

EIT Food RIS Consumer Engagements Labs in Kaunas, Lithuania (2019)

Consumer Engagement Labs are co-creation workshops for the food industry. It is an innovative form of cooperation between food producers and consumers — in case of the 2019 pilot Labs, the Labs participants were seniors, consumers aged 65+, and local companies representing different segments of the food industry: retailers, producers and innovative start-ups. The consortia also included scientific institutions and NGOs. The goal is to jointly create a new, exciting food product that would meet the requirements of target consumers.

CEL is a unique project: four co-creation workshops for food industry conducted in autumn 2019 in four European cities. Every workshop had three institutional participants — a local food retailer, a local food producer and a start-up company. There were about 15-20 participants in every location, senior consumers aged 65-85. They created ideas for new food products, working in this innovative laboratory of consumer behaviours. The participants gained numerous insights about purchasing behaviours of seniors and their attitudes towards food, valuable for the European food industry. EIT Food RIS Consumer Engagement Labs project was financed by the European Institute of Innovation & Technology as a part of HORIZON 2020 programme and co-ordinated by University of Warsaw.

“The products created by our participants were very different from the Lithuanian culinary tradition. They talked about drinks from the hop, but without alcohol. Or about rich toasts with spices, which are completely different from the products they have in shops. There were many interesting discussions” — recalls Dr. Gitana Alencikiene from the Kaunas University of Technology, who coordinated the Lithuanian workshop. “Our group was a little bit older than 65, we had many people over 80 years old. It was very interesting to see how people cooperated between themselves and how they interacted with representatives of participating companies, because the age difference was pretty significant at times. One could hear language differences between them and corporate employees. They used the same words, but with a different meaning, because of the age difference. Seniors used many expressions common in the times of their childhood” — says Dr. Alencikiene.

The participants (there were 20 of them) liked the feeling of being important. They felt a little like researchers specialising in consumer behaviours. „*Why you ask us these questions? We are not educated in this field*” — they were asking with initial disbelief, not trusting their own creative potential, which was yet to be unveiled through the creative tasks.

CEL workshop in Kaunas took place on the 14th of September and the 28th of October. The organizers enlisted three companies to participate: Palink, an operator of IKI supermarket chain, second largest in Lithuania with 228 stores and 6500 employees; Ekofrisa, one of the largest grain processors in the Baltic region, which in 2018 started producing a range of buckwheat products, including granola and food replacement powder; Innofoods, a start-up making AVOO, an innovative Lithuanian plant-based drink made from oats. With such a coordinating consortium, it was no surprise that healthy grain-based products became the focus of CEL workshop in Kaunas.

Seniors — with the cooperation of participating companies — proposed a wide range of creative, new products. For example, organic buckwheat bar in one bite-size, not sweet (as usual), but rather salty, with vegetables, spices and seeds. Among the proposed new foods, there was also an improved oat drink, distinctively different from AVOO and enriched with berries. One of the more creative ideas was “*Šnypštukas*” – a spicy and aromatic food replacement shaped as effervescent tablets.

One of the interesting insights from the workshop was that seniors would like to buy products in smaller packaging. “*They want to have sauces in one-portion packages*” — explains Dr. Alencikiene. Similar preferences for smaller packaging size were also prevalent in CEL workshops organized in other countries. Participants were open to novelties, and some of their ideas included unusual ingredients such as hemp, probably inspired by trends discussed by mass media.

CEL project proved an eye-opener for the local companies, unravelling needs of the growing and commercially relevant consumer segment. Seniors also enjoyed it immensely: they’ve gained a lot of self-confidence and made new friends. “*They liked very much that the workshop took place at the university. They were curious, feeling like students again*” — Dr. Alenckiene says.

In December 2019, the Lithuanian consortium implementing the EIT Food RIS Consumer Labs workshops in Kaunas selected their preferred new food product, co-created with consumers, which they consider as having the best potential for commercialisation. This innovative product will be available on the shelves in local shops by June 2020.

In 2020, the project continues — the Labs will take place in 6 countries of Central & Eastern and Southern Europe. “*We are constantly working on improving our co-creation methodology, testing it in new geographical contexts and applying to other consumer groups. This is a cutting edge in the innovation management research. Furthermore, we’re assembling an impressive body of knowledge about behaviours of senior consumers and challenges that companies face while cooperating with consumers*” — says prof. Krzysztof Klincewicz from University of Warsaw, leader of the project.

