

Article

Exploring Perceptions of Raspberries and Blueberries by Italian Consumers

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Abstract: Consumers can be important active contributors to a sustainable society by selecting foods that are produced respecting environmental and socially ethical standards. In the fruit sector, sustainability issues are often associated with imprecisely defined concepts such as “locally grown”, “freshness” and “local product”. This study has investigated raspberries (*Rubus idaeus* L.) and blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum* L.) purchases in order to identify how berry fruits choice attributes are ranked by consumers in two Italian Regions, using a choice experiment (best-worst methodology). Twelve attributes—that indirectly refer to the concept of environmental sustainability—have been investigated. According to the preferences expressed by our sample of retail purchasers ($n = 669$), the results show that the reasons for the purchase of berries are associated with numerous parameters among which freshness and product origin are the most important and price was not ranked as so relevant. These findings indirectly testify the consumer attention towards the sustainability of local production and the link between sustainability and territory. Therefore, we can presume that the improvement of consumer familiarity with attributes such as “locally grown” and “local product” could support more eco-friendly consumption of raspberries and blueberries.

Keywords: berry fruits; consumer acceptance; best-worst methodology; choice attributes; sustainability

1. Introduction

Trends and Aspects of the Consumption of Raspberries and Blueberries in Italy

Consumers are increasingly interested in food quality, broadly defined. In addition to expecting higher dietary, health and hygiene standards from the products that they purchase [1], consumers also consider the equity, fair trade, sustainability and ethical sphere of products [2]. This is also true for fruits and vegetables, which are increasingly valued as an important part of the diet, as their regular consumption has been associated with the prevention of several different diseases [3]. In fact, concern for dietary health impacts is now considered as important as taste in assessing the quality of a product [4]. Other important drivers include the procedures for fruit production, processing and sustainability, as well as the purchase of local products, particularly among European consumers [5]. As a result of this progress, food consumption behaviour in the European Union (EU) appears to be rapidly evolving, and is consequently becoming more difficult to understand and predict [6].

Raspberries and blueberries are a good example of the cultural dynamism that has characterised the evolution of food consumption in Italy. They demonstrate how the image of a product, which has always been considered niche, can potentially be considered as part of daily fresh fruit consumption, in addition to improving agricultural sustainability [7].

Peano et al. [8] emphasised that neither eco-labelling nor providing environmental information can be a goal in itself, but that these approaches are a means of creating a production system, consumption

attitude and a more environmentally friendly market. However, before retailers can implement a new marketing strategy they must firstly develop an understanding of the determinants of consumer purchases. The development of trends in consumer demands opens up new possibilities for adding value and differentiating specific products.

Raspberries (*Rubus idaeus* L.) and blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum* L.) were chosen for this study as they are important fresh products in Italy, and have been constantly cultivated and grown since 1980. Italy is among the leading European producers, producing 2000 and 1550 tons of raspberries and blueberries, respectively, per year [9]. In Italy, the domestic consumption of fruit and vegetables at the national level is characterised by a negative trend (−6.1% for 7 reference years between 2007 and 2013), while the consumption of berry fruits has increased in volume by (+156.3%) and in value (+206.6%) [10]. There are several contributing factors that have allowed berry fruits to penetrate the Italian market, including an increase in their use in both private households and the food service industry (restaurants, bars and ice-cream shops), the association of these fruits with high nutritional and natural value [11,12], an increase in consumption during the traditional summer period (June to September) due to improved storage techniques [13] and an increase in imports from countries within and outside of Europe [14]. Despite this, the rate of market penetration in this category decreased by approximately 24% in 2012, with an average of 2.7 annual purchases per family [15], composing only 1.5% of the sale value within the fruit sector.

