Consumers’ sensory perception and acceptability of hibiscus drinks: a cross-cultural study in Europe

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• Hibiscus var. sabdariffa drinks are rich in nutrients and their consumption is widespread in Africa and Asia, but they are still quite unknown among European consumers.
• The sensory quality and acceptability of a hibiscus infusion, prepared freshly from dried calyces according to Senegalese tradition, and two new hibiscus drinks developed by the African Food Tradition Revisited by Research (AFTER) project – an ultra-vacuum concentrate (UVc) and an improved syrup (REs) – were evaluated by comparable consumer samples in France (n=113), Portugal (n=113) and United Kingdom (n=124), between March and July 2014.
• Similar sensory characterizations and preference profiles were obtained across countries, although French participants were generally the most appreciative of hibiscus drinks.
• The most frequently selected CATA descriptors were fruity and red fruits, strongly suggesting that participants misidentified the drink as a red fruits beverage. Oppositely, tisane and new were among the less frequently chosen terms, suggesting consumers in general did not recognize the drink as an extract of an unknown plant.

Materials and Methods
• Participants were non-probably recruited in France (Montpellier, n=113, Portugal (Porto, n=133) and United Kingdom (Rochester, n=124), according to their willingness and availability to participate in the study. 98% were European or European residents. All participants consumed fruit beverages and 95% consumed fruit beverages or cold tisanes at least monthly.
• The questionnaire was written in French, Portuguese and English. To gather evaluative relevant information and maximize the equivalence between questionnaires, exploratory local focus groups were performed. XLSTAT (Addinsoft) software was used to analyze data.
• Sample acceptability was assessed by overall liking ratings provided on a 9-point hedonic scale. Hierarchical cluster analysis (Ward’s method) was used to segment consumers accordingly. Sensory attribute – red colour, sweet and acid taste – intensities, relatively to participants’ ideal level, were measured by attribute ratings provided on a 3-point JAR scale.
• Sensory profiles were obtained with CATA questions. These entailed 24 sensory or hedonic-oriented descriptors were drawn from previous focus groups held in Senegal and in Europe. Besides the three hibiscus drinks, participants were asked to use CATA question to describe their ideal beverage. The samples discriminant terms (p ≤ 0.05) were analyzed and subsequently submitted to Multiple Factorial Analysis (MFA) and Correspondence Analysis (CA).

Conclusions
• Overall liking assessments were complemented by attribute intensity evaluations and sensory profiling to provide important insights about hibiscus drinks’ perception and acceptability by consumers in three European countries. In spite of their varying sensory characteristics, the new drinks developed by AFTER were all moderately liked by Portuguese, United Kingdom and French consumer samples.
• Important drivers for further sensory optimization of the new hibiscus drinks were uncovered through the employment of JAR, CATA and Ideal Profiling techniques.
• Besides exploring further opportunities for enhancing the sensory profiles of the new drinks in line with European taste, future studies should also investigate the levels of marketing activities (pricing, distribution and promotional information – including nutritional and healthiness attributes) which will best support their successful introduction in European markets.