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Seaweed food products

What term for seaweed?

Idealg project

Context

Product packaging and labelling must be concise and yet as informative as possible to help consumers make their purchase decisions. Information about product content, origin, nutritional properties and best before date is conveyed via its packaging. This is why processors and manufacturers have to determine what **relevant information** -like product name, brand or certifications- **need to be highlighted on the label**.

A consumption survey and a market study conducted by AGROCAMPUS OUEST as part of the Idealg project have shown that a wide range of raw and processed seaweed food products is available on the French market. More than half of the French eat seaweed, mainly Asian-style products, as well as products more suited to French-style cuisine. In most cases, the packaging -including product name- gives little **or no indication of the presence of seaweed** in its composition.

Should the product name include the term seaweed on the grounds of transparency? The risk would then be that a negative link is made in consumers' minds between seaweed and algal blooms affecting Brittany's coasts, largely covered in the media. Or should terms like "sea vegetables" or "sea plants" be preferred to avoid the negative connotations associated with "seaweed"? Widely divergent views exist as to how seaweed should be termed.

Terms currently used to denote seaweed on food products

A shop survey of seaweed-based products - including Asian- and French-style products - has revealed that many different terms are used to designate seaweed in product names. Out of the 405 seaweed-based products identified, **only 124**, i.e. one third, **included the term "seaweed" in their names**. Another third were more specific and gave the name of the species used: wakame, dulse, laver, kelp, wrack, etc. Among them, almost 50% were Japanese-style products, especially dried laver sheets.

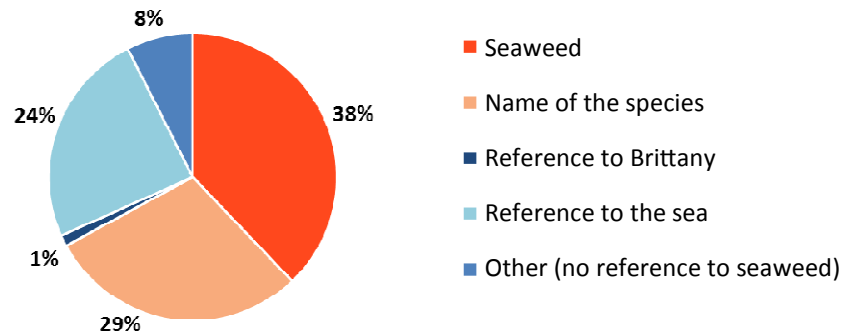


Examples of terms used to denote seaweed on seaweed food products

Terms currently used to denote seaweed on food products (continued)

A closer look at French-style seaweed products show that many names allude to the presence of seaweed in the product composition without actually using the term “seaweed” (see figure below). Names **evoking the sea** are quite common, like “sea vegetables”, “sea pesto”, “fisherman’s salad” or “ocean tartar”. Some are more elusive and **simply evoke Brittany** whilst others make no reference to seaweed at all (see “other” category in the figure below).

Conversely, two-thirds of products **explicitly indicate that they include seaweed** and even add the name of the species (kelp seaweed), the origin (seaweed from Brittany) or the production environment (ocean seaweed).



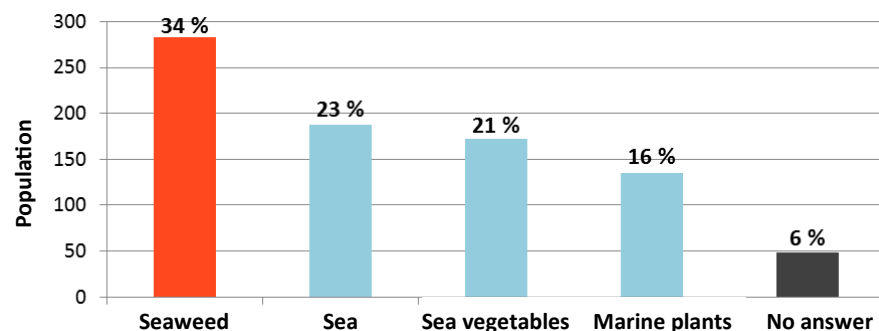
Terms used to denote seaweed on French-style food products
(Descriptive statistics obtained from the shop survey, 161 products identified)

What term should be used on seaweed product packaging?

Two “schools” emerge from discussions with seaweed professionals and with consumers (of seaweed or not) about what term should be used to indicate the presence of seaweed. The first considers that the **term “seaweed” should not be used** but replaced by more generic names, whilst the second wants **the term “seaweed” to appear** in the product name.

Names avoiding the term “seaweed”

As part of the nation-wide consumer survey, a panel of 825 interviewees were asked what term seaweed-based products should include in their names: “seaweed”, “sea vegetables”, “marine plants” or “sea”. Their responses were not unanimous but revealed that about **60% of French people prefer a term other than “seaweed” to appear in the product’s name** (see figure below). They consider “sea vegetables”, “marine plants” and other similar terms to be catchier and more pleasant, in other words, more easily saleable. Some even point out that they would not buy a product if they explicitly knew it contained seaweed.



