Abstract

Market research suggests that organic food consumption in Europe is growing. The concept of dining out organically may therefore represent a promising business opportunity and yet little is known about how it is perceived by restaurant managers. This study reports on the outcome of a qualitative research conducted with managers of UK casual dining restaurants. It finds that restaurateurs are sceptical about the business feasibility of dining out organically which is viewed as a niche market with limited consumer appeal. This contradicts market research which questions the robustness of its findings. A new research stream looking at actual consumer behaviour, rather than attitudes, when dining out is necessary. Recommendations are devised to facilitate organic dining out in the UK.

Introduction

To-date, organic food has become an established research object. A number of studies have consistently examined this topic through various lenses as applied in different geographical, political, socio-cultural and economic contexts (see, for instance, Marian *et al.,* 2014; Oates *et al.*, 2012; Vittersø & Tangeland, 2015). While the outcome of existing research on organic produce demonstrates both commonalities and contradictions (Hughner *et al.,* 2007), literature agrees that the market for organic food is enlarging, especially in western countries (Marian *et al.,* 2014). This outlines a number of research opportunities as evidence is required to support consumer and business confidence in the growing demand for organic food (Siderer *et al.,* 2005). Further research is also important to contribute to policy-making strategies and managerial actions designed to enhance consumer awareness, facilitate production and maintain demand for organic produce (Aertsens *et al.,* 2009).

Despite the established nature of organic food research, there is limited evidence of its application in the catering sector (Poulston &Yiu, 2010). The reasons for why this knowledge gap ought to be rectified are manifold. First, there are signs of recovery in the restaurant sector from the negative implications of the latest financial recession as the number and the frequency of dining out is growing (Mintel, 2014; Schubber, 2015). Second, with the rise of the 'experience economy' (Oh *et al.,* 2007), dining out is increasingly considered an integral part of holiday and leisure routine (Quan & Wang, 2004). This has given rise to a number of niche forms of tourism that rely heavily on organic food provision as an integral element of their product offer, such as gastronomy tourism, slow tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism and agri-/rural tourism (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Timothy & Ron, 2013; Wood & Lego Munoz, 2007). The number of restaurants that aim to positively differentiate themselves in the catering market by using high quality cooking ingredients, including those produced organically, have also grown (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). Third, literature reports on the growing public distrust in conventional methods of food production due to the recent food-related scandals (see, for instance, Premanandh, 2013; Yang *et al.,* 2013). This suggests that consumers are getting increasingly conscious about the food production process, especially from the standpoint of the nutrition, quality, safety and provenance of cooking ingredients (Sidali *et al.,* 2013). This finds reflection in, for example, the rising success of UK business ventures specialising in delivery of organic food boxes (Chittock, 2013). This is also supported by evidence that the number and the popularity of farmers' markets that sell local and organic produce is on the rise in Europe (Carey *et al.,* 2011). All the above demonstrates the on-going market trend towards consumption of food that has clear health, societal and environmental benefits, including organic produce. Most important is that the public interest in the issue of food nutrition, provenance, quality, safety and authenticity is growing not only when cooking at home, but also when dining out (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

In addition to the limited scale of scientific exploration applied to the phenomenon of dining out organically, the scope of analysis of organic food consumption in the restaurant sector has also been restricted (Glanz *et al.,* 2007; Poulston & Yiu, 2010). Existing studies have primarily been concerned with examining consumer motivation to eat out organically (Kozup *et al.,* 2003). The attitudes and approaches of restaurant suppliers to procure organic produce have also been investigated (Wang *et al.,* 2013). While this consumer and supply chain research focus has a number of benefits for restaurant management, it fails to reveal how restaurateurs themselves perceive the concept of dining out organically from the viewpoint of the business opportunities it embraces. Research on the topic of organic food conducted from the perspective of restaurant managers is important as it improves understanding of the extent to which restaurateurs recognise the growing market trend for dining out organically and develop their business strategies accordingly. It is also crucial for the design of policies directed towards facilitating more informed and, ultimately, healthier and more society- and environment-benign food choices among restaurant diners. Lastly, it is essential for the development of policy intervention measures aimed to enable a stable supply of organic produce to the restaurant sector to meet the rising market demand.