The consumption of berries in Italy is still low compared to that in the UK, where they represent 7.6% of the total purchased fruit [16] with a market penetration of 50% and an average of 10.4 annual purchases per family. Berries are considered a specialty in Italy. It is often difficult to define the fruits that fit into this category, as there is no unique definition of specialty foods. However, several organisations have their own definition of this category [17]. Within the myriad of definitions of specialty foods, it is possible to identify three fundamental characteristics, including a premium price, high quality and limited distribution. Other important features that are commonly included are the production methods, supply chain and symbolism. Murphy et al. [18] propose a definition of specialty foods that is well suited to the objectives of our study, and which combines these features:

“Specialty foods are considered as products outside the mainstream possessing specific qualities, which differentiate them from standard foods. These qualities are derived from a combination of at least two of the following features: (1) Exclusiveness: the product is produced on a small scale and is therefore only available in limited quantities; (2) Processing: the product has at least undergone primary processing using non- industrial artisan techniques; (3) Distinctiveness: the distinctiveness of the product arises from a combination of all or some of the following attributes: extraordinary packaging, premium price, renowned origin, and/or its unique design.”

In order to increase the consumption and production of raspberries and blueberries in Italy, it is necessary to predominantly include large-scale points of sale, which already contribute to the biggest increase in sales [15]. The aim is to activate tangible pathways for enhancement, both within and outside of these points of purchase, that intercept the consumer in everyday life and contribute to “constructing” his or her shopping basket of choice [17], based on that achieved previously by South American producers in large-scale retail stores in the UK [19].

It is necessary to understand how the knowledge of the consumer (what and why they are consuming a particular producer) can influence the future economic and marketing strategies of both the producer and retailer, also considering that these relationships should not be designed in a unique way. In fact, several consumer segments and niches differ widely and are ever-changing. Income, demographic variables and lifestyle are no longer sufficient in the categorisation of consumers [20]. This is particularly evident in the food industry, where the differentiation and overload of food supply, increased budget, migrations, globalisation and lifestyle changes, particularly in working habits, have altered food consumption patterns. Senauer [21] remarked that the decision making unit for food consumption is increasingly becoming individualised, rather than focusing on the household.

Currently, consumer choices and behaviours are affected by attributes and the quality of goods, in addition to the cultural, social, personal and psychological characteristics of individuals. Only a multi-disciplinary approach can succeed in explaining the behaviour of the modern consumer [20]. The opening of new markets and the reorganisation of existing markets is strongly driven by the introduction of new products and more sustainable production technologies [7]. Based on these considerations, the objective of this study was to assess the importance of 12 consumption attributes for berry fruits (raspberries and blueberries) in two Italian regions (Piedmont and Liguria). Using a choice experiment, this study identifies the way in which these attributes are ranked by consumers, considering the potential environmental and/or regional effects that may drive choice differences between the two investigated areas.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Blueberry and Raspberry Quality Attributes

The 12 attributes assessed in this study were selected using two different approaches. The first approach used was the “Delphi” method [22], where 10 experts (producers’ marketing managers and retail buyers) were interviewed twice to obtain convergent opinions on the major characteristics of the raspberry and blueberry markets. The second approach, concerning the choice of attributes, included an in-depth review of articles published in international journals. The attributes chosen were:

Freshness: In investigations focusing on specific fruits, such as apples, freshness has been shown to be one of the primary choice criteria for consumers [23,24]. As berries have a shorter shelf life, the consumer evaluates the freshness of the product at the moment of purchase [19,25–28];

Product origin: Numerous marketing studies have shown that the assessments made by consumers are significantly influenced by their knowledge of the origin of the products. For the consumer, information about the geographical origin can serve to identify both the product and the quality [22,29,30];

Organic label: Organic certification is recognised in various studies as an attribute that positively influences the choice of the consumer at the moment of purchase [31–35];

Health benefits: Research conducted on the psychology of consumption suggests that one of the main attributes driving the choice for buying raspberries and blueberries is the health benefit associated with their consumption [12,27,36–38];

Seasonality: Traditionally, the consumption of raspberries and blueberries has been closely linked to their harvesting season [19,33];

Appearance: The appearance of fruit is one of the attributes that most influences choice at the time of purchase. Retail stores and retailers at traditional street markets make their selections based on visual criteria before selling fruit and vegetables [28,39];

Locally grown: For companies, information regarding the region of origin is a means for differentiation. This provides a competitive advantage if appreciated by the consumer. Furthermore, food is closely related to territory and has strong traditional and symbolic connections with its place of origin, resulting from its interactions with the natural resources and the lifestyles of the inhabitants [28,30,40–43];

Packaging: Initially used for the purpose of containment and protection, packaging is now seen by retailers and brand owners as a potential platform for communication with consumers. Environmental sustainability influences the customer’s expectations regarding retail products and their packaging [16,44,45];

