

## CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR ON THE VENISON MARKET IN LATVIA

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**Abstract.** A study on consumer behaviour was conducted to identify trends in demand on the venison market, to ascertain consumer perception regarding venison products, and to get an understanding of consumer opinions on possibilities to purchase and consume venison and on qualitative characteristics of venison. The survey was performed from 15 December 2011 to 25 May 2012. Randomly selected respondents who had ever purchased and/or consumed venison were questioned during the research. The research aim is to identify the factors affecting the behaviour of venison consumers. The survey results showed that the consumers regarded the quality and taste aspects of venison as the most significant criteria for purchasing venison; yet, the majority of them pointed that they used an opportunity to purchase quality venison at a lower price, i.e. by avoiding retailers. The consumers were informed about raising deer on Latvian farms as well as qualitative characteristics of venison. However, they had no information on the possibilities to purchase venison, the sale sites, and the market price of venison. The consumers pointed that the best venison purchase sites were specialised meat stores, farm product fairs, and deer farms as well as the fact that selling food through the Internet is not developed. Although consumers are increasingly interested in using venison in their diet, there is no real point of contact among producers, processors, and buyers. Venison and especially venison products are available to consumers in Latvia in limited quantities, and the possibilities to purchase such products are limited and episodic. The respondents' replies to a question on the origin, value, and purchase possibilities of venison products indirectly revealed that the consumers were poorly informed about them.

**Key words:** deer farming, venison market, consumer perception.

**JEL code:** O13

### Introduction

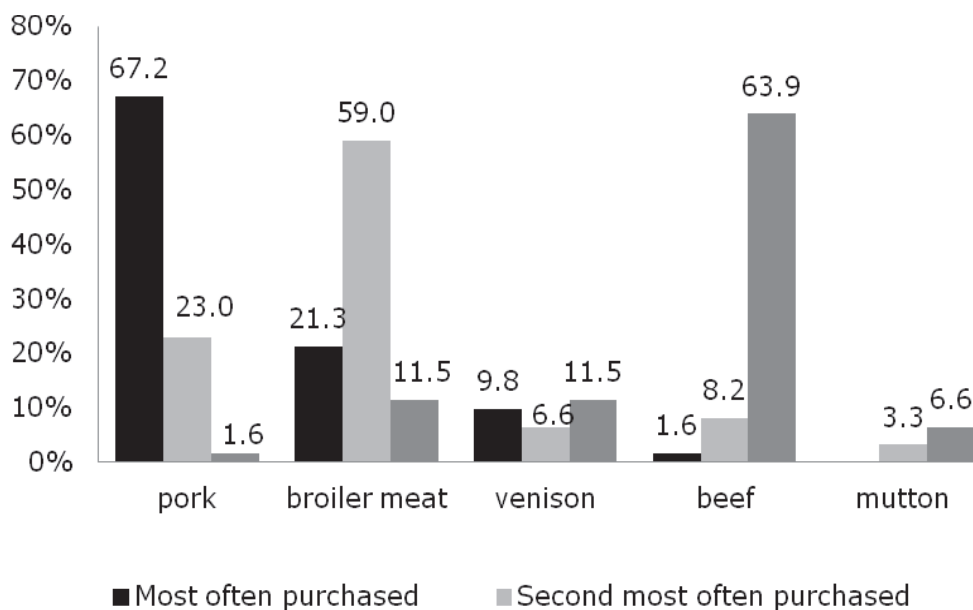
Deer farming is a new and non-traditional industry in Latvia, thus, one may assume that consumers are not or are insufficiently informed about the purchase possibilities of venison produced in Latvia and the positive effect of it on human health. Revealing of the motives of present and potential customers, now and in the near future, might be crucial regarding the consumption of goods and services provided by deer farming. Actually, a question has to be answered – what final consumers gain from consuming goods or services provided by deer farming. The satisfaction of consumers with meat quality has been studied quite extensively. Consumers increasingly start thinking of using healthy and safe products in their diet. Of the assortment of meat products on the market, consumers prefer fresh, lean, juicy, and good smelling products of high nutritional value (Dransfield, 2001, 2003; Ngapo, Dransfield, 2006). These studies emphasise that product recognition and consumer knowledge are important, as consumers are motivated to buy more appropriate food products (Cottingham, Winkler, 2007).