This article aims to better understand how the concept of dining out organically is perceived by UK restaurant managers. It evaluates managerial attitudes to the public demand for organic food when eating out; the challenges of serving organic food in catering establishments; and the future projections for the phenomenon of dining out organically in the UK. The outcome of this study contributes to literature on the demand in organic food consumption as facilitated by the 'experience economy', post-recession recovery and enlarged health, societal and environmental public awareness as well as on its implications for the catering sector. While the focus of this article is on the UK, it is anticipated that this study's findings can be adopted for application in other geographical contexts where the market for dining out organically is growing, such as USA, Australia and New Zealand, and continental Europe.

Literature review

For long, organic food has been a topic of controversy (Morgan, 2014). Some believe that it is a more natural, healthier and tastier alternative to conventional food that imposes less impact on the environment (Aertsens *et al.,* 2009). Concurrently, some see organic produce as an overpriced option, which is no different to conventional food, and even as another marketing trick utilised by the food service provision sector to make customers overpay (Guilabert & Wood, 2012). The outcome of recent studies which had carried out a systematic analysis of peer-reviewed literature with a view to enhance knowledge on the health-related, societal and environmental advantages of organic produce (Baranski *et al.,* 2014; Smith-

Spangler *et al.*, 2012) did not add any clarity to the discussion, but caused even more confusion due to the contrasting nature of the conclusions drawn (Carrington & Arnett, 2014).

Despite the on-going debate on the benefits and disbenefits of organic food, the number of consumers who opt for organic food options does not reduce; in contrast, recent evidence has demonstrated a steady growth in organic food consumption in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand (KRAV, 2014; Organic Trade Association, 2015; Soil Association, 2015). In the UK alone, after a drop in consumer demand associated with the impact of the financial recession, the national organic produce market has expanded by 4% in 2014 and the share of organic products in all UK food consumption is now estimated as being equal to 6-14% (Addy, 2015; Mintel, 2015b; Soil Association, 2015), depending on the data source. The rise in the post-recession consumer spend and the enhanced health consciousness among the public are anticipated to positively affect future development of the organic food market in the UK with a 31% increase forecast by 2019 (Mintel, 2015b). To seize this growing market opportunity, many UK grocery retailers are extending their organic product offer. Besides such large players in the British grocery retail market as Sainsbury's, Waitrose and Ocado which have traditionally been in the forefront of promoting consumption of organic produce, this market opportunity has also been considered by grocery discounters, such as Aldi, who have recently announced plans to launch an organic food range (Addy, 2015; Smithers, 2014). Similar trend can be observed in Scandinavia and North America (KRAV, 2014; Organic Trade Association, 2015) which demonstrates the growing market appeal of organic food.

The market trend towards organic choices in grocery retail correlates well with eating out practices. A review of studies conducted by Poulston & Yiu (2010) demonstrates that circa 50% of restaurant visitors in USA claim to seek healthier menu items which include organic produce. The study by Prewitt (2007) provides even stronger evidence as it finds that over 70% of restaurant diners in USA would choose a menu item labelled as organic over a conventional product. Likewise, over 60% of UK consumers claim to opt for healthy choices, which include organic food, when dining out (Mintel, 2014). Mintel (2015a) reports that UK restaurant visitors are getting increasingly concerned about what they eat and what impact their food choices impose on their personal health and the environment. As a result, they encourage food service operators to disclose where the food served comes from, what ingredients it contains and how it is produced in order to make informed choices when dining out. Sloan & Leith (2004) posit that many UK customers are demanding organic food in restaurants, but very few food service organisations are acting upon this demand.