Labelling (producer and/or retailer): Relying on a guarantee is one of the possible strategies in situations of risk or lack of information [38];

Quality certifications: Retail suppliers are required to provide quality certifications [46];

Price: In general, price is a key element in the purchasing decision of consumers. It can also be used as an indicator of quality when a consumer does not have enough information to evaluate a product. Price can also be important in situations of risk, as purchasing cheaper products reduces financial risk, while a particularly high price protects against poor quality [28,47];

Brand knowledge: The brand is an extrinsic quality indicator, as it allows the consumer to identify the product and connect with it through past experiences or information about the manufacturer (or seller) [38].

Each of these chosen attributes, with the exception of price, were clustered into five categories, shown in Table 1, obtained by adapting the four dimensions of food quality detailed by the “Total Quality Food Model” [48], in addition to the future trends of consumption described by Lappo et al. [5].

Table 1. Categories representing emerging cues in fruit perceived quality and consumer choice.

Sensory	Safety and Health Benefits	Convenience	Sustainability and Processing	Country and Region of Origin
Freshness	Health benefits	Packaging	Organic labelling	Product origin
Appearance	Quality certification	Labelling (producer and/or retailer)	Seasonality	Locally grown
Brand knowledge				

Adapted from Grunert [48] and Lappo et al. [5].

The price was not included in this classification, consistent with studies by Grunert [4] and Lopez Galan et al. [49]. These previous studies emphasised that food demand not only is driven by the price of a product and the income of the consumer, as stated by classic economic theory, but is also increasingly driven by more complex and heterogeneous attributes. Therefore, it may be useful to consider the price elasticity of the demand for fruits and berries. Andreyeva et al. [50] stated that the elasticity of demand for the price of fruit is 0.7 on average, suggesting that the demand for fruit reacts in a less proportional way to price changes.

Sobeková et al. [51] reported an elasticity range of 1.25–1.88 for berry fruits, arguing that price was not a major driver in the choice of individual purchases, as purchase of berries is often sporadic and in small quantities. Furthermore, they determined that price did not have a significant impact on the level of household spending.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected in supermarkets within the urban areas of Turin and Genoa (medium-sized Italian towns), in order to obtain data from consumers who had just bought berries. A total of 669 consumers participated in the study, which was conducted during the summer of 2014. The berry fruit marketing data [15] show that the main sales channel for raspberries and blueberries is large-scale retail, which comprises approximately 60% of the Italian market. Face-to-face interviews were conducted using paper questionnaires (see Appendix A) using an intercept survey method, choosing people who had just bought berries and alternating, whenever possible, between genders. The interviews were conducted from Monday to Sunday over 2 weeks in two time slots (10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.), to intercept different types of consumers. Before beginning the questionnaire, the respondents were briefed on the research and the selected attributes.

2.3. Measurement of the Importance of Attributes Using Best–Worst Scaling

The best–worst scaling (B–W) methodology was introduced by Finn et al. [52] and more recently formalised by Marley et al. [53]. It consists of a measuring technique in which respondents are asked to choose their favourite attribute (the best) and their least favourite attribute (the worst) from a set of attributes. We adopted this methodology due to the possibility of identifying associations between

sensory attributes and consumer choices in the preference data, as suggested by Jaeger et al. [54]. Different advantages such as the use of a dimensional range for the importance of the attributes were reported. The B–W methodology avoids the problem of bias that may occur from differences in the use of rating scales between respondents. While all acceptance and preference methods have been reported to be comparable, B–W scaling allows for improved discrimination between attributes. This method has also been reported to be slightly easier to use, thereby improving the ability of the consumer to provide accurate hedonic responses [55]. This method also offers the best way to determine the level of importance that the interviewee assigns to each attribute [53,56–58]. The B–W scale methodology has previously been used to analyse and discuss different scientific topics, including ethical beliefs and wine and food marketing values [42,56–61]. Two limitations of the method need to be highlighted. The first limitation of this method is its relativism, as additional information needs to be elicited in order to anchor the scale results. Such information would also allow for easier comparison to values from traditional rating scales [54,62]. The second limitation is that this methodology requires a greater cognitive effort [62], and may be considered more confusing than numerical scales [63]. We acknowledge these limitations and, therefore, in our study we have only made comparisons among specific attributes and not within their levels. This also limited the difficulties associated with the maximum difference scaling (MaxDiff) questionnaire in understanding the mechanism of response [64].