Consumer behaviour is closely related with economic growth in a country (Gaile-Sarkane et al., 2009). Since the society is stratified by income, consumers differently value the same product. Obtaining knowledge on consumer needs, factors, and motives affecting consumer behaviour is a way of providing the competitiveness and development of corresponding businesses. Consumer behaviour has to be understood to satisfy fully consumer needs. Making a purchase decision and consumer behaviour are a complicated process, yet, to make it easily perceivable, general (or

easily perceivable) consumer behaviour models are often available (Sheth, 2011). Consumer behaviour regarding purchasing food products is considered variable and difficult to predict; thus, creating problems for producers in identifying market trends (Grunert et al., 1997). To analyse the decision making process in detail, first, it has to be found out why consumers make corresponding decisions and what they wish to gain. From the viewpoint of consumers, a range of causes for their choice may be mentioned: income, knowledge and information obtained, products consumed; security in future as well as lifestyle, occupation, social status etc. (Sheth, Parvatiyar, 1997; Kotler et al., 2008; Malhorta, 2006).

Based on consumer behaviour studies (Kotler et al., 2008), it is stressed that consumer behaviour on the meat market is complicated. It has to be emphasised that the meat of non-traditional agricultural animals, including venison, is a group of products not known to the target audience, as consumers do not know their qualities and they are not available at sale sites. At the same time, a wide assortment of meat is available, and, according to studies, consumers prefer traditional products such as pork and poultry. Consumers usually do not notice small differences among similar and homogenous goods (Kotler et al., 2008). It means that inadequacies in consumer behaviour have to be avoided. From the practical point of view, consumers have to be informed about the characteristics of venison and other information related to venison as a quality product – its differences from other similar products, its availability on the market, its country of origin etc. – has to be provided freely. Kotler et al. (2008) stresses that buyers, obtaining information on

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Source: author's calculations based on the survey results

Fig. 1. Types of meat purchased and/or used in the diet most often in Latvia

a product of certain type, tend to reduce the risk related with their purchase as well as increase their satisfaction with the product.

It has to be noted that, for instance, in Great Britain where deer farming as one of the agricultural industries exists from the beginning of the 1970s, only 30% of respondents know about health aspects of venison (high contents of proteins and omega fat acids, low contents of fat and cholesterol) (Annual Review, 2010).

Quality is a significant criterion in purchasing meat, thus, it is important to find out the perception and knowledge of consumers on the quality characteristics of venison, which, at the same time, influence trends in demand. A survey on consumer perception was performed to identify the demand for venison on the market and to ascertain consumers' perception of products of deer farming. The research **aim** is to identify the factors affecting the behaviour of venison consumers. To achieve the aim, the following **tasks** were set:

- 1) to investigate the types of meat purchased most often and the criteria for their purchase;
- 2) to analyse the consumer awareness of venison and the possibilities to purchase it;
- 3) to identify the motivation of consumers to purchase venison and its products in the market.

## Materials and methods

In this research, deer farming is defined as a relatively new and non-traditional industry of agriculture. Foreign experience shows that in a situation when information is insufficient or incomplete for analysing a new and non-traditional industry, a survey of this industry's stakeholders (producers, processors, sellers etc.) may be used (Mjelde et al., 1992; Gillespie et al., 1998). A quantitative survey of consumers was carried out to get an understanding of consumer opinions on the possibilities to purchase and consume venison and on the quality characteristics of venison (Churchill et

