

CONSUMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS NOVEL FOODS AS ILLUSTRATED BY THE EXAMPLE OF ETHNIC FOOD

Iwona Kowalczyk[✉], Jerzy Gębski, Katarzyna Milewska

Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW, Poland

Abstract. The purpose of this study was to investigate the consumers' attitudes towards selected ethnic cuisines. Accordingly, a quantitative assessment (based on a survey questionnaire) and a qualitative assessment (FGI) were carried out. The quantitative assessment was conducted with 500 respondents selected using quota-sampling, taking their gender and age into consideration. This allowed to determine the frequency of eating selected ethnic cuisines (Japanese, Chinese, Mexican and American), hear the respondents' opinions on the characteristics of specific cuisines, and develop the profiles of consumers moderately or strongly interested in the consumption of the relevant products (referred to as "light users" and "heavy users"). In 2016, focus group interviews were conducted with the two consumer groups (2 interviews for each cuisine). As a result, the interviews provided information about the respondents' motivation to eat ethnic food, their views on the market offering and sources of information about this type of products. Also, it enabled outlining the image of ethnic meal eaters. As shown by this study, Polish consumers differ in their interest in ethnic food which is driven by product availability, moderate prices and access to information. Also, differences were discovered in their attitudes towards specific cuisines, depending on the demographic, economic and social characteristics of the respondents.

Keywords: novel foods, ethnic foods, consumer attitudes

INTRODUCTION

According to a classification proposed by Tuorila (2001), novel foods also include ethnic foods in addition

to functional foods, genetically modified foods, nutritionally modified foods and organic foods.

Narrowly defined, ethnic foods mean foods based on the heritage and culture of an ethnic group who prepares it with local vegetable and animal resources. In a broader sense, it may be defined as foods characteristic of a specific country, region or religion (Kwon, 2015). According to Arvela (2013), in practical terms, ethnic foods are "defined by differences" which means that anything beyond standard products is considered to be ethnic.

The analysts believe the ethnic foods market grows consistently (Howell, 2005; Kwon, 2015) with an estimated annual growth rate of 7% at the end of the 20th century (Jones, 1997). In Poland, this is still a relatively small market, with an estimated value of PLN 300 million at the beginning of the 2010s (Mroziak, 2011). The popularization of other national cuisines is largely affected by the development of ethnic catering concepts (Ćwierotka, 2001), primarily including Italian and Asian Restaurants (Kimura, 2000; Barbas, 2003).

In response to the development of the offering, the demand for ethnic products grows. This is driven by migration, globalization, widespread availability of information and other factors, such as increased attention paid to healthy diets which is the reason behind the interest in eastern cuisines (Mun, 2009), the willingness to diversify the diets (Assantachai and Lekhakula, 2007), and the consumers' search for new sensory experiences (Danhi and Slatkinem, 2009). However, the interest in

[✉]dr hab. Iwona Kowalczyk, Department of Organization and Consumption Economics, Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW, Nowoursynowska 159C St., 02-776 Warszawa, Poland, e-mail: iwona_kowalczyk@sggw.pl

other nations' cuisines is still restricted by insufficient supply, relatively high prices of some ethnical meals and, first of all, the Poles' attachment to their traditional national cuisine and its characteristic meals.

In many studies (Szromnik and Wolanin-Jarosz, 2013; Ertmańska, 2011; Figiel, 2004), Polish consumers were found to demonstrate a high level of ethnocentrism. Also, the research on food neophobia levels (Pilner and Hobden, 1992) shows that, compared to other nations, Polish consumers are more reluctant to new foods (Demattè et al., 2013; Fernández-Ruiz et al., 2013; Schnettler et al., 2013; Socha et al., 2011), while the strongest determinants of acceptance of foodstuffs are age, education, professional activity, income level and nutrition knowledge.

The consumer's attitude towards ethnic meals may also be determined by multiple factors. While it largely results from personal experience related to a specific cuisine, it is very often the consequence of adopted stereotypes about specific nations and their culinary art. In the globalization era, acceptance for culturally different diets seems to be an interesting research topic, and therefore the purpose of this study is to discover the consumers' attitudes towards selected ethnic cuisines.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To attain the research objective, a quantitative study (survey questionnaire) and a qualitative study (FGI) were performed.

The survey was conducted in 2016 with 500 respondents selected using quota-sampling, taking their gender and age into consideration (Table 1).