In terms of the market segmentation, Poulston & Yiu (2010) posit that organic food is more popular in the fine dining sector of food service provision. They find, for instance, that circa 70% of US restaurateurs include organic food options on their menus. Casual dining restaurants are falling behind with only about 30% of restaurateurs having organic food on offer (Perlik 2005 cited in Poulston & Yiu 2010). Higher popularity of organic produce with fine dining restaurateurs can be partially linked to the higher costs of procurement, preservation and preparation of organic produce; these are more likely to be offset by upmarket catering establishments with better financial and labour resources (Wang *et al.*, 2013). Organic food can be costly and excessive price premiums can deter consumers from purchasing organic produce (see, for instance, Winter & Davis 2006); this may partially explain why organic, usually more expensive dining options, are less popular within casual dining catering operators. The increased levels of public disposable income may also play a role in explaining a stronger appeal of organic menu options to fine dining restaurants. This is because it implies that contemporary consumers are prepared to pay extra for outstanding quality service and food which are the key attributes of the business offer delivered by upmarket catering establishments (Sidali *et al.,* 2013).

In some countries, dining out organically is supported politically. This is particularly pronounced in Scandinavia where restaurants are incentivised by the government to offer organic food. As a result, the number of catering facilities serving organic produce in Sweden, for example, has increased dramatically in recent years with all in-train restaurants offering organic meals and with many hotels providing customers with organic beverages (Dahlbacka, 2012; Gössling *et al.,* 2011). Continued governmental support has encouraged many public sector catering establishments in Scandinavia to serve organic food only and led to the increased interest among private sector restaurants in offering organic produce (Malmö Stad, 2015). Rech (2003) argues that the public catering sector has potential to become a role model in serving organic food as it facilitates demand and establishes the business pattern which could subsequently be followed on by private sector restaurants. This approach may be well justified because there is evidence showing that consumers are more likely to choose healthier, often organic, menu options for work lunch breaks (Mintel, 2014). Importantly, the continued success of eating out organically in Scandinavia is attributed not only to governmental and managerial initiatives, but also to a generally higher environmental awareness of consumers which translates into higher demand (Bohdanowicz, 2006).

Given the rise in organic food consumption as facilitated by the 'experience economy', the enhanced health and environmental awareness among restaurant visitors and the post-recession recovery, the restaurant industry should look more closely into the area of organic dining and adapt its practices accordingly to ensure a strong position in the market (Drummond & Brefere, 2004; Glanz *et al.,* 2007). Examples of successful restaurant businesses in Scandinavia which have integrated organic food into their menus demonstrate the feasibility of this market strategy. This suggests that this may be the right time for UK restaurateurs to consider serving organic produce or enhance the choice of organic options in catering establishments (Williams, 2007).

This literature review depicts market opportunities associated with serving organic food in restaurants. The British casual dining restaurant sector has however been slow in responding to this market call. While no reliable statistical data exist to derive an indication of how many UK private sector restaurants have integrated organic catering in their business strategies, in literature agrees that this number is small (Mintel, 2014; Sloan & Leith, 2004). Little is known about the managerial attitudes to the concept of dining out organically, and yet it can help understand the key determinants of its limited market uptake by UK restaurateurs. Evidence from other countries suggests that provision of organic food may require significant organisational changes which can be expensive and laborious to implement (Morgan & Sonnino, 2007). Limited supply and unreliable delivery services associated with this supply can also represent a barrier (Mikkelsen & Sylvest, 2012; Morgan & Sonnino, 2007). The price premium of organic food as perceived by consumers has been identified as another major constraint (Mikkelsen & Sylvest, 2012). Lastly, the issue known as the 'attitude-behaviour' gap in consumer behaviour research may play a substantial role in the yet limited uptake of organic dining in the UK private catering sector (Hibbert *et al.*, 2013). The gap is in that existing market studies predominantly deal with consumer *attitudes* to dining out organically, rather than explore their actual *behaviour* (Schubert *et al.*, 2010). It is known to represent a key obstacle for behavioural change towards more society- and environment-benign dining out practices and should not therefore be excluded from analysis. This study has therefore set out to enhance understanding of dining out organically in the UK, adapting a managerial perspective and examining the challenges and opportunities of serving organic food to the British restaurant custom.

