UFC-Que Choisir survey on “traditional” food - Nutri-Score doesn’t stigmatize our culinary heritage!

While the European Commission will decide by the end of the year on the format of the mandatory nutritional labelling of food products, some food industry actors are claiming that so-called “traditional products” would be unduly penalised by Nutri-Score. To debunk this assertion, UFC-Que Choisir is releasing today a survey conducted on 588 samples (of 310 traditional products), submitted by its local groups, that shows that nearly two-thirds of them receive a favourable score with Nutri-Score. In order for consumers to systematically benefit from this reliable tool to balance their diet, the Association is sending the results of its survey to the European Commission and urges it to ignore the fallacious arguments of food manufacturers by making Nutri-Score mandatory throughout Europe.

The investigation of UFC-Choisir contradicts the unfounded argument of manufacturers

In the face of a worrying increase in overweight and obesity (1), its deleterious consequences on health and the inaction of Member States recently denounced by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2), the European authorities have planned to impose a nutritional label on the front of pack of food products, whose format should be defined by the end of 2022. In this context, it would be logical to choose Nutri-Score, a simple and rigorous display, approved by scientists (3) and consumers (4), and already adopted in France and five other EU countries.

Determined to hide the low, or even poor, nutritional quality of their products and refusing any improvement in their recipes, some food manufacturers are working hard to discredit Nutri-Score. Their lobbyists, using the “sympathy capital” that European food heritage enjoys, claim that its calculation would be wrong because it would systematically give bad scores to traditional products, citing in particular Roquefort cheese, Parma ham and olive oil.

Wishing to shed light on this specious argument, UFC-Que Choisir’s local groups have collected 588 samples, representing 310 traditional products (5) of their regions, in order to calculate their Nutri-Score. The results show that far from being systematically poorly rated, our traditional products are, on the contrary, distributed over all the Nutri-Score classes.

A large majority of traditional products obtain favourable Nutri-Scores

A large majority of the products surveyed (62%) have a Nutri-Score A, B and C. In most cases, their consumption is even encouraged because of their better nutritional quality. There are 121 food products with an A and B rating, as well as olive oils with a C rating (7 products) which are recommended over other fats.
Among these products whose consumption is promoted, we find no less than 30 traditional dishes that are very well balanced, such as the Flemish hoespot, the Auvergne potée (stew) or the famous cassoulet from Castelnaudary. Then there are meat and poultry (34 products), with, for example, PDO Camargue beef, Label Rouge Limousin veal, PDO Bigorre black pork, or PDO Mont-Saint-Michel salt meadow lamb. Finally, there is a large number (37 products) of vegetables, fruits and legumes such as endive from the North, PGI lettuce from Nantes, PDO red apricot from Roussillon, PGI Quercy melon, PDO green lentils from Puy and PGI beans from Vendée.

At the same time, 73 traditional food products were awarded a Nutri-Score C, such as Alsatian spaetzle pasta, Burgundy parsley ham, Breton far cake and Franche Comté cancoillotte cheese.

Data we collected from the field speak for themselves: the manufacturers' argument that Nutri-Score stigmatizes local products doesn't stand!

**Nutri-Score D and E: beware of misinterpretations**

Contrary to what opponents of Nutri-Score claim, it appears that traditional Nutri-Score D or E food products represent barely more than one third of our sample. This scientifically based classification is perfectly justified, since it reflects the high levels of saturated fat and salt present in certain sausages.
and patés, such as rillettes de Tours and knack sausages from Alsace, or certain cheeses, such as Roquefort or Bleu des Causses.

However, it is inaccurate to say that these products rated E and D are stigmatized by Nutri-Score. It should be kept in mind that these D and E ratings, which are rarely displayed on the products that receive them (6), are in no way intended to denigrate them, nor to prohibit their consumption. They only mean that it is recommended to consume them in moderate quantities and at reasonable frequencies. Provided that these recommendations are respected, UFC-Que Choisir reminds us that these products fit in a diversified and balanced diet.

While the WHO has just recommended to European authorities to implement a mandatory simplified nutritional labelling, UFC-Que Choisir strives for the selection of a truly effective and non-stigmatizing tool to help consumers. As the Nutri-Score is by far the model that best meets these requirements, the Association:

- Sends the results of its investigation to the European Commission and asks it to resist the false arguments of industrial lobbies and make the Nutri-Score mandatory at the European level;
- Warns the food industry of their responsibility in maintaining the opacity on unbalanced food products.

(1) Among children, the obesity and overweight rates in France have increased sixfold since the 1960s and now reach 17%. Among adults, one person in two in France is concerned. The Obépi-Roche 2020 study for the Ligue contre l’obésité (League against obesity) also shows an increase in obesity among adults in recent years.

(2) The World Health Organization indicates that no member state in Europe has succeeded in "halting the progression of obesity" - WHO European regional obesity report 2002 - May 2022.

(3) In 2015, the High Council for Public Health (HCSP) came out in favour of the Nutri-Score. In 2015 and 2016, the French National Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health Safety (Anses) confirmed that the Nutri-Score classifications are in line with the official nutritional recommendations of the National Nutrition and Health Program (PNNS).

(4) The survey conducted in 2016 by the Ministry of Health in 60 supermarkets, as well as a practical test with consumers, demonstrated the superiority of the Nutri-Score over all other labelling models tested.

(5) In order to avoid duplication, which would have affected the representativeness of the study, when several references were found for the same traditional product, the most frequently encountered Nutri-Score was selected.

(6) Nutri-Score "E" food products represent only one percent of the products of major national brands displaying this logo. Source: Study "Three-year evaluation of the Nutri-Score nutritional logo" – French Ministry of Health - February 2021.