al., 2010; Aaker et al., 2007). The research object is consumers who have ever purchased and/or consumed venison. The survey was carried out electronically, and randomly selected individuals participated in it; 368 questionnaires were received back, of which 349 were valid. The survey included questions on meat purchase habits, opinions on meat quality criteria, and the use of venison in the diet. To exclude respondents who do not fit the research object and to verify whether a potential respondent complies with the chosen criteria, questions for the selection of respondents were included in the survey. The survey included open questions enabling respondents to explain their replies in detail. To answer closed questions, respondents had several options, which were important to them, for their reply. Respondents' attitudes to assertions regarding deer farming were evaluated by using questions with an evaluation scale and hierarchical questions. The questionnaire ended with classification questions on age, education etc. The survey was performed from 15 December 2011 to 25 May 2012. The data obtained were processed by employing Microsoft Excel statistical methods.

## Results and discussion

### 1. Characteristics of the purchase and consumption of meat

Initially, the survey established how consumers made their decision to make a purchase. In the questionnaire, consumers were asked questions about the type, price, quality, and choice criteria of meat purchased most often (Figure 1). As regards the questionnaire's question on the most frequently purchased and/or consumed type of meat, 67.2% of the consumers admitted that they most often bought and consumed pork, 21.3% preferred broiler meat, and 9.8% bought or consumed hunted animal meat.

According to researchers (Jemeljanovs, Sterna, 2008; Partikas un lauksaimniecibas..., 2006), pork is consumed owing to historical consumption traditions in Latvia.

The respondents pointed to broiler meat as the second most purchased type of meat (59.0%), which may be explained by the availability of this meat at supermarkets and specialised meat stores (Kekava, Bauska, Lielzeltini) at a relatively low price (Figure 1). Pork as the second most popular meat was preferred by 23.0% of the respondents. An inverse relationship may be observed in this case – 80.5% of the respondents for whom pork was the most popular meat chose broiler meat as the second most popular meat, while 92.3% of the respondents for whom broiler meat was the most popular meat preferred pork as the second most popular meat. It may be explained by the availability of pork and broiler meat and the relatively low price on these types of meat as well as food consumption habits in Latvia.

As regards wild animal meat, 6.6% of the respondents pointed to it as the second most preferred meat and for 11.5% it was the third most purchased meat. The author believes that such indicators are good considering the present development of deer farming in Latvia.

The Latvian State Institute of Agrarian Economics (LVAEI) reported in its study "Research, Analysis and Prospects of Food Consumption in the Territory of the Republic of Latvia" conducted in 2007 that 53% of the respondents purchased food products at supermarkets, 37% shopped at small food stores, and 7% made their daily purchases on the marketplace, which, to a great extent, determine meat purchase and consumption traditions in Latvia.

In the survey conducted by the author, 67.7% of the respondents pointed to specialised meat stores as the most popular site for purchasing meat, for 57.4% it was a supermarket, 44.3% preferred farm product fairs, and 37.7% purchased meat directly from meat producers, while only 1.6% of the respondents mentioned the Internet as a way of buying meat. Therefore, these customer habits have to be taken into consideration to develop the venison market.

The US agricultural market specialists Dietmann N.P. and Ridder E. (2004) who pointed to the facts that consumers were interested in small specialised producer stores or farm product fairs as well as that expenses were lower in case products were bought directly from a producer, made a similar conclusion.

From the viewpoint of producers, it is important to understand the main leitmotif of consumers to purchase meat and its products. The reply options included in the survey had assertions related with organoleptic properties of products, quality of goods, price on goods, and subjective wishes of consumers.

The price of goods is a significant factor in the majority of countries. Such a finding was made in a study of "BnB NORD Latvian Barometer" – Latvian residents considered quality as one of the key factors when choosing food products (68%), yet, for 79% it was price (Partikas produktu paterins, 2010). However, Danilane L. and Lubkina V. (2007) in their research pointed that price was important but not the most significant criterion in making a purchase decision. In a study ordered by the supermarket chain Elvi, the medium

agency Media Planning Group reported that the quality of goods was essential for 66% of customers. It is one more proof that Latvian consumers prefer quality products that are fresh and human-health-friendly. Foreign researcher Moffat D.A. (2005) pointed that meat taste was one of the factors being attractive for the majority of consumers.