2.4. Questionnaire Design and Data Analysis

The questionnaire was divided into two parts (see Appendix A). The first part examined the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondent through standard questions (residence, gender, age, household, level of study, work and income) [65]. The second section focused on the 12 attributes chosen for the B–W scaling. In order to implement the experimental design, it was necessary to choose how many times each attribute should be presented to respondents, as well as the number of attributes included in each set of choices. Orme [66] recommended that a range of 3–5 attributes should be included in each set of choices, and that each attribute should be presented to the respondent between 3 and 5 times. According to these recommendations, we chose to include 4 attributes per set, and to present each attribute three times within the questionnaire. The following Equation (1) was used to determine the nine subsets:

$$N^{\circ} \text{ SET} = \frac{\text{ATT} \times \text{FR}}{\text{SET}} \quad (1)$$

where ATT represents the total number of attributes, FR represents the frequency of appearance of each attribute and SET is the number of attributes per set.

MaxDiff designer (v.2.0.2; Sawtooth Software, Orem, UT, USA) was used to assign each of the 12 attributes to 4 different versions of the questionnaire. Each of these versions comprised nine subsets, each including four attributes (see Appendix B and C). Using the MaxDiff Designer software we performed a series of simulations using different combinations of attributes to obtain the best experimental design [65,66]. The design meant that each attribute was used 3 times on average, and that each pair of attributes appeared together an average of 3.27 times (standard deviation 0.44). Overall, this was an almost balanced design. Methods such as latent class (LC) and hierarchical Bayes (HB) estimation do not require a perfect balance [54]. A two-way balance was favoured in this study design, meaning that it was directed towards the frequency at which paired combinations of attributes appeared together. As the average B–W scores take positive and negative values, and therefore sum to zero, they are often perceived as difficult to interpret. For instance, in the case of importance measurement, a negative B–W value does not indicate negative importance, but rather low (below average) importance. In order to allow a more intuitive interpretation of the results, we rescaled the B–W score to adopt a square root ratio approach that standardises the square root ratio scale to

importance weights, which add to 100 per cent. Therefore, each root value ($i = 1, \dots, n$) needs to be weighted by a factor, given in Equation (2):

$$\text{Weighting factor importance scale} = \frac{100}{\sum_{i=1}^n \sqrt{\frac{B}{W}}} \quad (2)$$

where B is the number of best score, W is the number of worst score and i is the total number of observations.

Rescaling can be applied for the total sample or the subsamples, such as segments, to allow an easier comparison than using raw B–W scores [48]. The total responses for each best and worst attribute were calculated using Sawtooth MaxDiff (SSI-version 8.4.6; www.sawtoothsoftware.com) using the cyclical algorithm, $k(k - 1)/2$ (where k is the total number of attributes) making possible paired comparisons. An estimation analysis of the scores was performed using SPSS (version 21.1, Armonk, NY, USA). In order to understand whether one attribute was preferred to another within the same sample of respondents, we performed a repeated measures *t*-test with two tails to compare the rescaled scores for the attributes identified by each individual respondent.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics

The socio-demographic characteristics (Table 2) of the respondents ($n = 669$ observations) revealed that the majority were women and people over the age of 45.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

		Piedmont (%)	Liguria (%)	Frequency
		$n = 43$	$n = 57$	$n = 669$
Gender	Women	81	62	470
	Men	19	38	199
Age	<30 years old	9	14	79
	Between 30 and 45 years old	31	35	220
	Between 46 and 55 years old	21	20	139
	>55 years old	39	31	231
Household composition	1	16	10	90
	2	40	39	243
	3	32	35	195
	≥ 4	12	16	141
Educational status	Primary school	4	6	40
	Lower secondary school	10	7	39
	Upper secondary school	46	41	308
	Master's degree	40	46	282
Occupation	Housewife	10	9	58
	Unemployed	6	6	35
	Employee	52	45	323
	Entrepreneur	12	18	111
	Retired	14	15	108
	Student	6	7	34

