mean scores of 2.93 and 2.81, respectively.

Table 4. Respondents’ ranking of reasons for purchasing monastic agri-food products

Reason	Mean Score
High quality products	
Authentic and traditional taste	
Curiosity of trying new products	
Religious sentiment	
Financially support of the monasteries	

Finally, survey participants were asked to express their personal market assessment of the changes in the future within the decade demand for monastic agri-food products would be. They were asked to rate their perception on a five-point Likert scale (1=will decrease significantly, 2=will decrease moderately, 3=will remain the same/unchanged, 4=will increase moderately, 5=will increase significantly). The findings in Table 5 show that the highest percentage at 35.7% believe that the demand for monastic agri-food products in the future will increase significantly, with another 33.9% expressing the view that it will increase moderately. In contrast, a comparatively small percentage of respondents (8%) considered that demand in the future will decrease moderately, with a mere 3.6% stating that it will decrease significantly. Lastly, 18.8% of respondents expressed the view that in the future, demand for monastic agri-food products will remain the same.

Table 5. Respondents' estimation of the future demand for monastic agri-food products

Significant increase	Moderate increase	Remain the same	Moderate decrease	Significant decrease
	38		9 (8%)	4 (3.6%)

CONCLUSIONS

Across Greece, there are over 550 active monasteries, some of which have been listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites, and many of which have in recent years developed the production and processing of high-quality agri-food products. This study examined the behaviour of Greek consumers in Northern Greece regarding the frequency, method, and reason for purchasing these niche products, as well as respondents' perceived assessment of future purchasing trends. Although the number of respondents who bought these specialty products was not very high, it was more than half, making it apparent that there is sufficient consumer interest in these products, thus, creating an increasing purchasing trend (Mastora, 2023). Within this context, a growing number of monastic agri-food products have been made available beyond the physical confines of the monastery compound, claiming their own share of the market in the agri-food sector. The fact that many monastic communities have established websites, where they not only present, but in many cases also offer e-commerce services, has greatly contributed to the increase in this market share. A reasonable assumption which can be drawn from the findings of the present research is that online purchasing is becoming the most popular way for Greek consumers, at least in the Northern part of the country, to buy these products, thus, creating a trend, which needs to be researched extensively. Furthermore, the research findings showed that the most important reason for people buying monastic agri-food products is consumers' belief in their high quality, followed by their desire to consume authentic and traditional tastes. Therefore, it can be recommended that monastic communities should capitalize on this market trend by investing in the concept of product quality and emphasizing product differentiation (i.e., small scale farming; traditional farming methods; high-quality, self-produced raw materials; importance given to organic

production, attention to special packaging and branding). Moreover, in accordance with the present findings, consumer estimation of future demand for monastic agri-food products is expected to show a significant increase.

In conclusion, the present research deals with a topical issue, which has not been the subject of extensive scientific research. The findings of this study could be beneficial for all agents involved in the very particular monastic agri-food sector (monasteries, consumers, wholesalers, retailers, producers) to identify target markets or market niches as well as future trends. In this respect, it also contributes to the literature on consumer behaviour in niche markets. The limitations to the research results have to do with sample size, which was relatively small, and the fact that the research was concentrated in one region of Greece. Regarding proposals for further research, it would thus be interesting to conduct similar research in other regions of Greece, studying a much larger sample of consumers. It could even be extended to tourists visiting the country from abroad, as many monasteries have become more accessible to them, too.

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