

Consumer Attitudes Towards Alternative Diets

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Because poor nutrition and related diseases are common in Germany, there have been calls from many different sides for a change in eating habits. Besides the dietary recommendations of the German Society for Nutrition (DGE, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ernährung, 1989), many alternative diets have been proposed including, e.g., the "Vollwert" diet, vegetarian diets, Schnitzer's diet, Hay's diet, anthroposophic and macrobiotic diets. Common to these is the priority of vegetable and (ovo)-lacto-vegetable food over meat, which is largely or completely avoided. Cereals, especially "whole" grains, and fresh fruit and vegetables are seen as particularly important for human health. Sugar, salt, coffee, (black) tea, and nicotine and alcohol, on the other hand, should be avoided. All dietary recommendations, except those of the DGE, are based on the principle that food should be "as natural as possible"; therefore produce of alternative farming is preferred to industrially processed food and food containing additives.

The various diets differ mainly in their origins, reasons, and aims. The dietary recommendations of the DGE which are based on scientific physiological knowledge aim solely at the maintenance of human health. The diet according to Schnitzer as well as Hay's diet also claim remedial effects on disorders which in fact cannot be cured by dietary measures. Some of the dietary rules the authors propagate have not been verified scientifically. In contrast to these, "Vollwert", vegetarian anthroposophic, and macrobiotic diets aim not only at human health and arguments in support of these diets are not merely physiological ones. Adherents of the "Vollwert" diet consider also ecologic, social and economic effects of the nutritional behaviour. Vegetarians do without meat and other food of animal origin as eggs (lacto-vegetarians) and eggs and milk (vegans) mainly for ethical and esthetic reasons. Macrobiotic and anthroposophic diets are part of comprehensive ideologies which define the specific nature of food in their own way.

In the last few years a good deal has been written by the mass media about these diets. "Vollwert" meals and "Vollwert" food are offered in canteens and retail shops. So far, however, it has remained open whether "alternative" diets are indeed so well known among the population as one might assume, and to what extent these diets have influenced its eating habits.

The study summarized here was conducted for the Minister of Rural Areas, Food, Agricultural and Forestry of the Land, Baden-Württemberg (Hess & Flick, 1991). The aim of the study was to determine the familiarity of alternative diets among private households in Baden-Württemberg and, furthermore, to find out how

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much practical experience with these diets is available in private households. We also sought information about the effects which the adherence to alternative diets has on selection, purchase and consumption behaviour, and about the compliance with the dietary rules. Finally, we were interested in finding out what differences exist in the sociodemographic characteristics, nutritional education and attitudes of persons having different degrees of knowledge and practical experience with alternative diets.

Interviews were carried out in November 1989 by GFM-GETAS (a marketing research institute) with 1,002 randomly selected persons living in Baden-Württemberg, who were above 16 years of age and in charge of their households.

Knowledge of alternative diets

Most (93%) of the persons interviewed knew at least one alternative diet by name. In most cases this was either the vegetarian or the "Vollwert" diet, but only some of them had detailed knowledge about these diets. Only 14 to 20% knew the various forms of vegetarianism such as the vegan, the lacto-, and the ovo-lacto-vegetarian diets, and only 15% of the interviewed associate the term "Vollwert" diet with the names of specific authors or propagators. Other alternative diets and the DGE recommendations were less known.

A simultaneous nationwide poll of 2,000 homemakers by GFM-GETAS shows that the knowledge of alternative diets is above average in Baden-Württemberg. This may be explained by the fact that many of these diets originate from this region.

Experiences with alternative diets

One fifth (19%) of the sample not only knew alternative diets but had also tried them. One-third of them dropped the alternative diet again, mostly after less than 6 months. Reasons for returning to conventional food were mainly organizational problems such as non-compliance of the family or too much time and labour involved in the preparation of food, and the restrictions imposed: doing without certain foods was found to be hard.