The respondents were asked how often they eat selected ethnic (Japanese, Chinese, Mexican and American) cuisines at home, catering places or when visiting their families and friends. In this question, a positional 0-to-5 scale was used with: 0 – “I do not eat”; 1 – “I eat on average once a year”; 2 – “I eat several times a year”; 3 – “I eat average once a month”; 4 – “several times a month”; 5 – “I eat at least once a week.” The analysis resulted in calculating the average consumption frequency which was then used to develop the classification (profiles) of consumers moderately or highly interested in eating specific cuisines (referred to as “heavy users” and “light users”). The classification was performed with Classification and Regression Trees (C&RT), a data mining tool (Setlak and Paško, 2013).

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents covered by the quantitative research

Specification	Number	%
Total	500	100
Gender		
Women	260	52
Men	240	48
Age (years)		
16–24 (1*)	75	15
25–34 (2*)	105	21
35–44 (3*)	90	18
45–59 (4*)	135	27
60–75 (5*)	95	19
Place of residence		
Village (1*)	165	33
City with a population of up to 10,000 (2*)	70	14
City with a population ranging from 10,000 to 100,000 (3*)	118	23.6
City with a population over 100,000 (4*)	147	29.4
Education		
Vocational, primary (1*)	40	8
Secondary (2*)	190	38
Higher (3*)	270	54
Net monthly income per capita		
< PLN 1,200 (1*)	55	11
PLN 1,200 – PLN 2,000 (2*)	198	39.6
PLN 2,001 – PLN 4,000 (3*)	165	33
PLN 4,001 – PLN 6,000 (4*)	55	11
> PLN 6,000 (5*)	25	5
No data (6*)	2	0.4
Nutrition knowledge		
Very limited (1*)	15	3
Limited (2*)	85	17
Average (3*)	320	64
Large (4*)	55	11
Very large (5*)	25	5

*Group designation in C&RT diagrams.
Source: own elaboration.

Personal data (age, gender, place of residence, income, education and nutrition knowledge) was used for the purposes of classification.

The characteristics of specific cuisines were assessed in a 0-to-5 semantic scale. The question covered the following:

- taste (0 – very untasty, 5 – very tasty)
- balance (0 – unbalanced, 5 – very balanced),
- visual attractiveness (0 – very unattractive, 5 – very attractive),
- nutritional value (0 – very low, 5 – very high),
- prestige (0 – very low, 5 – very high).

The mean values of selected characteristics of the cuisines under consideration and the mean frequencies of eating these cuisines were compared with the analysis of variance (ANOVA). The statistical analysis of the quantitative assessment was performed with the use of Statistica 12.

The qualitative assessment was performed in 2016 with the use of focus groups. For each cuisine covered by this study, two group discussions were conducted with people who eat a cuisine more (“heavy users”) or less (“light users”) often than the mean consumption frequencies calculated as a part of the quantitative assessment. Each discussion group was composed of 5 to 7 persons (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of respondents covered by qualitative research

Specification	Cuisine			
	Japanese	Chinese	Mexican	American
heavy users	6	7	5	7
light users	5	6	7	6

Source: own elaboration.

The interview scenario covered the following:

- motivation to eat/not to eat the cuisines under consideration,
- assessment of the market supply of products typical of specific cuisines,
- sources of information on products typical of specific cuisines,
- image of consumers eating ethnic cuisines covered by the analysis.

The time of the interviews was 1 to 1.5 hours. The recordings and their transcripts were the basis for the analyses.

RESULTS OF THE QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

As shown by the analysis of the frequency of eating meals covered by the study, American cuisine was the most frequently eaten by the respondents (several times a month). On average, the respondents ate Chinese meals once a month; they declared to eat Mexican meals slightly more frequently than a few times a year. Japanese meals were the least frequently eaten, as confirmed by the results of research by Czarniecka-Skubina and Nowak (2014). Chinese and American meals were usually eaten at home and in catering places. Also, the respondents usually ate American cuisine when visiting their friends (Table 3).