Terms preferred by respondents for denoting seaweed
(Descriptive statistics obtained from the national survey, 825 respondents)

What term should be used on seaweed product packaging? (continued)

During the focus group discussions with consumers (of seaweed or not), some participants indicated that part of the population had a negative perception of seaweed and would be put off if they knew the product contained some: “[...]the term ‘seaweed’ is not really enticing[...]”. Indeed, seaweed not only evokes the sea, holidays and health, but also pollution.

To get round this poor image, using the prefix “sea” could be, in their opinion, a good solution because it reinstates the product in its environment. “[...]a term that evokes seaweed, but not too directly[...]”. Associating a soil-grown vegetable with the term “sea” can help improve the image of the product as with sea lettuce for *Ulva* sp. or sea spaghetti for *Himanthalia* e. “[...]the point is to refer to a well-known vegetable [...]”. A wide variety of names was suggested: marine salad, sea spinach, sea tagliatelle, sea herbs, sea vegetables, marine greens, etc. The term “sea” was especially favoured by those who do not eat or eat very few seaweed products, those who are not spontaneously drawn to this kind of food or are consumers of sushi .

Other participants preferred Japanese-inspired terms like “Japanese kelp” or even Japanese ones (“nori”) that they view as more fashionable. Finally, a few participants wanted a term that highlights the healthy and nutritional value of seaweed “[...]green and health should be emphasised[...]”.

Names including the term “seaweed” or the name of the species

According to the nation-wide consumer survey, **one third of French people would prefer the term “seaweed” to appear in the product name**. These are mainly people who regularly eat or are familiar with seaweed products. They consider that hiding the fact that they contain seaweed under other names is “window-dressing”. As consumers, they simply want to know what they eat, “[...]it must be clear[...]”. Another point is that people who do not eat seaweed do not know its various commercial names (dulse, kelp, wakame, etc.) and will not bother to figure them out if the word “seaweed” is not indicated clearly on the product. “[...]I do not know the names of the various species, so I need the word seaweed [...]”.

These answers were validated by most of the focus group participants who considered that the term “seaweed” should not be concealed. On the contrary, communication should focus on seaweed and its benefits and use it as a competitive edge to attract consumers’ attention. “[...]People will look for the term seaweed if properly communicated[...]”. Indeed, some consumers buy these products specifically to eat seaweed and benefit from its nutritional properties.

According to professionals, seaweed, even in small quantities, can add originality, texture, colour or flavour to a product. The problem would appear to be not so much the name of the ingredient as a lack of knowledge about seaweed in general. “[...]gradually make people familiar with the various species[...]”. The number of species, combined with the fact that some may have several names, only adds to consumers’ confusion. Wakame, for example, whose Latin name is *Undaria pinnatifida*, is also known as sea mustard. Knowing all the seaweed species and their various names can therefore be difficult for the average consumer.

Many people, however, consider that seaweed adds value to a product. Combining **the term “seaweed” with the name of the species** or its commercial name could help provide information about the variety of existing species.

An alternative would be to add an adjective to “seaweed” to provide consumers with more information and give the product more visibility. “Organic seaweed”, “natural seaweed”, “edible seaweed”, “Breton seaweed” or “ocean seaweed” are often mentioned and appreciated. Other formulas such as “seaweed flavour” or “contains seaweed” could also be used.

Note: all quotes are from consumer focus groups

Conclusion

The studies carried out by the Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences Centre highlight the great variety of terms used to denote seaweed-based products, which can be classified in two categories depending on the objective pursued.

Names from which **the term “seaweed” is absent** are relevant in the case of products with **low seaweed content** to **reassure** consumers who are not familiar with this type of product, especially if reference is made to a soil-grown, trusted vegetable. Such product names can also help **get round preconceived ideas** due to concerns about the taste or texture of seaweed for non-consumers or to the cognitive link between seaweed and algal bloom pollution.

Conversely, if the objective is to **highlight the originality** of adding seaweed to a product and to **communicate about its benefits**, (health, ethics, environment, etc.), the name of the product should then explicitly **refer to the presence of seaweed**, and even give the species' name. This name provides **greater transparency** and is in line with consumers' behaviour who increasingly pay attention to and want to know the “identity” of what they eat. Since seaweed is relatively unfamiliar, it is in the interest of manufacturers to communicate about this ingredient and **educate** consumers about the diversity of species. Being too specific, however, could be pointless or counterproductive if the seaweed content is too low or if consumers are unable to identify the scientific or commercial name as seaweed.

For further information

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All the results are available on the Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences Centre website: halieutique.agrocampus-ouest.fr • “Etudes et Transfert” section • IDEALG