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EIT Food RIS Consumer Engagements Labs in Poznań, Poland (2019)

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“Seniors in our group were looking for products reminding them of their childhood. But they also spoke about the environmental and ethical dimensions of food production, which surprised us. Our participants were very rational consumers” — says Dr. Anna Wielicka–Regulska from Poznań University of Life Sciences, who coordinated the team delivering CEL workshop in Poland. “They had a very health-focused, rational attitude to food. They wanted food to help them with fight against time, to slow down the ageing processes. Seniors also have more time to cook and to look for ingredients than younger consumers. Health and longevity were their main concerns” — Dr. Wielicka–Regulska adds.

The workshop in Poznań took place on the 10th and 17th of October, 2019. It had 20 participating seniors (aged 65–85) and three companies: Gminne Składy, a local medium-sized food retailer running 47 stores in the region; Folwark Wąsowo, a restored 19th-century farm specialized in production of preserves and ecological vegetables; COFACTOR, a biotechnology start-up with mission to create new innovative technologies in the field of nutraceuticals, cosmeceuticals, pharmaceuticals, and analytical reagents.

“Our participants became extremely engaged. This was a unique experience for them, even though the tasks we asked them to do were not easy. We were also surprised that some people who were actually not invited turned out at our workshop, because they’d heard it was interesting and wanted to participate” — Dr. Wielicka–Regulska smiles.

The focal food product category for the Polish workshop was fruit and vegetable preserves — with regionally produced ingredients playing a prominent role. Participants selected beetroot as one of the most important ingredients in many of the proposed new products. In the final presentation, the beetroot was part of 4 out of 9 product concepts. Seniors proposed among others a *borscht* plate, a beetroot-based ice cream, a beetroot juice with herbs and spices and a beetroot paste with herbal additives. Beetroots are not only produced in the Poznań region but also deeply connected with Poland’s culinary tradition. The taste of beetroot evoked in many participants memories of their childhood. This sentimental factor was fused with a tight focus on the health value of the foods. The participants suggested using ingredients such as ginger or turmeric because of their health impacts. An interesting idea was the use of collagen, which improves the condition of joints, skin, hair and nails. At present, food products with the addition of collagen are unique in Europe.

“It was a new experience for the participating companies and they found it to be very interesting. They also obtained very interesting results: potentially fantastic product to sell in the future. Participants created unique combinations of ingredients, which are not available on the market” — explains Dr. Wielicka–Regulska.

The workshop itself was also very interesting for local companies as a new approach to creative processes. The companies plan to follow up the project with sensory testing of food prototypes, helping them to modify and improve the final products.

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EIT Food RIS Consumer Engagements Labs in Oeiras, Portugal (2019)

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“What was special about our group? We had a few participants who were born in Angola and Mozambique, people from the former colonies in our group. They brought their sensitivity with them: the energy, the excitement, the love of life” — says Dr. Carla Moita Brites from Instituto Nacional de Investigação Agrária e Veterinária (INIAV), who organized a workshop in Oeiras, Portugal. Dr. Brites knows what she talks about: she was born in Benguela, Angola, herself. The culinary traditions of Angola and Mozambique were also present during the workshop. Participants proposed to use spices and other ingredients popular in these former Portuguese colonies.

The workshop was organized in Oeiras on the 19th and 29th November. The atmosphere during both workshop days was great. *“Women appeared more interested in the sessions than men and tended to speak more during the teamwork, but men were in turn very inventive. Once they came, that is, because it was not easy to recruit them. Throughout the sessions, people became very engaged, they connected among themselves on social media and were making new friends” — enthuses Dr. Brites.*

Three institutional partners involved in the co-creation were very carefully chosen. The organizers enlisted Modelo Continente Hipermercados, the leading food retailer in Portugal with over 28000 employees and more than 3 billion euro of annual revenue; Vieira de Castro, an esteemed Portuguese food producer with more than 75 years of corporate history and over 200 employees; Qualiriso — a start-up company specialized in the production of innovative food ingredients made from rice by-products, rice flours and

stabilized rice bran. The consortium decided to focus on specific category of food products — wellness biscuits, with a special emphasis on diabetics. *“We happened to have several diabetics in our group, some of them were involved with the Portuguese Association of Diabetics”* — explains Dr. Brites.

Seniors had long and enlightening discussions about food. They proved extremely attentive to health factors. They wanted their food to taste well — but also wanted it to contain less sugar, or use natural sugar alternatives. Furthermore, many of them wanted their biscuits to be gluten-free. The discussions were very detailed: it turned out, for example, that one of the important sensory factors for senior consumers is food stickiness. Many senior consumers use dentures and don't like when their food sticks to their artificial teeth. As part of the creative sessions, seniors made attempts to design the optimal texture of biscuits.