Methodology

Despite the market research based evidence pointing at enhanced public demand for organic food globally and in the UK, the literature review shows that the British restaurant industry has been slow in responding to this market trend. This study aims to better understand the attitudes of restaurateurs to serving organic produce from the perspective of a sample of UK restaurant managers. The focus is on casual dining as it represents the most rapidly growing segment of the restaurant market in the UK (PwC, 2013). This is also because literature reports that, compared to upmarket catering establishments, casual dining restaurants have so far been reluctant to introduce organic food choices into their menus which calls for better understanding of the underlying reasons behind this decision.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative approach was adapted for primary data collection. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate to achieve the aim of this project as it allows for an in-depth evaluation and conceptualisation of opinions which can be examined in more detail in a subsequent quantitative analysis (Veal, 2006). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as these represent a reliable tool in qualitative research which enables collection of rich data for analysis. Furthermore, they are seen suitable for conducting an exploratory research on the social phenomena characterised by scarce and fragmented knowledge (Silverman, 2000). Semi-structured interviews allow for diversion from a set list of questions which facilitates deeper analysis and enables topical trajectories to be followed up (Veal, 2006). This method is considered particularly valuable when collecting data from busy and difficult-to-access participants as it offers an opportunity to collect quality, comparable data within a short period of time (Silverman, 2000). Restaurant managers represent a category of participants which is difficult to recruit for research (Poulston & Yiu 2010); hence, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most cost-effective method for primary data collection. Focus groups were also considered; they were however abandoned due to poor recruitment rate. The interview schedule was developed on the basis of the main themes as emerged from the literature review; it was pilot tested with two willing café managers. Some questions were re-worded in the result of pilot testing to make the interview schedule more appropriate for understanding by the target audience.

First round of interviews was conducted within the period of four weeks in March - April 2015. Due to the substantial difficulties in recruiting willing participants, the second round of interviews was necessary and these were conducted in October – November 2015. The convenience sampling approach was utilised as the financial and temporary constraints associated with this project's implementation had deterred researchers from deploying a more robust sampling technique. General Managers at 40 casual dining restaurants (where none were marketing themselves as 'organic) located within a mile radius from the town centre of Bournemouth (Dorset, UK) were approached with a request to partake in the study. The response rate was rather poor with only 12 restaurateurs (30% of the total sample) agreeing to contribute to this project (Table 1). The general unwillingness to participate may be partially attributed to the busy nature and the small size of restaurant businesses in the UK. This is recognised as a common issue in the study area in question as similar challenge was reported by Poulston & Yiu (2010) when recruiting restaurant managers for research in New Zealand. Researchers visited all participating restaurants and interviewed managers on site at convenient times. Interviews lasted between 25 and 40 minutes and were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. No incentives were offered.

[Insert Table 1 here]

A thematic framework was developed to categorise, analyse and summarise the outcome of interviews. It was based upon the findings retrieved from literature as well as the new research themes which had emerged from the interview transcripts. Data were reduced to a number of major categories (codes), thus facilitating evaluation of the opinions expressed by the participants and enabling analysis of their fit with the common themes identified earlier. Table 2 shows the coding structure employed for data analysis. Verbatim quotations were chosen when writing-up the outcome of thematic analysis and utilised to provide empirical evidence for the data interpretation conducted in this study and enhance credibility of its findings (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003).

[Insert Table 2 here]

The study has a number of limitations and it is acknowledged that its findings represent an indicative, rather than definitive character. A larger sample size would have enhanced the quality of data collected alongside their generalisability. The focus on casual dining restaurants reduces the representativeness and the value of this study's outcome for the upmarket and fast-food restaurant sectors. The project evaluates the perspective of British restaurateurs which can be different from the perspective adapted by restaurant managers in other countries. While all being the limitations, these are also promising research avenues which should be explored as part of future research.

Results

Interviews started with some general questions designed to better understand what restaurateurs perceive as 'organic food' and explore the experience they have in utilising organic produce at home and at work. A number of definitions were provided but all participants agreed that organic food is the food served in more natural state compared to conventional produce. As Hannah puts it:

'[Organic food is] the food produced without pesticides, the food in its natural state'

Organic does not necessarily mean it is completely pesticides free (Melik, 2010) which indicates that while managers are generally well familiar with the concept of organic produce, there is no exact knowledge on what makes food organic. Below, Hilary speaks about the problem of organic food's definition:

'It is difficult to define… it is different to each customer… it is free from pesticides, it is more natural, there is no artificial help in production'

Too many and too different definitions of organic produce as adapted in different geographies represent a renowned issue which hampers the market appeal of the concept and contributes to public and managerial confusion (Essoussi & Zahaf, 2008). These restaurant managers are no exception which outlines an area for policy-making intervention. Existing definitions of organic food as adopted in different geographies should be harmonised to enhance consumer and managerial understanding of what exactly the notion of 'organic food' stands for and what advantages and disadvantages it offers.