The author found, analysing criteria for meat choices, that price was not the determining factor for Latvian consumers when they chose meat and its products. A study on the industry of food services, conducted by Tume L. (1997), reported that 80% of the respondents believed that the quality of venison was worth the relatively high price of it.

An analysis of the survey results revealed that Latvian consumers, when purchasing meat, based their choice on their subjective wishes, and the main criteria were the availability and quality of products, followed by their price. Therefore, the author believes that there are possibilities to increase sales of venison.

Assuming that the meat purchase criterion "low price" might be a dominant one for the population group with low incomes, the author assessed the meat choice according to income per family member.

When purchasing meat, according to the survey (Figure 2), the most important criterion for the group of respondents with an income less than LVL 100 per family member was the taste and availability of meat. The respondents of this group pointed to specialised meat stores as the most popular meat purchase site, which, to a certain extent, may be explained by the fact that it is an opportunity to buy quality meat at lower prices than at supermarkets.

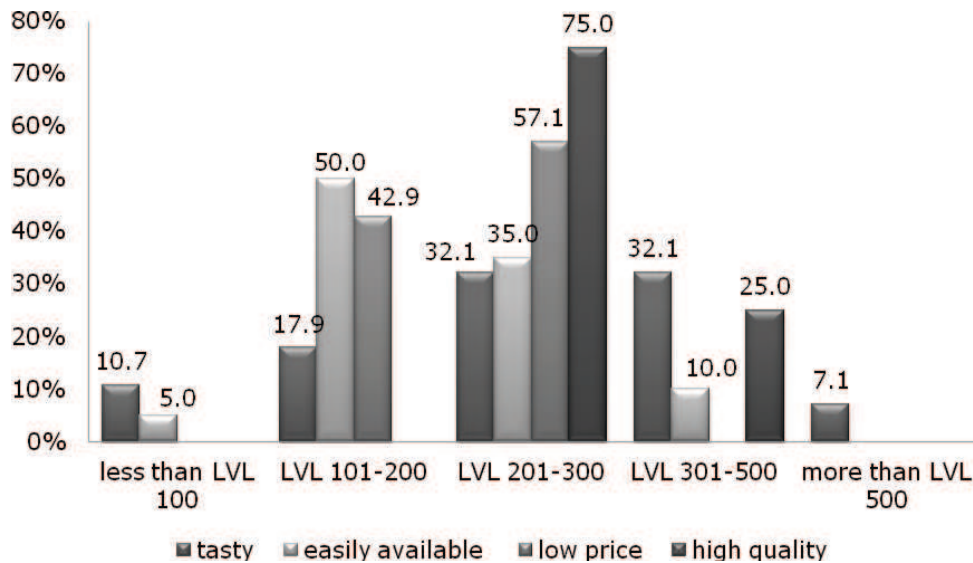
In the income group of LVL 101-200, the respondents pointed to the availability of meat (50%) and the price of meat (42.9%) as the main meat purchase criteria, thus, not stressing the role of meat quality. The respondents of this group purchased meat mostly at supermarkets (72.2%) and in farm product fairs (61.1%).

For the respondents whose income per family member was within a range of LVL 201-300, the most significant meat choice criterion was meat quality (75%), followed by meat price (57.1%). A similar opinion dominated among households having an income per family member within a range of LVL 300-500. For these groups, specialised meat stores were the most popular meat purchase site (69.6% and 71.4%, respectively). The author believes that venison producers have to focus on regular sales of venison at specialised stores and farm product fairs as well as search for opportunities for selling their venison at supermarkets.

## 2. Consumer awareness of venison

Many respondents pointed to hunted animal meat as one of the most frequently purchased types of meat. In this aspect, it is important to find out what wild animal meat and meat products consumers use in their diet and the consumers' opinion on venison qualities and its consumption.

According to the survey, one can conclude that wild animal (wild boar, deer, roe deer, and elk) meat had been consumed by 88.5% of the respondents, including venison – by 63.9%, while venison products had been consumed by 31.2% of the respondents.