A small proportion of interviewees (13.5%) lived alone, with a higher proportion living in pairs (36.3%). Respondents who claimed to have a family consisting of 3 persons were about one-third of the total (29.0%) and those who have a family of 4 or more persons made up more than 50% of the sample. The majority had a master's degree (42.2%) or upper secondary education (46.0%), making our sample somewhat biased when compared to the national schooling rate. Regarding occupation,

employed individuals composed approximately half of the interviewees (50.5%), self-employed (16.6%) and retired (16.2%) individuals composed approximately one third of the sample, and the remaining respondents were students and job seekers. We observed a higher frequency of women sampled in Piedmont when the demographic characteristics between the two subsamples (Piedmont and Liguria) were compared, however, there were no significant differences for the other analysed parameters.

3.2. Importance of Raspberry and Blueberry Attributes

The number of times that each attribute was chosen as being the best or worst, the difference between these two values (best *minus* worst) and the average rescaled score for each attribute (from an estimate of the MaxDiff score function of the HB software SSI) are presented in Table 3. It is evident that the most important attribute, according to the respondents, was the freshness of the berries, which presented the highest average value for the rescaled scores (13.072). Furthermore, this attribute was significantly different from all other attributes. Cardello and Schutz [24] reported that the type of food influences the judgement of freshness, and that characteristics related to the description of freshness depended on the food considered. Similarly, a study on apples by Péneau et al. [23] found that consumers assigned remarkable importance to *freshness*, and when asked to specify the meaning of this term, they answered *crispness* and *juiciness*. These results support the assumption of Bourne [67] that textural properties, such as firmness, often represent the freshness of a product.

Table 3. Best–worst scale rating for attributes of raspberries and blueberries.

Category	Attributes	Best	Worst	B–W	Rescaled Score
		<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	(%)
Sensory	Freshness	804	306	498	13.072
	Appearance	390	510	−120	7.245
Safety and health benefits	Health benefits	571	458	113	9.210
	Quality certifications	443	571	−128	7.322
Convenience	Labelling	501	451	50	8.266
	Packaging	371	653	−282	6.749
	Brand knowledge	367	587	−220	6.496
Sustainability and processing	Seasonality	549	495	54	8.722
	Organic labelling	512	461	51	8.541
Country and region of origin	Locally grown	441	547	−106	9.658
	Product origin	634	428	206	7.284
-	Price	429	545	−116	7.435

We did not organise a panel test in the current study. Therefore, the responses of consumers were derived from their general preferences, which are associated with the memory of their experience and not a sensory evaluation.

Péneau [68] reported that appearance is of high importance in perceiving the freshness of strawberries. From our analysis, however, a close relationship between these two attributes was not evident.

The rescaled score of 6.496, obtained for the brand knowledge attribute, was the minimum value observed in this study. This was close to the value observed for packaging, both of which are part of the macro category of “convenience”. Roosen et al. [69] indicated that it is often difficult and expensive for manufacturers of agricultural products to highlight their product quality with a brand. In fact, a survey performed in Germany showed that the brand was not important to consumers purchasing

steak, and this also applied to dairy products [70]. All other attributes had a value of below 10 and did not differ significantly.

The results for the Piedmont and Liguria subgroups are presented in Tables 4 and 5, respectively. These two subsamples were compared using the raw score and the standard deviation. As previously mentioned, the most important attribute for consumers in both regions was the freshness, and the least important attribute was the packaging. Furthermore, in the Piedmont subgroup, the freshness of the product was given the highest absolute value. The attribute that differed the most between the two areas was the labelling attribute, which was given a score of 9.467 in the Piedmont subgroup and 6.519 in the Liguria subgroup. The values for the other attributes evaluated were relatively similar between the regions, meaning that the consumer behaviour was not very divergent.

Table 4. Best–worst scale rating for attributes of raspberries and blueberries in the Piedmont subsample.