All participants used organic food at least a few times a week when cooking at home. However, no one reported a completely organic diet while the choice of specific types of organic produce when cooking at home was determined by their perceived better taste, health benefits and animal welfare concerns. This was effectively summarised by Tony and Hilary. This is in line with literature (see, for example, Makatouni, 2002) which indicates that consumers put taste, health and animal-centered values in the forefront of their decision to purchase organic food in the UK. Importantly, some degree of scepticism about the health benefits of organic food was expressed by these two participants which shows the relevance of the on-going academic debate on this topic:

'Only recently I have started looking into organic as it is interesting to see a taste difference. It is also out of worry of health issues in chemicals … I eat organic beef mince and milk. A difference in taste noticed though it could be psychological'

'Organic food from a nutritional point of view is no different and more expensive I think. I'm not prepared to pay more for same nutritional value. I do buy organic chicken for particular family members though because of an animal husbandry welfare issue. I also buy organic fruits and vegs. There is taste difference due to less water but no difference in chicken'

In terms of serving organic food at work, none of the participants operated a fully organic menu in their restaurant although half of the participants did use a limited amount of organic produce, either to prepare specific dishes based on perishable ingredients, such as milk- and fruit-based deserts or salads, or on an 'when and if required' basis as per quote by Craig:

'We do use it [organic food] but only because we are a commercial entity. If a client requests organic, we get it in, but that is very rare'

Importantly, all participants emphasised that such selective use of organic produce was not deliberate; it was purely because suppliers did not offer any conventional food alternatives. When cooking with organic ingredients, all participants would mention this on their menus. There is evidence that the simple addition of the label 'organic' to a food item has potential to instantly create a 'halo' effect making consumers believe the item is of higher quality, lower in fat and calories, and steering them towards that particular food choice (Wan-Chen *et al.,* 2013). This may serve as a partial explanation as to why the restaurants chose to stress the organic nature of certain products on their menus, allowing consumers to believe that they are offering a superior product compared to competitors.

As part of the Craig's quote suggests, limited consumer demand is the key reason for not serving organic food in British restaurants. This is in line with literature pointing at the significant appeal of organic food for niche tourism/hospitality markets, rather than for mainstream users of food service provision (Choo & Jamal, 2009). All participants but one claimed that the UK market for dining out organically is tiny and has seen better days as per quotes by Derek, Ryan and Jorge:

'There's no demand [for organic food]! In 9 years only one person asked me about organic. More people ask about Free Range'

'Five years ago organic was more popular. I mean, it trended in 2005, 2006, that sort of time. Organic has had its day except for the niche market'

'I do not see much requirement for organic from consumers – there is a high level of cynicism to organic produce these days as being overpriced and not always authentic. Tiny market'

Hannah, whose restaurant specialises in serving vegan food, was an exception here although she also argues that dining out organically represents a rather small portion of the national market:

'We sometimes do get people who specifically want organic. They don't want artificial additives. Nationwide though I think the demand is low as people aren't as bothered when eating out'

This is an interesting finding given that the outcome of previous research (Sloan & Leith, 2004) and UK market research and statistical data (Mintel, 2015b; Soil Association, 2015) show the demand for organic food, after a recession-caused decline, is back on the rise, both when eating at home and dining out. This may indicate that the restaurant managers are unfamiliar with the most recent market trends pointing at the rise in consumer demand for organic food when dining out. This is however deemed unlikely; more possible is that this signifies the 'attitude-behaviour gap' in consumer food choice. The gap can be caused by a variety of factors. Higgins & Tadajewski (2002) suggest, for example, that although consumers may have intentions to consume organic food, financial or other constraints may prevent them from translating intentions into purchasing behaviour. The determinants of the gap in consumer choice of organic produce alongside the solutions which might help overcome this gap need to be better understood.