Table 3. Frequency* of eating cuisines covered by the analysis

Place of consumption	Cuisine			
	Japanese	Chinese	Mexican	American
At home	0.55 ^{c**}	1.36 ^a	1.07 ^b	1.25 ^a
When visiting family or friends	0.34 ^c	0.52 ^b	0.58 ^b	0.81 ^a
In catering places	0.80 ^b	1.18 ^a	0.79 ^b	1.60 ^a
Total	1.69	3.06	2.44	3.66

*Scale: 0 – never; 1 – on average once a year; 2 – several times a year, 3 – on average once a month; 4 – several times a month; 5 – at least once a week.

**The same letter repeated in a line means no statistically significant difference at $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: own elaboration.

Based on the analysis of consumer profiles, it was concluded that in the case of Chinese cuisine, there was a near balance between heavy users (HU, 247) and light users (LU, 253). The first differentiating variable for this sample was the income (people with lowest and the highest incomes are HUs while those with medium incomes are LUs). In the case of HUs, the second distribution criterion was “nutrition knowledge” (people with the poorest knowledge are classified as typical LUs while

others are HUs). The third classification level in the HU branch was age: respondents from the 2nd and 4th income groups were HUs while representatives of the 1st and 5th groups were LUs. In summary, as regards Chinese cuisine, heavy users are primarily middle-aged persons with lower or highest levels of income who demonstrate extensive nutrition knowledge, whereas light users are respondents with medium-level incomes, members of youngest and oldest age groups, demonstrating poor nutrition knowledge (Fig. 1).

Japanese cuisine eaters were classed into two LU groups by place of residence. The first one is the population of rural areas and small towns (113 persons) which are obvious LUs; the second one are residents of big cities (387 persons), mostly LUs with a large share of HUs. Generally, Japanese cuisine eaters are mainly light users. The very few heavy users are big city dwellers with rather high incomes and a more extensive nutrition knowledge (Fig. 2).

As regards Mexican cuisine eaters, the first differentiating variable was age, and the oldest population proved to be obvious LUs (5). In other classifications, there was a balance between HUs and LUs. However, persons more interested in Mexican cuisine are residents of larger cities with higher incomes (Fig. 3).

In the case of American cuisine eaters, HUs were slightly more numerous than LUs. In this sample, the first differentiating variable was the respondents' age. While younger people are obvious HUs, the older population are rather LUs. In other classifications of the young population, HUs are dominating. As regards older people, the majority of HUs are men. More generally, American cuisine eaters are young people with medium and poor nutrition knowledge while light users are mainly members of the older groups, women and respondents with medium incomes (Fig. 4).

Having in mind the respondents' opinions on the characteristics of the cuisines under consideration, it was concluded that the taste of Chinese, American and Mexican cuisines received the highest ratings while Japanese meals were the bottom-ranked cuisine. The Chinese and American cuisine were found to be, respectively, the most balanced and the most monotonous one. As regards visual attractiveness, the Japanese cuisine was rated highest by the respondents, followed by the Chinese and Mexican cuisines, whereas the American cuisine was found to be the less attractive one. The Chinese and Japanese meals are considered to have the best nutritional values. The wholesomeness of the Japanese cuisine is also emphasized by Renton (2006)