Category	Attributes	Best	Worst	B–W	BW Average	Standard Deviation	Average
		<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	Raw Score		Rescaled Score (%)
Sensory	Freshness	427	103	324	1.158	0.825	11.362
	Appearance	164	226	−62	−0.178	0.540	6.906
Safety and health benefits	Health benefits	195	179	16	0.152	0.670	9.607
	Quality certifications	208	271	−63	−0.317	0.863	7.520
Convenience	Labelling	177	236	−59	−0.261	0.906	9.497
	Packaging	186	262	−76	−0.244	1.120	6.090
	Brand knowledge	142	269	−127	−0.392	0.405	7.111
Sustainability and processing	Seasonality	219	243	−24	−0.176	0.516	9.344
	Organic labelling	241	166	75	0.254	0.758	7.829
Country and region of origin	Product origin	301	144	157	0.624	0.746	9.047
	Locally grown	188	240	−52	−0.242	0.868	7.553
–	Price	153	262	−109	−0.377	0.532	8.134

Table 5. Best–worst scale rating for attributes of raspberries and blueberries in the Liguria subsample.

Category	Attributes	Best	Worst	B–W	BW Average	Standard Deviation	Average
		<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	Raw Score		Rescaled Score (%)
Sensory	Freshness	377	203	174	0.483	0.641	10.886
	Appearance	226	284	−58	−0.231	0.462	7.100
Safety and health benefits	Health benefits	376	279	97	0.202	0.680	9.272
	Quality certifications	235	300	−65	−0.109	0.426	7.490
Convenience	Brand knowledge	225	318	−93	−0.213	0.535	9.777
	Packaging	324	215	109	−0.473	0.682	6.923
	Labelling	185	391	−206	0.215	0.480	6.519
Sustainability and process	Seasonality	330	252	78	0.209	0.402	9.028
	Organic labelling	271	295	−24	−0.083	0.584	7.656
Country and region of origin	Product origin	333	284	49	0.095	0.722	9.425
	Locally grown	253	307	−54	−0.108	0.469	7.645
–	Price	276	283	−7	0.013	0.362	8.279

From the raw scores, it is evident that three attributes (freshness, health benefits and product origin) were more influential in purchase decisions. By contrast, five attributes had scores that were below average (negative raw score) for both regions, including appearance, locally grown, packaging, quality certification and brand knowledge. Consumers from Liguria, unlike those from Piedmont, assigned a positive weight to seasonality, while consumers from Piedmont were more receptive to the processing aspects. In fact, the organic labelling attribute received a positive score by Piedmont consumers, while seasonality and brand received positive scores in the Liguria region. It is necessary to highlight, as stated by Evera Qendro [71], that the term “organic” has many meanings and is often associated, or confused, with terms such as “green”, “ecological”, “environmental”, “natural” or “sustainable” [72]. Consumers attribute different meanings to the term “organic” and, similarly, the

factors that make one product organic may not be organic for another, which influences purchasing decisions in unpredictable ways. In our study, consumers from Liguria assigned high importance to the seasonality of berries. Similar results have also been reported in strawberries from a German study [73], in which locally grown strawberries were preferred to imported strawberries. The same authors [73] stated that the reasons for this choice by consumers may have been the idea that these berries were fresher, with a shorter storage period than imported strawberries. Such considerations can also be applied to our results. Finally, consumers from the two regions assigned a similar importance to the price attribute.

3.3. Emerging Cues in Fruit Perceived Quality and Consumer Choice

The “Total Quality Food Model” developed by Grunert [48], applied in a study by Lappo et al. [5], showed that the taste and preference of consumers in food consumption were the principal purchase drivers. The attributes used in the B–W analysis were grouped into five categories (see Section 2.1), and the authors assigned four different levels of relevance (quite relevant, relevant, very relevant or extremely relevant) in accordance with responses obtained during the survey (Table 6).

Table 6. Comparison of the five classes with weight, as assigned by the authors.

Sensory ****	Safety and Health Benefits ***	Convenience *	Sustainability and Processing **	Country and Region of Origin **
Freshness	Health benefits	Packaging	Organic labelling	Origin
Appearance	Quality certification	Labelling (producer and/or retailer)	Seasonality	Locally grown
		Brand knowledge		

* Denotes categories deemed to be quite relevant; ** relevant; *** very relevant or **** extremely relevant, as assigned by the authors.