The lack of consistent supply was referred to by the majority of participants as the second most important reason for the limited use of organic food in their restaurant businesses. This is logical given that demand determines supply. The challenge of organic food supply was reported in previous research (Kasim & Ismail, 2012; Mikkelsen & Sylvest, 2012; Morgan & Sonnino 2007) and this study shows the problem persists, also in the UK context. Another interesting finding is that, according to Hilary, there is limited public understanding of the concept of organic food which makes an effect on demand:

‘For mass catering it is really difficult to provide organic produce as there are so few suppliers able to cater for large scale. Plus consumers see local the same as organic so there’s no point’

Hilary’s quote outlines one of the major public confusions associated with organic food. According to Melik (2010), many UK consumers believe that any local food is organic; this is not true in reality as, in fact, only 5% of UK organic produce is grown locally. Furthermore, there are issues which relate to the legal definition of ‘local’ where the absence of a single, commonly agreed upon definition represents the key problem (USDA, 2010). In the context of this study, for instance, the participants gave various definitions when asked to specify the radius which would meet their understanding of locally produced food. This indicates an area where governmental policies are required to enhance public and managerial understanding of the concept of organic food to ensure they comprehend what organic produce stands for, how it differs from local food and, on this basis, make informed purchase decisions.

Unlike organic, all participants made an effort to serve locally grown, Fair Trade certified and seasonal food in their catering establishments. Restaurateurs believe that these aspects of food are more important to consumers than the notion of ‘organic’ as summarised by Ben.

‘British, ethically reared or grown and seasonal is far more important for consumers than organic’

In contrast to UK market research and statistical data which claim that restaurant visitors take the health implications of their food choices into consideration (Mintel, 2015a), the participants argued that ‘health’ is usually not a priority for consumers and such factors as value for money, portion size, familiarity, variety of choice and indulgence are more important. This may either indicate poor awareness among restaurateurs of the on-going UK market trend for organic food when dining out (which is unlikely) or underpin flaws in existing research on organic purchase decisions when dining out (which is more possible).

It was suggested by the participants that limited demand for organic is partially due to the lack of consumer knowledge on what organic food is about and the benefits it brings. It was further established that consumers may therefore be unwilling to pay a premium for organic produce as they do not understand why this premium is charged and if it is justified or represents value for money. Consumers also seem to have little knowledge on local food due to the lack of a clear definition, but they may have more trust in the ‘local’ label (Sims, 2009). Therefore, restaurants are following the demand of consumers and labelling their products as ‘local’ rather than ‘organic’. Again, this outlines a number of policy-making implications which should aim to enhance public understanding of the notion ‘organic food’ alongside the benefits it brings.

The next set of questions was designed to identify the factors which would encourage restaurateurs to serve more organic food in their catering establishments. Increased demand was referred to as the key factor followed by more reliable supply. This is logical given the two factors inter-relate:

'If demand increased, we would [serve organic]. The industry is owned by consumers. Consumers who buy organic via retail will expect to see similar products in restaurants but it is still very niche. Price wouldn't make much difference as supply is so unreliable and certain items aren't easily available' (Tony)

The findings show that restaurant managers appreciate the market for dining out organically but they do not view it as a feasible business opportunity unless consumer demand for organic food improves and drives supply of organic produce. Organic food procurement costs were seen as an important, but not a determinant, factor for the broader adoption of dining out organically in restaurants. This is in line with Glanz *et al.* (2007); Morgan & Sonnino (2007) but contradicts Kasim & Ismail (2012); Mikkelsen & Sylvest (2012) who argue that the price of organic food will be a primary limitation for its broader adoption by restaurateurs.