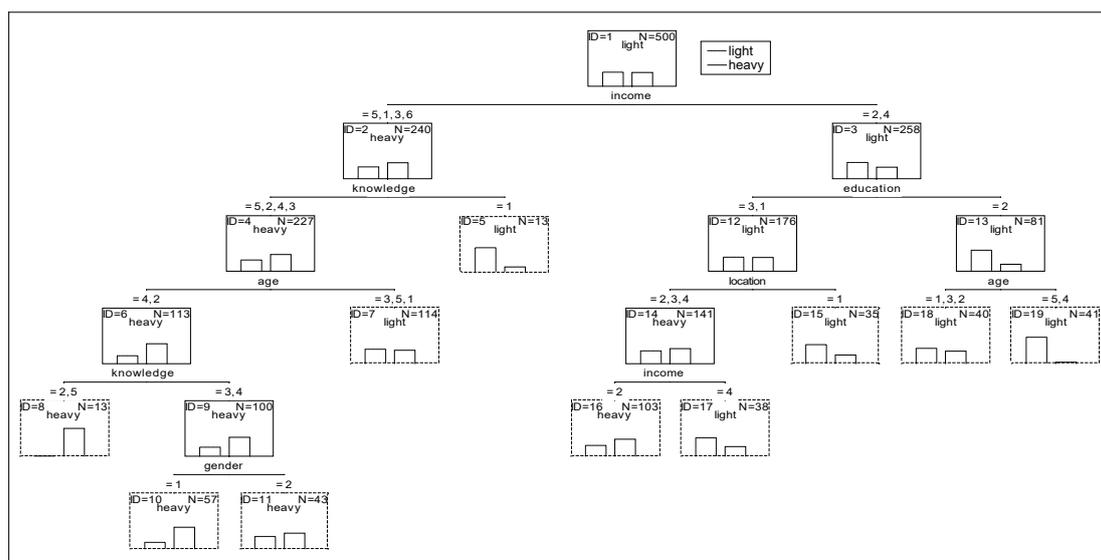


Fig. 1. C&RT for Chinese cuisine eaters
Source: own elaboration.

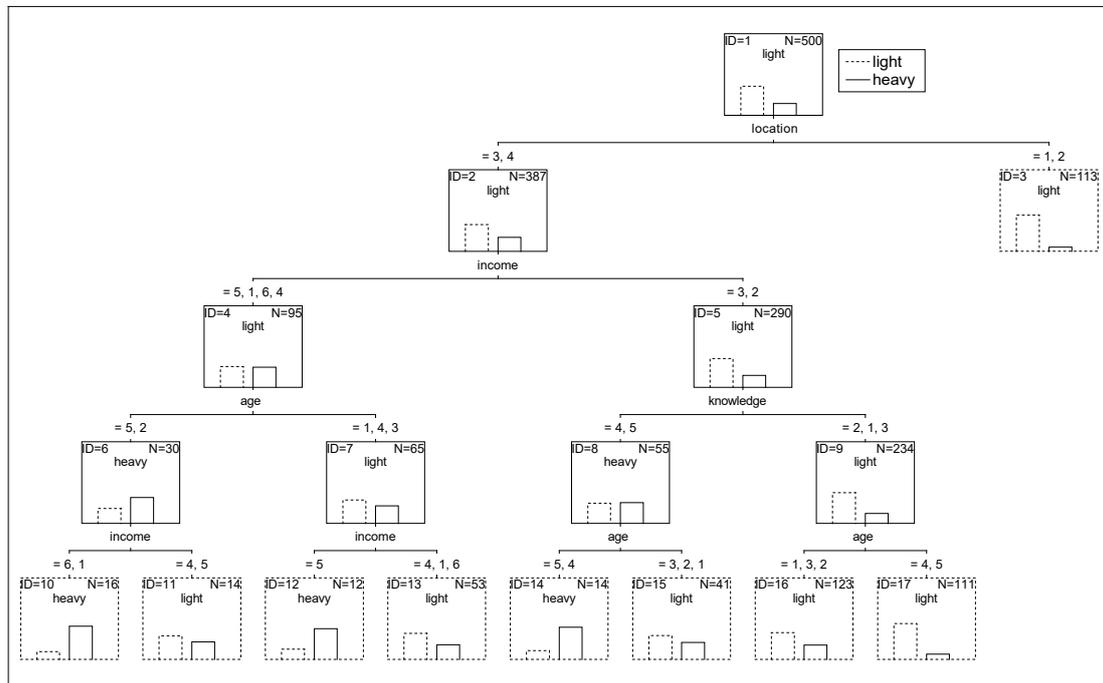


Fig. 2. C&RT for Japanese cuisine eaters
Source: own elaboration.

