

**COMMISSIONER DALLI'S PARTICIPATION AT
THE AGRI/SANCO CONFERENCE:
LOCAL AGRICULTURE AND SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS**

**WEDNESDAY 20 APRIL 2012, 17:00HRS
CHARLEMAGNE BUILDING, RUE DE LA LOI - BRUSSELS**

SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking my colleague – Dacian – for his kind invitation, asking me to speak here today.

Indeed, I welcome the opportunity to address such a diverse audience and speak about an issue in which I know all of us have a very strong interest.

The issue of quality in relation to food has become increasingly important in recent years and this trend will no doubt continue.

But quality is a complex value – difficult, if not impossible, to define in a simple, all-embracing manner.

In addition to the long-established concepts of taste, appearance and texture, it can cover aspects such as methods of production and environmental or animal welfare considerations.

During my frequent visits to the Member States, I am often surprised not so much by the quality demanded by consumers but more by the sheer diversity of what there is on offer.

My home country is Malta – and we Maltese have a special relationship with food and a long and proud history of traditional products.

I am well aware that French or Italian cuisines are considered by many to be the best in the world. But all Member States are equally proud of their traditions relating to food. To cite a concrete example let me draw on my own personal experience. Maltese food is rustic in character, full of the flavour and colour typical of the Mediterranean.

Our food is influenced by Malta's proximity to Sicily and North Africa –with, what we like to think, is a special twist of our own.

Traditional food accompanies us through life – some gbejniet (local sheep's cheeses), zalzett (herb flavoured Maltese sausage) with galletti (Maltese crackers) and some bigilla (broad bean pate) served with Maltese bread and olive oil; or on a cold day hot pastizzi (savoury ricotta or pea-filled pastries).

Believe me – I am not trying to make you feel hungry. Rather, I am trying to show the strong attachment that all Europeans have to their own traditional products. These are part of our individual and common cultural heritage bringing us together in the most interesting and unique of ways.

For me – and I am sure for you too – it would be unthinkable not to offer this diversity and variety – this cultural wealth – to future generations.

I can categorically state therefore that the Commission does not intend to create Europe-wide standards for taste.

What would be the point of forcing the hand of producers instead of simply leaving them to be free to innovate and excel, and genuinely respond to consumer demands?

Indeed, attempting to impose uniformity of quality would nullify variety to the detriment of all.

But whilst this holds for the somewhat nebulous concept of quality, the concept of food safety is an entirely different matter.

Food safety is a prerequisite to food quality. Without safety, quality simply cannot exist.

The last decade saw a complete overhaul of the European food safety system. An important element of this reform was the so-called "hygiene package".

This created, in January 2006, a single transparent EU hygiene policy. The main premise of the hygiene policy is that food operators bear full and prime responsibility for the safety of the food they produce.

Provision is made for hygiene rules to be applied at all levels of the food chain, from primary production to delivery to the final consumer.

In order to serve consumers and also to respect the needs of small-scale producers, the Commission took great pains to ensure, and will continue to ensure, that EU hygiene legislation does not stifle small, local, traditional food producers.

The hygiene package allows for appropriate flexibility not to hamper the sale of foods produced by small producers, or locally by traditional means of production.

Let me be crystal clear: contrary to a much-circulated myth, the legislation on food hygiene does not favour industrialised methods of food production.

Allow me now to turn to other Commission initiatives of particular interest for the traditional production of food. Commissioner Ciolos is more able to speak about the intricacies and long history of the Common Agricultural Policy but what is clear to me is that the reform of this policy over the last two decades has seen the introduction of a radically different model for agricultural support. It confirmed the shift in emphasis away from reliance on price support towards reliance on market demands. This is where consumer policy comes to the forefront since EU farmers are not only increasingly exposed to global competition but even more so to consumer demand. This poses a key challenge where they have to provide buyers with products in the right quantity, of the right quality and at the right price.

We currently have a number of measures and instruments designed to assist farmers to deliver quality to their buyers and consumers.

As many of you will know, the EU is the second largest exporter of food in the world. Over the years, the Union has developed a specific promotion policy for European agricultural products, for both internal and external markets.

This boosts the image of European products in consumers' eyes, in particular as regards quality, nutritional value and safety of foodstuffs. Great importance is also attached to traceability and the methods of production.

I should also note that the Commission was recently actively involved in funding research projects dealing with the concept of traditional foods. The integrated project TRUEFOOD is an important tool supporting traditional food production and enhancing its competitiveness.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I have said, the future success of European food producers is likely to become ever more dependent on quality, which in turn relies on safety.

There is a place and role for every type of food production.

Vive la difference!

At European level there is strong commitment to making sure that small, traditional producers find and keep their place – their "niche" – in order to continue to respond and satisfy consumer demand for safe but varied, quality products.

I wish you all a successful, profitable and sustainable future.

Thank you.

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