When discussing the opportunities for offering more organic food options, the participants made reference to UK government in terms of its concurrent role of a facilitator and an inhibitor of serving organic produce in restaurants. For example, Hannah, a manager of a recently opened vegan catering business, states:

'I got a grant to start up my business which I am sure was influenced by the business model [vegan] including the use of organic food in cooking'

This suggests that there is some governmental support available in the UK to restaurateurs willing to go organic; however, this support is likely to cover the start-up costs only while continued provision of organic food in restaurants would bring about significant on-going expenses related to, for example, its procurement and marketing. There is no governmental support available to offset these which implies they may have to be passed onto customers, thus increasing menu prices which may negatively affect demand. Furthermore, as Jorge posits:

'Going fully organic will be challenging due to legislation. There is no governmental support and too many barriers due to cleaning regimes requirements and use of non-organic food in cooking…'

Operational re-organisation which is required to meet governmental standards related to food safety and hygiene is an established factor which decreases appeal of organic produce to restaurateurs (Morgan & Sonnino, 2007) which finds confirmation in this study.

In terms of the benefits associated with serving organic food, restaurateurs agreed there were some, such as an improved public image, an enhanced appeal to the niche tourist market, and a showcase of the organisational commitment to corporate social responsibility with subsequent reputational gains. This notwithstanding, the participants did not really identify themselves with these benefits which suggests these are ranked lower than the short-term commercial profit. Managers failed to recognise a number of other organisational benefits of offering organic food as highlighted in literature, such as kitchen routine optimisation, improved focus on the production process, indirect cost savings, enhanced process documentation, a reduction in food waste and improved staff morale, pride and engagement (Mikkelsen & Sylvest, 2012). This suggests that the UK restaurant industry does not have confidence in serving organic food which prevents managers from giving more thorough consideration to the prospective benefits of catering for dining out organically.

Fine dining restaurants were mentioned by Tony as trend setters in the field of dining out organically due to the upmarket appeal and a larger pool of resources available. The potential of fine dining food operators to drive consumer demand for organic in the restaurant sector was also acknowledged:

‘Fine dining should be a role model. They are industry leaders who set up trends’

According to Craig, contemporary consumers increasingly consider restaurants as part of the entertainment industry. He argues that they often go to a restaurant not because they are hungry, but because they want to be amused and try something they have seen trending on TV. Therefore Craig argues that media can affect consumer choices towards organic food:

‘Hospitality is little to do with the food these days, it’s to do with showbusiness. Hospitality are just followers, we offer what the entertainment industry sells. TV chefs show what to eat and how to eat. If they cook organic food, consumers will come and ask for organic’

The recent popularity of cookery TV programmes in the UK (Ramsden, 2014) proves Craig’s argument. This also highlights an effective opportunity to affect public understanding of organic food and promote the concept of dining out organically which may translate into increased demand and make British restaurateurs re-consider their scepticism about the business opportunities it encompasses.

Conclusion and implications

This study examined the perspectives of managers of casual dining restaurants in the UK on the concept of eating out organically aiming to provide better understanding of how restaurateurs respond to the increased public demand for organic food, both when cooking at home and dining out, as reported in market research. The study found that restaurant managers possess fairly solid knowledge on the notion of organic food and are aware about the issues attributed to its benefits and disbenefits. They do not however differentiate between the concepts of ‘organic’ and ‘local’ food and see the latter as being more appealing to restaurant visitors than the former.

The key finding of this study was in that, despite market research evidence pointing at the enhanced consumer demand for organic produce in the UK, both in at home and out-of-home settings, restaurateurs are sceptical about the business feasibility offered by the concept of dining out organically. According to managers, eating out organically represents a niche market. Restaurateurs report scarce demand for organic food which translates into inconsistent and unreliable supply. While managers acknowledge the improved levels of public spending as well as the enhanced health- and environment-consciousness among diners, they claim there are other factors which consumers prioritise over organic eating. These include both the hedonic (for example, the value for money, portion size, familiarity, variety of choice, restaurant image) as well as the eudemonic (for instance, animal and plant welfare, local or British produce) reasons.