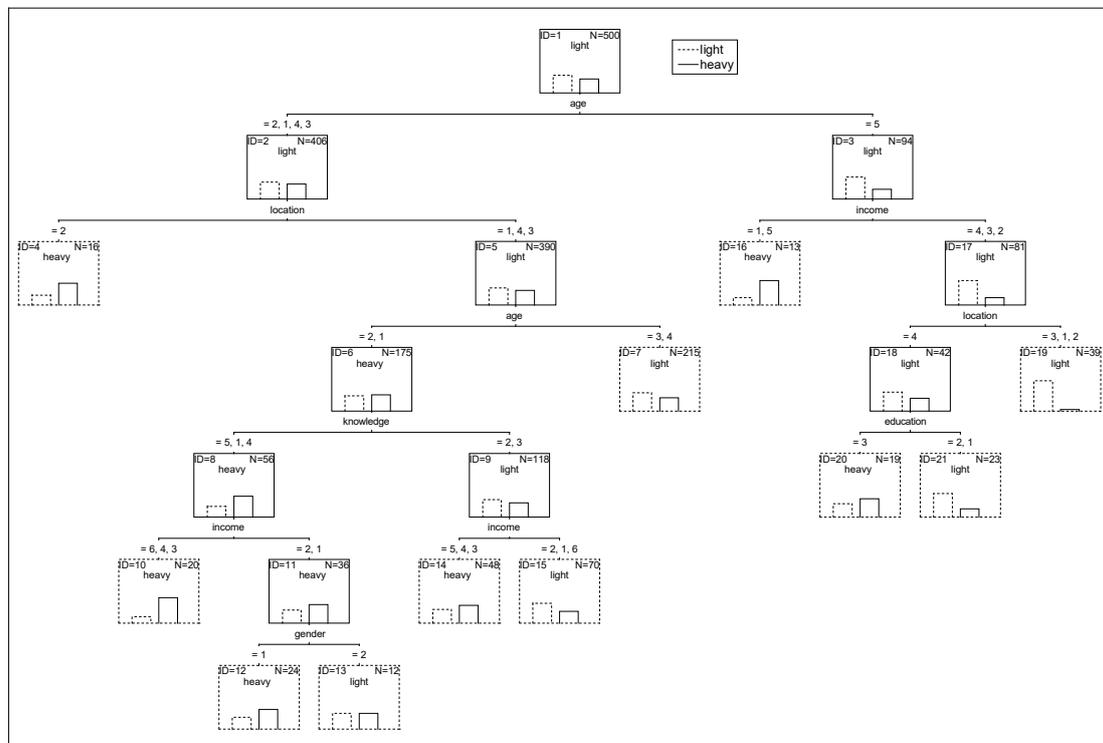


Fig. 3. C&RT for Mexican cuisine eaters
Source: own elaboration.

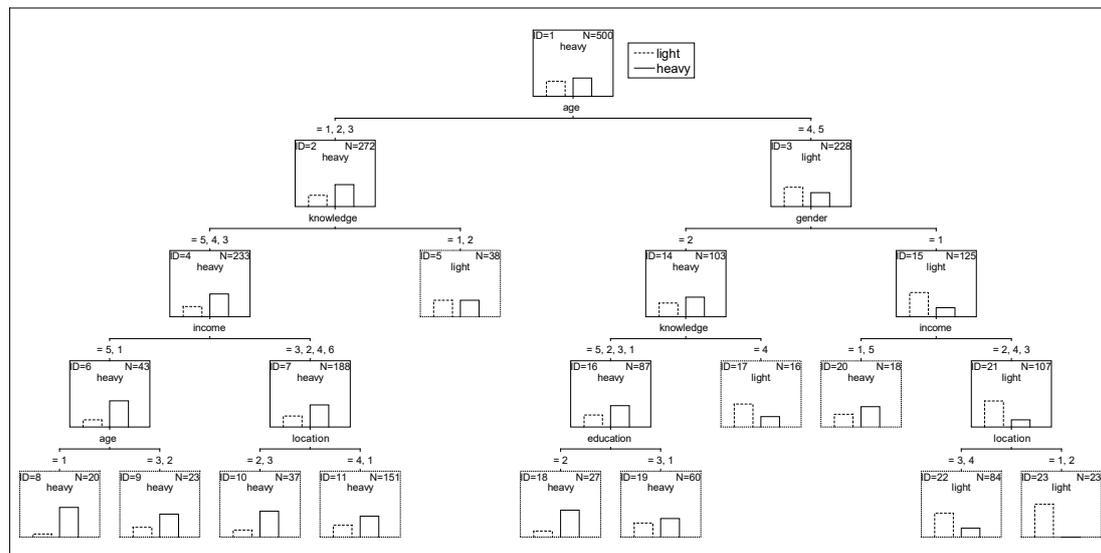


Fig. 4. C&RT for American cuisine eaters
Source: own elaboration.

and Issenberg (2007). In turn, the less healthy options are believed to be the Mexican cuisine, in accordance with an opinion advanced by McEvoy (2006), and the American cuisine, which is probably because American meals are usually associated with fast food (Levenstein, 2003). As regards the prestige, the highest ratings were given to the Japanese cuisine, which may be related to

high prices in Japanese restaurants. Other cuisines were ranked lower (Table 4). As regards the general score, the Chinese and Japanese cuisines received the highest ratings while American meals were ranked at the bottom. A similar classification was obtained in SW Research (Polskie dania..., 2016).