For the attributes included in the “convenience” category, there was little importance assigned by the consumers analysed in our study. The packaging of berry fruits is not considered to have any added value, as the consumer is accustomed to buying berries in different types of clamshell packaging [44,45]. In fact, extrinsic information, such as packaging, branding and labelling, can significantly alter our experience of food through the process of “sensation transfer”, in which these attributes contribute to our sensory perception of a product [74]. Furthermore, compared to unbranded products, consumers perceive products that are branded as blackberries to be more reliable, of higher quality, and with less chance of not meeting expectations. Nevertheless, most fresh fruit products are sold unbranded, and existing marketed fruit brands are not particularly well-known by consumers, as confirmed in our study. The advantages of forming new names and brands are, in fact, lower than those of trusted brands [75].

Some consumers are willing to pay a premium price for organic and biotech-free products, as well as products produced with concern for equitable income distribution, animal welfare and/or the environment, even if these products look and taste the same as products without these attributes, as measured by sensory analysis [76]. In our study, an analysis of the “sustainability and processing” category suggests that only Piedmont consumers preferred organic products. This result was expected, as consumers often associate berry fruits with wild berries. In general, consumers believe these products to be grown in hilly or mountainous areas, and therefore, consider berries to be more sustainable by default [14].

Recently, the “safety and health benefits” and “country and region of origin” categories have become more important in their influence on consumer purchases, as confirmed in our study. One factor that has contributed to the growth in the market for fresh berries is the consumer recognition that berries are high in phytochemicals, associated with desirable effects on human health and protection against disease. The most commonly cited reasons for the preference of locally produced food items

are related to the quality, personal health of the consumer, food safety, care for the environment and support of the local economy. Therefore, the interest in locally produced food is linked to the perception that berries are sustainable local products, unlike foods that are produced far from the consumer [77].

The consumers analysed in our survey identified that their primary criteria were in the “sensory” category, even if they paid attention to social and environmental concerns. In fact, the “freshness” attribute was considered the most important for both regions analysed. This result could be confirmed with a supporting study that combined panel and/or consumer testing with a consumer analysis study [23].

4. Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

This study investigated the perception of raspberries and blueberries by consumers in two regions of Italy. The results, obtained using the B–W method, indicated that freshness was the most important determinant in consumer choice for both areas. This finding is consistent with previous studies on apples and strawberries [23,68]. The price of the berries did not rank within the most relevant attributes for either region investigated. This result agrees with that previously reported by Mezzetti et al. [78], which showed that, in general, the price of a product was not important for the consumer when choosing vegetables and fruit. When the consumption preferences of consumers in the two regions were compared, it was evident that Ligurian consumers, unlike consumers from Piedmont, preferred seasonal berry fruits and products that showed labels from the producer or retailer. Moreover, these two choice attributes appeared to be associated. Liguria consumers, who preferred seasonal products, tended to buy products from a neighbouring area of production (e.g., Piedmont), giving rise to a loyalty mechanism. The results from our study may be useful for raspberry and blueberry producers in Piedmont, which, especially in rural hilly and foothill areas, are well suited for the production of berries [14,79]. An increase in demand could generate further cultivation, having a positive impact on the sustainability of such fragile territories, both economically and socially. Berry cultivation is labour-intensive and environmentally friendly, due to the limited use of pesticides [7,80]. In order to promote cultivation, existing marketing strategies could be combined with a specific communication campaign focussing on the production areas and their close proximity. In this way, seasonal and local products, and thus fresh products, could be offered to consumers that appreciate these attributes, in addition to an awareness of their sustainability. In fact, this study clearly shows the increasing consumer attention towards the sustainability of food production and the link between sustainability and territory. These associations could be used to create or enhance the value of territorial systems, contributing to their sustainable development, especially due to economic activities, which are often led by young entrepreneurs [81]. An additional marketing strategy could be based on further promoting the health benefits of berry fruits, which are already widely recognised by consumers and supported by numerous scientific studies [73,82,83]. The current study has contributed to increasing our knowledge of berry fruits, as little is known about the consumer preference for raspberries and blueberries in the scientific literature. However, our study has some limitations that should be considered in further research. First, our study was limited to a specific country (Italy) within the EU, and therefore, should be repeated in other European countries to confirm the results. In addition, regarding the methodology of this study, a more detailed characterisation of consumer profiles should be performed in order to provide more specific and targeted marketing recommendations, especially as we collected socio-demographic data from consumers. Moreover, the B–W methodology proved to be a useful tool in evaluating consumers’ preferences, as previously used in other studies in the agribusiness sector [22,64]. The main positive feature of this study was the ability to discriminate between the importance of each choice-attribute, providing clear and simple answers about the attributes that the respondents considered to be more or less important. Future research should focus on better identifying the consumers, as well as conducting a survey that includes other attributes, such as taste and flavour, which were not included in this study as they require consumer and panel tests.