Of the 12% of the interviewed who still adhered to an alternative diet, only 60% of them said they observed the dietary rules strictly or very strictly. This corresponds to 7% of the homemakers in Baden-Württemberg. The longer they have been on the diet (7 years on the average), the stricter they are in complying with the rules. Asked for their reasons for complying with alternative diets, the respondents stated mainly health arguments, e.g. less exposure to harmful substances and prevention of disease, but also ethical, religious or ideologic arguments were also given, the latter mainly by vegetarians.

Nutritional behaviour of respondents on alternative diets

There were differences between those on alternative diets and those on conventional diets in the reported consumption frequency of nearly all foods and meals which were included in the food frequency questionnaire (60 in total). These differences reflect the various dietary rules (Table 1).

Among the food consumed daily by persons on alternative diets are dairy products, fresh fruit and vegetables and wholemeal bread; leaf vegetables, cooked

vegetables, potatoes, muesli and cold-pressed vegetable oils are consumed almost daily. However, the frequency of consumption especially of milk, cereals and cereal products and of legumes by those on alternative diets is not as high as the dietary rules would lead one to expect.

Adherents of alternative diets paid more attention than persons living on conventional food to aspects such as content of preservatives and of valuable ingredients and the kind of farming, packaging, and country of origin of the produce (Table 2). Interest in prices and in sensory aspects of foods and meals was below average.

Furthermore, most persons living on alternative diets bought produce from organic farming (85%) and did so more frequently than persons living on conventional food (23%).

Table 1

Eating habits of respondents on alternative diets, from answers to the question "How often do you eat the food items listed below: several times per day, once a day, more than twice a week, once to twice a week, several times per month, seldom, never?"

Respondents on alternative diet	
Eat more often than others	Eat less often than others
	<i>Animal produce</i>
Raw milk Yoghurt, sour milk, etc. (unsweetened)	All kinds of meat, offal, sausages UHT-milk Yoghurt, sour milk, etc. (sweetened)
	<i>Fats</i>
Vegetable-oil spread	Vegetable oil Margarine
	<i>Fruit and vegetables</i>
Fresh fruit Raw and salad vegetables Germs, sprouts Cooked vegetables Soy-products, nuts, kernels Cooked/steamed potatoes	Preserved fruit Canned vegetables
	<i>Cereals</i>
Fresh or prepared muesli Wholemeal bread	Fried potatoes, potato snacks
Brown rice Cereal dishes (barley, sorghum, maize, buckwheat etc.) Wholemeal cereal-based spreads, baked foods	White bread/rolls, brown bread White rice
	<i>Sweets</i>
Honey (as sweetener)	White-flour baked foods Sugar, jam, chocolate spreads Desserts and confectionery
	<i>Beverages</i>
Malt coffee Mineral water Fruit tea, fruit juice	Coffee, tea, cocoa Lemonade, coca cola, etc.

TABLE 2
Properties of the food especially important when buying and eating food

Criteria for selection*	Percentage ^a of respondents on	
	Conventional diet (n=833)	Alternative diet (n=117)
Freshness	58	66
Price	57	29
Quality	25	16
Content of preservatives	15	39
Taste	14	7
Content of nutrients	12	19
Brand	9	5
Appearance	9	4
Health	8	5
Packaging	7	13
Country of origin	6	19
Kind of farming	4	32
Other criteria	20	27
No answer	5	1

*More than one answer possible.

Characteristics of respondents on alternative diets

The degree of familiarity and use of alternative diets was above average among women, highly educated persons, persons on part-time jobs and those with a high net income. Knowledge of alternative diets was above average among female and male homemakers and among persons undergoing training. Alternative diets were followed to an above-average extent also by the age group 30-49 years, people living in households with children and those living in larger cities.

Knowledge and practical use was high among those who used relatively many sources of nutritional information, who knew much about nutrition and were open to recommendations for changes in nutrition, even if these imply a limited selection of foods, and who took a more negative attitude towards conventional diets than others. Present adherents of alternative diets differed in their attitudes from those who once followed an alternative diet, but had returned to conventional food.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the great attention that is paid to "alternative nutrition" in the media, and the wide availability of alternative food, the majority of people in Germany have not accepted alternative diets so far. Adherents of alternative diets are a relatively small group of people, mostly having a special interest in nutritional questions and corresponding nutritional attitudes.

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