Attempts to increase public awareness of healthy eating practices in the Nordic countries and beyond seem not to have led to significant changes in patterns of food purchase and consumption (Norden, 2006). Much is understood about nutrition through science, and the relationship of nutrition, diet and health is communicated ubiquitously. However, the question remains, why obesity and non-communicable diseases remain a significant problem in society as a result of detrimental eating habits (WHO, 2011).

From a policy perspective this question is a core focus in the Nordic countries as displayed by a plan of action on health, diet and physical activity focused on healthier food to result in a better quality of life (Norden, 2006). On a global scale this issue is also of core interest to the World Health Organisation in terms of combating the propagation of poor diets and its effects on health and non-communicable diseases (WHO, 2011).

In this paper we present a Nordic perspective which advocates a consumer-driven or in broader terms a society-driven strategy in food perception research, to develop and propose healthy foods which can be tolerated and adopted into the diet in the long term from a human sensory and acceptance perspective (see Dijksterhuis & Byrne 2005).

Food and health research needs to investigate the role that innovation in foods and new basic research technologies could play in counteracting the continuing rise of food-related health problems (see Grunert et al. 2008). Innovation must include sensory-acceptance-focused healthy food development aimed at formulation and reformulation processes with a view to enhanced dietary adoption. With respect to more fundamental research and technologies this must be focused on gaining greater insight and understanding of the mechanisms underlying eating behaviour with respect to personal food identity and culture.

From a research perspective these issues are focal areas of the Pan-European multidisciplinary FoodUnique research Network (www.foodunique.eu). FoodUnique is group of key interdisciplinary research partners (20+), encompassing Location, Identity, Perception and Well-being researchers overseen by the WHO and FAO, aimed at “researching, understanding, defining and promoting the benefits of food uniqueness for healthy eating”. FoodUnique’s interdisciplinary research structure (Figure 1) is driven by the applicability and context of its research, which is synergistically integrated with the key impact stakeholders, policymakers, SMEs, branch organisations, consumer bodies and the public through focused research initiatives.
FoodUnique’s mandate is to focus on the view that to enable delimiting of nutritious unique European food it is fundamental to know the importance of genetic and environmental factors on the phenotypes of the products that reach consumers. This knowledge can help producers choose the optimal combinations of varieties and locations to obtain products that will satisfy the sensory, consumer and health demands of the market. Thus, promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development, particularly in territories across the European Union where unique food is strategically and scientifically under defined and lacking in utilisation in a health promoting context, namely the Nordic countries.

This paper is presented by a partnership led by FoodUnique which is tasked with coordinating Nordic input to the European FP7 Capacities project INPROFOOD, “Towards inclusive research programming for sustainable food innovations” (www.inprofood.eu). The aim is to foster dialogue and mutual learning between industry, academia and civil society, already in the earliest stages of the research processes – directed towards developing innovative approaches (technical and social) for dealing with the food and health challenge. 18 partners from 13 European countries have joined forces in INPROFOOD to address this hugely ambitious task during three years of intensive activities.

Figure 1. Bridging the knowledge gap in the definition of unique food identity re healthy eating

References


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