Source: author's calculations based on the survey results

Fig. 2. Most significant meat purchase criteria by monthly income per family member in Latvia

The opinions, expressed in the survey, on venison qualities were different, in some cases even controversial; yet, there were some respondent groups providing similar replies. Of all the respondents, one in five or 21.3% could not tell the difference between venison and traditional meat (pork, broiler meat, and beef).

Some respondents had a negative opinion on venison qualities. Of the respondents, 4.9% believed that venison was tough and hard to be cooked, saying "... I really do not know but I assume it might be tougher, with a specific taste". In one questionnaire, it was pointed that "...children are allergic to venison, and it might not be used in the diet of children". At the same time, there were respondents who asserted that venison was "... very healthy, hypoallergenic, and dietetic".

The majority of the respondents (57.3%) said that venison was healthy, of high quality, with a low level of cholesterol, environmentally clean, and hypoallergenic (appropriate for being consumed by allergic people and children). The respondents stressed the environmental criteria as quality characteristics of venison: "it is GMO-free, free of food colourings, food supplements, antibiotics, growth hormones, and other components not needed and harmful for consumers." "First, this meat does not originate from artificially raised animals (as broiler meat and pork from livestock specially fed to grow faster and be ready for selling). Second, it contains a lot of nutrients that have formed naturally." At the same time, it was noted that venison had a specific colour, taste, and smell.

Further in the survey, the respondents expressed their opinion on various assertions regarding the purchase and consumption of venison.

The respondents were provided with three reply options: 1 – I agree with the assertion, 2 – I do not agree with the assertion, and 3 – I have no opinion on the assertion. Given the specifics and short history of deer farming, the third reply option was included

in the questionnaire, as respondents might have no idea about deer farming. The results are presented in Table 1.

An analysis of the survey results showed that 78.7% of the respondents knew that deer were raised on farms in Latvia for meat. The majority of the respondents (77%) believed that venison was healthy, as animals were raised in the natural environment, while 57.4% of the respondents believed that it was healthy because the cholesterol level in it was lower than in beef and pork. It has to be noted that the number of those respondents who did not agree with the two mentioned assertions was small (3.3% and 0%, respectively). The respondents expressed a similar opinion on the nutritional value of venison – 55.7% agreed and 3.3% did not agree with the assertion.

The assertions on purchases of venison indicated that the consumers loved to buy venison for holiday feasts (67.2%) and loved to buy venison if the price were acceptable (65.6%). Only 18% of all the respondents said that they did not want to buy venison.

Attention has to be paid to the respondent replies to Assertion 7 – about half (47.5%) agreed with the assertion that they did not know where to buy venison and only a third of the respondents (31.1%) knew where it was possible to buy venison. Similar replies were given to Assertion 12 (*Venison is not offered at a store*) – 50.8% agreed and 39.3% had no opinion.

The fact that the respondents had not seen venison in the assortment of stores and did not know where to buy it is proven by their replies regarding venison prices. The most frequent reply to the assertions – *the price of venison at a store is acceptable to me* and *the price of venison at a store is too high* – was the reply option "I have no opinion on the assertion", 85.2% and 86.3%, respectively, which indicated that the consumers had not seen venison in the assortment of stores.