Table 4. Assessment* of the characteristics of the cuisines under consideration

Features	Cuisine			
	Japanese	Chinese	Mexican	American
Taste	2.71 ^{b**}	3.41 ^a	3.18 ^a	3.39 ^a
Balance	2.93 ^b	3.49 ^a	3.09 ^b	2.67 ^c
Visual attractiveness	3.43 ^a	3.18 ^b	3.19 ^b	2.92 ^c
Nutritional value	3.22 ^a	3.36 ^a	2.91 ^b	2.57 ^c
Prestige	3.61 ^a	2.77 ^b	2.84 ^b	2.55 ^b
Total	15.90	16.21	15.21	14.10

*On a scale from 1 (low rank) to 5 (high rank).
**The same letter repeated in a line means no statistically significant difference $p \leq 0,05$.
Source: own elaboration.

RESULTS OF THE QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

The results of the quantitative assessment allowed to improve the knowledge on the consumers' attitudes and opinions on the cuisines under consideration.

Japanese cuisine

According to heavy users, the main motivation to eat Japanese meals was their taste, originality and nutritional value, as well as the trends and recommendations from friends. Younger frequent eaters of Japanese meals emphasized that visiting Japanese restaurants is still trendy, and that serving such meals at home reflects "a good culinary taste and impresses the guests." Another important reason for eating Japanese meals was the relatively wide availability of Japanese restaurants. In turn, people who rarely eat Japanese meals claimed to be discouraged by their specific taste, high price,

concerns about eating raw fish and the related risk of foodborne illness. They also emphasized that preparing Japanese meals by themselves requires a lot of skills and “cannot be done by an average man.”

Both surveyed groups found the availability of Japanese products on the market to be modest. Heavy users claimed that truly original raw materials and intermediates may only be purchased in specialist stores while the products available in supermarkets are of poor quality. Most of the respondents shared the light users' opinion that Japanese meals are difficult to prepare by oneself, and therefore are generally purchased in restaurants, even if served at home.

For the heavy users, the basic source of information on the Japanese cuisine were the offering of catering businesses, friends and Internet. In turn, infrequent Japanese cuisine eaters declared to look for information (though not too often) in the leaflets and Internet.

According to frequent Japanese cuisine eaters, someone who eats such meals is a man of the world; a trendy, modern person open to novelty, with no complexes; a wealthy, educated young or middle-aged person, living in a big city; studying a prestigious course, employed as a manager or practicing a liberal profession. A different description was presented by light users. They believe Japanese cuisine eaters are people who want to stand out of the crowd and follow the trends; hipsters or even people with low self-esteem. As regards economic and demographic features, they are young, rich residents of big cities.

Chinese cuisine

For the heavy users, the basic reasons for eating Chinese meals was their general availability, attractive taste, low price, a high nutritional value resulting from the use of vegetables and fruits, and ease of preparation. However, they noted that many fake Chinese catering businesses operate in the market. Attracting customers with low prices, they serve junk food which does not have much in common with Chinese meals, thus harming the image of the original Chinese cuisine. This argument was also advanced by light users. They claimed that despite the low prices, they are afraid of eating Chinese food when out and about because it makes them think of raw materials of uncertain origin and unhygienic preparation and serving conditions. In turn, they are discouraged from preparing Chinese food at home because they do not know how to properly prepare and season it, and

because other members of their families are not interested in eating it.

The market availability of products used in the Chinese cuisine was found to be good by both respondent groups. However, just as in the case of the Japanese cuisine, heavy users emphasized that truly original products can only be purchased in specialized stores. For all of the respondents, the main source of information on the Chinese cuisine were market observations, their friends and the Internet.

Heavy users believe Chinese cuisine eaters to be persons curious of the world, interested in the Eastern culture; spiritual people who look for a new culinary experience. As regards economic and demographic characteristics, they find Chinese cuisine eaters to be young people with an average economic and education status; mid-level white-collar workers. Meanwhile, light users describe them as persons with unsophisticated culinary tastes who do not pay much attention to nutrition and eat junk food; rather young, less prosperous, not too educated, lower-level employees.