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Author Contributions: Vincenzo Girgenti, Stefano Massaglia and Filippo Brun designed the research, interpreted the results and wrote the paper. Stefano Massaglia, Angela Mosso and Cristiana Peano collected data, collaborated in the literature review, performed the research and checked the results. All of the authors read and approved the final manuscript, analysed the data and contributed to the discussion.

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Appendix A. Questionnaire

An example of one of the nine possible best-worst choice sets submitted to each respondent is reported in the second section of the questionnaire.

FIRST SECTION: Respondent's Socio-Demographic Profile

1. Post code: _____ Man Woman. Age: _____

2. Household composition: _____

3. School age children (number and age)

4. Educational status:

Primary school

Lower secondary school

Upper secondary school

Master's Degree

Other (specify)

5. Employment

Student

Employed

Entrepreneur

Retired

Unemployed

Homemaker

Other (specify) _____

6. Yearly household income

less than €25,000

€25,000–€35,000

more than €35,000

SECOND SECTION: BEST WORST SCALING Subset

Please try to focus on your last fresh raspberry/blueberry purchase.

For each of the following tables, select the ONE reason that MOST influenced your choice and the ONE that LEAST influenced your choice.

MOST/BEST (only one answer)	Attribute	LEAST/WORST (only one answer)
<input type="radio"/>	Labelling	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Health benefits	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Appearance	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	Product origin	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix B

Table B1. Design of best worst questionnaire.

Version	Set	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4
1	1	3	2	1	4
1	2	5	6	7	8
1	3	9	10	11	12
1	4	6	3	12	2
1	5	10	5	3	9
1	6	4	11	10	5
1	7	1	12	4	6
1	8	7	1	8	9
1	9	11	8	2	7
2	1	2	12	5	10
2	2	12	9	4	7
2	3	8	4	12	3
2	4	5	2	9	1
2	5	3	5	6	11
2	6	9	4	8	6
2	7	1	7	3	11
2	8	8	7	2	10
2	9	6	1	11	10
3	1	10	6	1	9
3	2	4	9	5	11
3	3	7	10	6	4
3	4	2	8	6	3
3	5	12	5	1	8
3	6	3	12	7	1
3	7	7	2	4	5
3	8	11	8	10	12
3	9	11	3	9	2
4	1	10	4	2	1
4	2	5	7	10	3
4	3	9	6	5	2
4	4	1	11	8	4
4	5	4	11	3	7
4	6	8	1	12	5
4	7	6	2	11	12
4	8	3	9	10	8
4	9	12	7	9	6

Design obtained using Sawtooth software MaxDiff Designer v.2.0.2 with 1000 iterations, random number seed 25, favouring a two-way balance.

Appendix C

Two Way Frequencies:

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	12	4	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3
2	4	12	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4
3	3	4	12	3	3	4	3	3	4	3	3	3
4	3	3	3	12	3	3	3	4	3	4	4	3
5	4	3	3	3	12	4	4	3	3	3	3	3
6	3	3	4	3	4	12	4	3	3	3	3	3
7	3	3	3	3	4	4	12	3	3	3	4	3
8	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	12	4	4	3	3
9	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	12	3	3	4
10	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	12	3	4
11	4	3	3	4	3	3	4	3	3	3	12	3
12	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	12

Off Diagonal Non-prohibited Elements
 Mean = 3.27273
 Std Dev. = 0.44536

Positional Frequencies:

Item	Pos.	1	2	3	4
1		2	4	3	3
2		4	2	3	3
3		3	3	3	3
4		3	3	3	3
5		3	3	3	3
6		3	2	4	3
7		3	3	3	3
8		3	3	3	3
9		3	3	3	3
10		3	3	3	3
11		3	3	3	3
12		3	4	2	3

Mean = 3
 Std Dev. = 0.40825

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