Table 1

**Purchase and consumption of venison assessed from the viewpoint of consumers in Latvia**

No.	Assertions	Percentage distribution of respondent replies		
		agree	do not agree	do not know
1	More and more people consume venison	14.8	36.1	49.2
2	Deer are raised on Latvian farms for meat	78.7	1.6	19.7
3	I would love to buy venison for regular consumption	29.5	36.1	34.4
4	I would love to buy venison for special holiday feasts	67.2	13.1	19.7
5	I would certainly buy venison if it is available at stores	36.1	29.5	34.4
6	I would certainly buy venison if its price is acceptable to me	65.6	6.6	27.9
7	I do not know where I can buy venison	47.5	31.1	21.3
8	I would buy venison even if I have to go to a special store	23.0	41.0	36.1
9	I do not want to buy venison	18.0	63.9	18.0
10	The price of venison at a store is acceptable to me	6.6	8.2	85.2
11	The price of venison at a store is too high	9.8	6.6	83.6
12	Venison is not offered at a store	50.8	9.8	39.3
13	Venison is healthy, as the cholesterol level in it is lower than in beef and pork	57.4	0.0	42.6
14	Venison is healthy, as animals are raised in the natural environment	77.0	3.3	19.7
15	The nutritional value of venison is higher than that of traditional meat	55.7	3.3	41.0
16	Venison is soft and juicy	41.0	29.5	29.5
17	Venison is easy to cook at home	45.9	19.7	34.4

**Source:** author's calculations based on the survey results

### 3. Consumer motivation and behaviour on the venison market

According to the survey, price did not always played the crucial role in purchasing food, yet, it is important to ascertain consumers' opinion on the preferable price of venison on the market for the purpose of planning the development of deer farming. First, it was found out that the respondents considered venison an expensive meat of special category. The range of prices mentioned by the respondents was very broad – from LVL 1.50 to LVL 50.00 per kilogram of venison. The average preferred venison price ranged from LVL 4.16±1.976 to LVL 8.31±6.956.

An analysis of the frequency and sites of purchasing venison showed that only 27.9% of the respondents had bought venison or its products. As the site of purchasing venison, the respondents mentioned the store *Desa&Co* in Riga, in some cases venison was bought directly from its producer or from hunter teams (venison from deer hunted in the wild). Those respondents who had never bought venison said that they had eaten venison of deer hunted in the wild by their relatives or friends or tasted it at degustation fairs or during a tour on a farm.

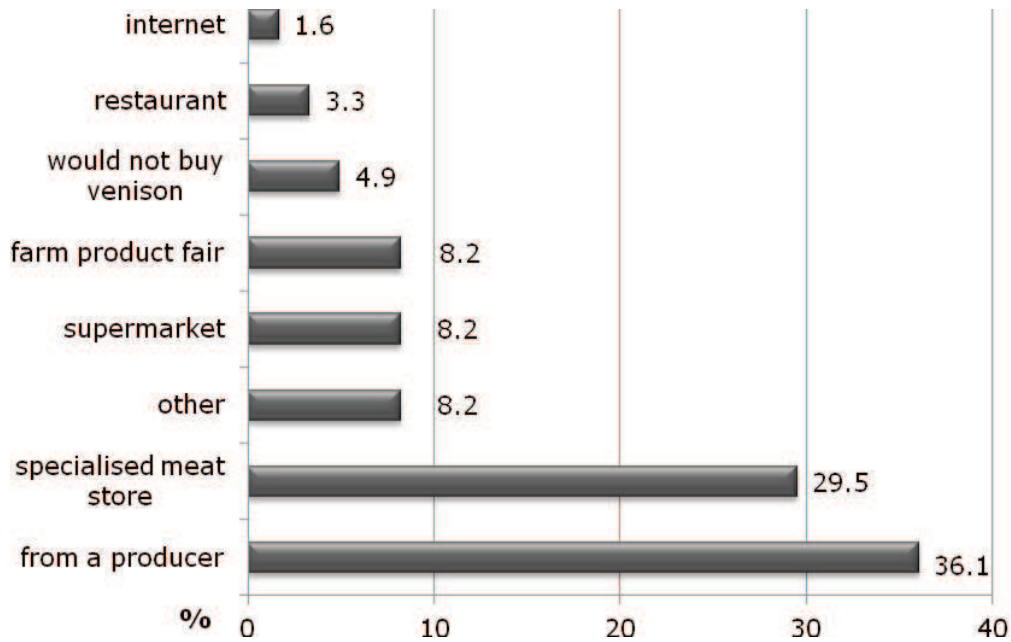
As regards replying to a question what encouraged them to buy or consume venison, many respondent replies were as follows: "...what is hunted in the forest has to be eaten". Such an assertion was expressed by the respondents who consumed venison of deer hunted in the wild by their relatives or friends. The respondents

who bought venison at a store mainly had an opinion that they just tasted venison as well as consumed it because it was healthy and unpolluted.