Mexican cuisine

Most of heavy users declared that their first contact with the Mexican cuisine was incidental: they received an invitation from friends or discovered a new restaurant. They were encouraged to continue eating that cuisine by the specific taste and originality of meals, and by the atmosphere of restaurants where such meals are served, because a vast majority of respondents ate Mexican meals only in catering places. Meanwhile, light users declared not to eat Mexican cuisine due to low availability. Also, they were afraid of the pungent taste and of potential health consequences.

Both groups found the market availability of Mexican cuisine products to be very limited. As emphasized by light users, even if such products were available in stores, they would not see them because they lack essential knowledge and such goods are not conspicuously marked in commercial establishments.

The main source of information on the Mexican cuisine were friends who had tasted it mainly in catering places. Occasionally, Internet and advertising leaflets were cited as a source of information.

According to heavy users, a Mexican cuisine eater is an original person, an experimenter who follows his/her own opinion and taste and who pays attention to where and how he/she eats. In economic and demographic

terms, it is a middle-aged, rather educated person with middle- or upper-level incomes; a student or an employee working in a professional position which requires creativity and individualism. Light users described Mexican cuisine eaters as original persons bored with their lives who look for new experiences and want to stand out from the crowd; rather young, wealthy and educated residents of big cities.

American cuisine

For frequent American cuisine eaters, the basic motivation to eat American meals was their availability, taste and low price. As emphasized by this group of respondents, American food (ribs, steaks, French fries, chicken, hamburgers, hot dogs) has somehow become a part of the Polish tradition and it is difficult not to eat it, even if one wants to avoid it. It has been argued that the general availability of hot dogs and hamburgers (offered by street food booths, gas stations and shops) makes the population somehow “forced to eat American meals.” However, others opined that the extended offering is the response to the needs reported by the customers. To light users, American meals usually mean junk food, and therefore they declare not to eat it because it is unhealthy and untasteful. They also suggested that access to such meals should be formally restricted.

When asked of the market availability, both groups found it to be sufficient. However, some heavy users claimed that this catering offering should be “more authentic” and include less known meals which could change the Poles’ poor opinion on the American food.

According to both heavy users and light users, a typical American food eater is an average Pole “with no specific requirements for culinary experiences” who does not pay attention to his/her diet, lives “a simple life of an American farmer,” organizes barbecue parties and watches TV. He/she is slightly overweight or obese, wearing casual jeans clothing. In economic and demographic terms, he/she is impecunious or moderately wealthy; a young or middle-aged person with average education levels, living in a small town or less prosperous districts of big cities.

SUMMARY

As shown by the research, the ethnic cuisines under consideration were eaten by the respondents at different

frequencies. American meals were the most frequently eaten (several times a month). On average, the respondents ate Chinese meals once a month; they declared to eat Mexican meals slightly more frequently than a few times a year. Japanese meals were the least frequently eaten. When it comes to taste, the highest ratings were given to the Chinese, American and Mexican cuisines. The Chinese and Japanese cuisines are believed to be, respectively, the most balanced one and the most visually attractive one. Also, both of them were found to offer the best nutritional values, whereas the Japanese cuisine was considered to be the most prestigious one. What should be noted is that while the American cuisine is highly popular, all of its characteristics, except for taste, are ranked at the bottom of the scale. The reason for this inconsistency seems to be the high availability of catering businesses offering American meals and their affordability.

The main reasons for eating (or not eating) the cuisines under consideration were the taste, price and availability. The market offering of products of particular cuisines was found to be good in the case of the Chinese and American cuisines, and poor in the case of the Japanese and Mexican cuisines. The main sources of information on the cuisines were the offering of catering businesses, friends, Internet and advertising leaflets.

Based on the qualitative assessment, it was concluded that the profiles of frequent and infrequent eaters of specific cuisines are highly diversified. However, in more general terms, several characteristics shared by people more interested in ethnic meals may be identified, namely: young or middle age, medium and high income levels, medium or extensive nutrition knowledge, and living in big cities. This is only partially confirmed by the descriptions presented during group interviews. In the case of all cuisines under consideration, heavy users are believed to be young people, while high incomes, a place of residence in big cities and tertiary education were characteristic of frequent eaters of Japanese and Mexican cuisines.

As shown by this study, Polish consumers differ in their interest in ethnic food which is driven by product availability, moderate prices and access to information. Also, differences were discovered in their attitudes towards specific cuisines, depending on the demographic, economic and social characteristics of the respondents.

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