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Challenges and Consumer Conundrums**

Stephan S. Marette

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**Jill E. Hobbs, Stavroula Malla, Eric K. Sogah
and May T. Yeung, 2014, *Regulating Health Foods.
Policy Challenges and Consumer Conundrums***

Edward Elgar, 288 p

Stéphan Marette¹

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This book focuses on the regulation of health foods encompassing both functional foods and supplements. Firms' strategies, consumers' attitudes and impacts of regulations across various countries are precisely studied.

The book is organised in eight chapters. The first chapter introduces the issue. The second chapter focuses on the definition of "health foods". The third chapter details different types of regulatory regimes that organise the market. The fourth and fifth chapters successively focus on the health claim regulations in developed markets and in emerging markets. The sixth chapter studies the industry and the market structure. The seventh chapter analyzes consumer attitudes towards health foods and health claims. Eventually, the eighth chapter concludes. It should be noted that from pages 165 to 237, 5 appendixes give exhaustive descriptions regarding the main references used in this book.

The major positive aspect of this book comes from its quality in providing many details regarding health foods and the related regulations. There is an impressive work for analysing health characteristics that matter for consumers in different countries. The authors provide many details about the functioning of these markets by underlining each country specificity. They combine different literatures coming from the fields of food science, nutrition, economics, public policy, and marketing. Chapter 6 focusing on the market trends is really interesting, with firms developing strategies for extracting the consumers' willingness to pay for health food in the USA, the EU and Japan. The book is particularly informative and accessible for academics interested in food, nutrition policy and food economics.

Despite these previous qualities, I have, however, a few reservations regarding some editorial choices. The reader should be aware that the book covers a wide range of health characteristics with related health claims and, as a result, some points are

✉ Stéphan Marette
marette@agroparistech.fr

¹ Economie Publique, AgroParisTech, INRA Grignon, 78880 Thiverval-Grignon, France

naturally omitted or overlooked in the book. This being said, my main concerns can be summed up in the four following points.

First, the general objective of the book does not seem very obvious during the reading, since it mainly appears as a catalogue that consider trends in developed and emerging markets. In particular, the conclusions of chapter 8 (*Through the looking glass*) do not really offer new insights.

Second, chapter 7 dealing with consumers' attitudes could provide much more details coming from recent fields in consumers' economics. In particular, studies in behavioural economics and neuro-economics are relatively omitted although they are increasingly used to explain construction of consumer preferences and perceptions. These studies could help to explain the specificity of functional foods, for which imperfect scientific knowledge, consumers' confusion and imperfect recall appear as crucial. For instance, herding behaviours analysed in particular by Bikhchandani et al. (1992) could explain how fads may drive opinions and perceptions about health food. Readers may wonder if markets for health foods are driven by fads, despite scientific evidences and even if regulation should impede false or imaginary claims.

Third, several times during the reading, I wondered about the impact of these health claims on products prices. Even if hedonic prices, quantifying the link between prices and product characteristics, are not the panacea, they could be useful in complementing the analysis of chapter 6 focusing on firms and chapter 7 focusing on consumers. A ranking of health characteristics depending on relative prices and consumers' willingness to pay could beef up the economic analysis.

Fourth, many works/contributions quoted in the book focus on a few characteristics taken separately, but we sometimes miss an overall view related to the overall diet, which is maybe an impossible task. However, new works are now focusing on the whole diet of consumers with a lot of details on many micronutrients. Health is not only coming from a few functional foods, but from a diet with foods taken as a whole. For instance, Irz et al. (2015) study relationships between the consumption of many goods, diets, nutrients and, ultimately, health impacts. For instance, these approaches may help to know if a reduction of saturated fat intakes, and/or if more fruits and vegetable have a larger effect on health than a higher intake of functional foods or supplements. Another question could consist in knowing the value of health foods, if you have (or not) a balanced diet without nutrient deficiencies. More details about overall diets and their relationships with functional foods and supplements could enrich the debate about the role of functional foods.

Beyond these previous criticisms, the reader will read this book for its precise and descriptive analysis of health foods.

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