According to a survey conducted in Russia, the significance of the country of origin, to a great extent, depends on the category of goods. It is especially important for such food necessities as meat, fruit, vegetables, fresh fish etc. (Honkanen, Frewer, 2008).

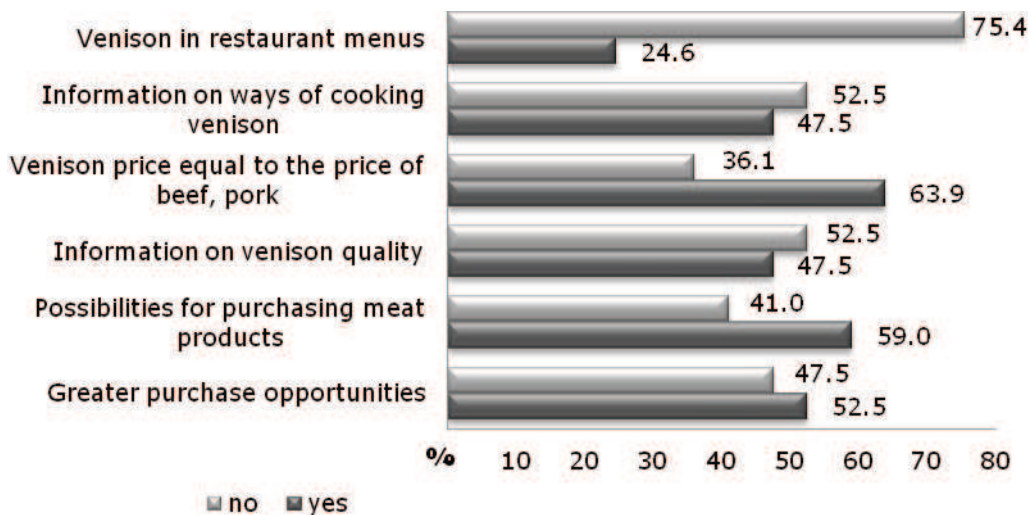
In Latvia, consumers pay special attention to products of local producers when making a purchase decision. One of the most significant factors for the choice of venison and its products, along with price and taste, is the place of origin. Latvia as the place of origin of venison as a significant factor for purchasing meat was mentioned by 86.9% of the questioned individuals.

The present and potential demand for products determines the development of deer farming, thus, the respondents' wishes regarding purchasing venison in future and the preferred venison purchase site were identified (Figure 3). The survey revealed that 4.9% of the respondents wanted neither to buy nor to consume venison. However, the majority of the respondents were interested in using venison in their diet and pointed that if they decided to purchase venison in the near future, they would prefer to buy it directly from the producer (36.1%) or at a specialised store (29.5%). As other preferred sites for purchasing venison, the respondents mentioned a supermarket (8.2%), a farm product fair (8.2%), and restaurants (3.3%). The most unpopular



Source: author's calculations based on the survey results

Fig. 3. Venison purchase sites preferred by customers in Latvia



Source: author's calculations based on the survey results

Fig. 4. Consumer motivation for purchasing venison and its products in Latvia

venison purchase site was the Internet (1.6%). In case the reply option "other" was chosen for the preferred venison purchase site, the respondents explained that they would probably buy venison from familiar hunters, thus, purchasing venison of deer hunted in the wild.

In Europe, venison sales are often practised on the spot on farms. It is related with consumers' opinion on food quality. Conducting a study on the consumer understanding of meat quality, Becker T., Benner E., and Glitsch K. (2000) point that consumers prefer to buy meat at specialised stores, while purchasing meat directly from a producer is the third most popular meat purchase site (Becker et al., 2000).