Low consumer demand for organic food in private catering as identified in this study is in line with the outcome of previous research conducted among restaurant managers in USA and New Zealand. This managerial scepticism however contradicts the findings of UK national statistical surveys and consumer research which report on organic food consumption at home and when eating out as being a growing consumer trend. This discrepancy may be attributed to two major factors. On the one hand, it may indicate that British restaurateurs are primarily concerned with short-term profits and pay little attention to the market opportunities which are likely to pay off in a long-term perspective. On the other hand, the discrepancy may be due to the ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ issue in consumer research which highlights the limitations attributed to research design of existing consumer and market surveys. This is because they largely report on consumer attitudes, rather than on actual purchase behaviour. Consumer behaviour is often different from attitudes; given that restaurant managers witness consumer behaviour, rather than attitudes, may indicate that the outcome of research projects which aim at exploring the managerial perspective on the issue in question have potential to generate more reliable and realistic results. Having said this, given the limited sample size which this study is based upon, it is difficult to draw generalisable conclusions from its outcome. It can however be used as a basis for designing a large-scale, quantitative survey striving to examine the perspectives of British restaurateurs on the issue in question and thus providing more representative results. Such a survey can also be conducted in different geographies to enable a subsequent cross-country comparison. Such countries as Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Austria where literature attributes more success to dining out organically would be particularly interesting objects for a comparative investigation.

The study found that restaurateurs would be prepared to adopt organic food options more broadly, subject to increased consumer demand. Consumer demand can be facilitated by mass media and the hospitality industry itself; it can also be influenced by purposefully designed governmental policies. The entertainment and media industries, especially cookery and celebrity chef shows, can make a positive effect on demand for organic produce in the UK given the significant role played by the media in shaping public opinions. Furthermore, fine dining catering establishments have potential to serve as ‘role models’ and ‘trend setters’ in encouraging eating out organically. These media and industry-related approaches can help transform dining out organically into a new fashion which will be followed by the custom of casual dining restaurants. Lastly, the effect of the ‘experience economy’ should not be neglected. Given the on-going rise in public awareness of the health and environmental implications of food choice, restaurateurs should consider promoting organic food as a consumer experience, rather than a product. This may have a particular appeal for customers of niche forms of tourism, such as slow tourism and eco-tourism.

Restaurateurs assigned important role to UK government in facilitating demand for organic food in catering establishments. This can partially be achieved via incentivising and subsiding public food service operators which would enable them to serve organic produce. The UK's public sector food procurement accounts for circa 6% of UK's food service sector sales (Bonfield, 2014); it does not currently integrate organic procurement which represents an opportunity for intervention. The Scandinavian experience shows that this is a viable tool to enhance public knowledge on and facilitate consumer demand for organic. Similar to the case with fine dining catering establishments, UK public sector food service operators can have a positive influence on consumer attitudes to organic food consumption. UK government should also design policies directed to strengthen supply of organic produce as this was referred to as another limiting factor. Organic suppliers can be provided with subsidies and business preferences, especially if the decision to introduce organic procurement in public food service operations is made. Lastly, given the consumer confusion about the notions 'organic' and 'local', UK government can develop dedicated media campaigns designed to enhance public understanding of these concepts, refine knowledge on their benefits and disbenefits, and enable consumers to see the difference between the two, thus ultimately making more informed dining out choices.

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Table 1. Interview participants (n=12).

Pseudonym	Type of casual dining establishment	Managerial work experience in the field: *Limited = 1 year and less* *Advanced = 2-5 years* *Extensive = more than 5 years*
Craig	Traditional British casual dining restaurant	Extensive
Ryan		
Ben		Advanced
Samuel		
Jorge		Limited
Hilary	Modern British casual dining restaurant	Advanced
Julia		
Derek		Extensive
Nick	Modern British and European casual dining restaurant	Advanced
Ken		Limited
Tony	Modern British casual dining restaurant with elements of fine dining	Extensive
Hannah	Casual dining cafe which specialises in serving vegan food	Limited

Table 2. Coding structure with themes and codes.

Themes	**Main codes**
Understanding of the ‘organic food’ construct	Healthy food
	Less processed food
	Use of specific production methods
	More environment-friendly food
Frequency of using ‘organic’ when cooking at home	Daily
	Weekly
	Less frequently
Frequency of using ‘organic’ when cooking at work	Only for selected menu items
	When and if available
	To cater to specific requests
Barriers to serving ‘organic’ at work	Lack of consumer demand
	Inconsistent supply
	Governmental policies and legislation
	Stronger appeal of other food attributes e.g. provenance and nutrition
Benefits of serving ‘organic’	Enhanced image and reputation
	Appeal to niche tourist markets
	Good corporate citizen