What else did they want from their ideal wellness biscuits? The participants discussed environmental issues: a biscuit should be free from palm oil and packaged into easily recyclable materials. The biscuit container should be not too big (this was by the way a recurring issue, pointed out by consumers in various countries). The optimal packet of biscuits, according to workshop participants, should contain 5–6 medium-sized biscuits, should be easily opened and closed (preferably: sealed hermetically to preserve flavour and freshness). The proposed design would also help attain a long shelf life for the product.

Portugese consumers invented a marketing slogan for their new product: *“Preciosa – A bolacha saudável e gostosa!”* (*“Preciosa — healthy and tasty cookie!”*). The local companies were visibly interested in the co-creation outcomes. *“They even discussed in which part of the supermarket they can put this product and whether people could pay a premium price for such a product”* — says Dr. Brites.

In December 2019, the Portuguese consortium implementing the EIT Food RIS Consumer Labs workshops in Oeiras selected their preferred new food product, co-created with consumers, which they consider as having the best potential for commercialisation. This innovative product will be available on the shelves in local shops by June 2020.

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EIT Food RIS Consumer Engagements Labs in Badajoz, Spain (2019)

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“We could not find many participants from rural areas. Many of them came from university for seniors, from the town of Badajoz. They turned out to be very active people! At the beginning, participants thought the workshops were about cooking, not creating new products. But they were very satisfied in the end — and became very interested in participating in our Lab” — says Prof. María de Guía Córdoba Ramos from Instituto Universitario de Investigación en Recursos Agrarios (INURA) of the University of Extremadura, leader of the research team that conducted workshops in Badajoz.

The organizers have received numerous applications and finally selected 17 participants, aiming for desired gender, age and other criteria that ensure the diversity of the group. There were also three institutions participating in the co-creation session: Lider Aliment, a food retailer employing 1200 workers in 260 locations; IBERITOS, a local producer of high-quality pâtés and spread creams with 120 employees; Brain_Co, a start-up research and design agency. The workshop took place in Badajoz on November 8 and 15, 2019.

“The participants were very happy about the idea of creating products from their region, with local qualities and its pride, as a central focus. For example, there is a special product from the Guadalupe region of Extremadura called morcilla. It is a local variant of blood sausage, special meat product prepared with blood. Some participants entertained the idea of developing a new product inspired by morcilla, as they loved its texture and taste, but unfortunately, morcilla is not very healthy. So they worked on developing far healthier versions or alternatives” — explains Prof. María de Guía Córdoba Ramos.

Healthy (or at least: *healthier*) blood sausage was not the actual goal of the workshop. Participants were divided into 3 teams and every team worked on a number of creative tasks, which resulted in three top ranked ideas for new food products.

“Participants were very happy with their homework, which included a visit to the supermarket. All of them went together in the supermarket, examined products available there. They created a profile of their desired consumer and had different opinions about how to get the best products for this specific person. Most of participants proposed products like creams, many different types of creams and spreads, with various ingredients and textures” — explains Prof. María José Benito Bernáldez, who was also involved in the organisation of the Labs in Spain.

What products were designed? For example, one of them was a very spicy fish pâté with peppers and a rather exotic taste. Seniors from Badajoz pointed out to the researchers that for elderly — just like for anyone else — food is not just something they consume merely to survive. It should be a pleasure, enjoyed with all the senses. Elderly consumers do not want to give up this pleasure. Their health might not be as good as ten or twenty years ago, and nutritious requirements might restrict their food options, but they still want to enjoy life — including food — to the fullest.

However, health remains a very important consideration. That is why they want to see in their local supermarket delicacies resembling them of delicacies of traditional Spanish cuisine, but with less salt, in a low-fat version, and free from many additives.

Among food product concepts developed, there were also many other exciting culinary ideas like spreads combining scrambled eggs with morcilla sausage from Guadalupe, spiked with apples and pine nuts. *“Producers were very happy with this kind of product and we hope to commercialize it”* — sums it up Prof. María de Guía Córdoba Ramos.

In December 2019, the Spanish consortium implementing the EIT Food RIS Consumer Labs workshops in Badajoz selected their preferred new food product, co-created with consumers, which they consider as having the best potential for commercialisation. This innovative product will be available on the shelves in local shops by June 2020.

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