In European countries – Germany, Denmark, Great Britain, and the Czech Republic – where on average 80-90% of deer farming enterprises fit the status of micro-enterprise, venison is mainly sold in the local market, on the spot on farms, at agricultural fairs, or sold to public catering companies. In this aspect, researches of LVAEI scientists Melece L., Romanova D., and Sena I. (2008), which set two economically viable priorities for food production, have to be stressed. Medium and large meat enterprises have to focus mainly on export markets and the regional market. Small meat enterprises, in their turn, have to focus their sales on the local market (Melece, Romanova, Sena, 2008). The majority of deer farming

enterprises in Latvia fits the status of micro-enterprise, and, according to scientific studies and experiences of other countries, the most popular type of sales for them is direct sales. According to the survey performed by the author, an opinion prevails among consumers in Latvia that meat and its products are human-health-friendly and of high quality if these products are purchased from a local producer.

Consumer motivation studies serve for identifying the target audience and further marketing activities (Sheth, 2011; Kotler et al., 2008; Malhorta, 2006). From the supply side, a broad assortment is a prerequisite for stimulating demand. It means that the development of venison processing is directly related not only with broadening a product assortment but also with increasing demand on the market (Michelsen et al., 1999).

The determinant criteria, based on which consumers purchase meat and its products and which, largely, reveal the consumer motivation, were identified in the survey (Figure 4).

The venison price being equal to the price of beef and pork would motivate the questioned individuals most to buy and consume venison and its products (63.9%). The possibility to purchase venison products (sausages, smoked products, semi-finished products etc.) would motivate 59.0% of the respondents, while greater availability of venison could motivate 52.5% of them. Of the respondents, 47.5% pointed that information on quality characteristics of venison, ways of cooking venison, and recipes would motivate them to buy venison. Only about a fourth (24.6%) of the respondents noted that the availability of venison in restaurant menus would motivate them to buy venison. Some respondents said that they would love to consume venison products at fast food restaurants (snacks, pizzas, sandwiches etc.).

The economic activity of deer farms in Latvia generates income for Latvian residents from producing products of deer farming, processing hunted animals, trade, and providing tourism services, thus, reducing social and economic tension in rural areas. The increasing area used in deer farming promotes the use of agricultural land in agriculture and the preservation of rural landscapes. Therefore, the rural environment as a place of residence and recreation improves and the number of domestic and foreign tourists rises.

Low efficiency is specific to the chains of supply of deer farming products in Latvia. It is due to the individual activities of producers in organising sales of their products. Deer farming products are mostly sold as unprocessed or minimally pre-processed products, delivering them in small quantities to consumers or sale sites.

According to the analysis of the most significant development stages of the deer agribusiness market in Latvia, developing production and processing are equally significant as well as promoting marketing activities and actively informing the public on the qualitative characteristics, assortment, and sale sites of venison are also significant. At the same time, the local market's expansion may be provided by small deer enterprises that develop their home production for the purpose of processing and selling their products directly to final consumers on the local market.

## Conclusions

1. Based on the survey, the author concludes that the most significant meat purchase criteria for customers are the quality and taste of meat, while the majority of customers pointed that they used an opportunity to purchase quality meat at a lower price, i.e. by avoiding retailers.
2. The consumers were informed about raising deer on Latvian farms as well as qualitative characteristics of venison. However, they had no information on the possibilities to purchase venison, the sale sites, and the market price of venison.
3. The consumers pointed to specialised meat stores, farm product fairs, and deer farms as the best venison purchase sites. At the same time, they stressed that food trade via the Internet was not developed in Latvia, although there were several Internet sites offering hunted animal meat, mainly it was wild animal meat.
4. The possibilities to purchase venison in Latvia are limited and episodic. Venison and especially its products are available to customers in limited quantities. Although consumers are increasingly interested in using venison in their diet, there is no real point of contact among producers, processors, and buyers. It indicates on limited availability of venison and the possibilities to purchase venison.
5. The respondents' replies to a question about the origin, value, and purchase possibilities of venison products indirectly revealed that the consumers were poorly informed about it.

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