Same food, different perceptions: UNISG launches CULTSENSE-FOOD to study how culture shapes the way we experience food

The 36-month project, supported by The Rockefeller Foundation and Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, adds the human dimension to the molecular data of the Periodic Table of Food Initiative

Pollenzo (Bra, Italy) / November 25, 2026 – The same food can taste different depending on where you grew up. Scientists on three continents are now setting out to understand why. The University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo (UNISG) has launched CULTSENSE-FOOD (*Exploring global food perception: Cross-cultural insights in sensory description and preference*), a project that connects what food is made of with how people around the world experience it, with the purpose of advancing public scientific knowledge that can help communities everywhere eat more healthily and sustainably.

CULTSENSE-FOOD is supported by The Rockefeller Foundation and Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo. The initiative, which will run from October 2026 to September 2029, is led by the Sensory, Behavior and Cognition (SBC) Lab at UNISG, directed by Prof. Luisa Torri, Full Professor of Food Science and Technology and Prorector of UNISG. The SBC Lab studies how people perceive food through the senses and how they behave around it, with the aim of supporting healthy and sustainable food choices.

The study is part of the Periodic Table of Food Initiative (PTFI), The Rockefeller Foundation's effort to make food composition data open and accessible worldwide, in support of healthier diets and a more sustainable food supply. Building on PTFI's detailed picture of what foods are made of, down to the molecular level, CULTSENSE-FOOD adds a human dimension: how people describe a food and how much they enjoy it.

The SBC Lab will lead a network of three laboratories on three continents. Using a standardized sensory protocol, the network will build the first harmonized, cross-cultural sensory dataset linked to PTFI.

In each country, participants will taste the same set of shelf-stable foods. Local focus groups will first collect the words people naturally use to describe what they taste. Participants will then rate the intensity of these sensory attributes and say how much they like each food. The work begins with a pilot phase, which tests the protocol before data collection extends across the network.

Language is at the heart of the study. In addition to building a common lexicon for describing the sensory characteristics of food, the project will commit to documenting and preserving local sensory vocabularies, considering them an integral part of the communities' cultural heritage.

“Food is chemistry, but it is also language, memory and culture,” explains Prof. Luisa Torri, Full Professor of Food Science and Technology, Prorector of the University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo and Director of the SBC Lab. “Our goal is to build a shared method that

lets us compare how people on different continents perceive the same foods, while protecting the local words that make each food culture unique. Knowing what people accept and enjoy is essential if we want diets that are both healthier and more sustainable.”

The evidence generated by CULTSENSE-FOOD will help inform the design of diets that are healthy, sustainable and culturally acceptable. When the study concludes, the dataset will be released as FAIR open data under a CC BY 4.0 license, and its protocols will be available for future research consortia and for teaching.

Attention to environmental sustainability and ethical principles is an integral part of the study design. The use of shelf-stable foods reduces the environmental impact of international shipments, and the research undergoes a comprehensive ethical review by the UNISG Ethics Committee and local committees, in line with the Declaration of Helsinki."

The partner laboratories will be announced in early 2027. Data collection is expected to be complete in spring 2028, and the open dataset will be released at the close of the project in September 2029.

“CULTSENSE-FOOD fully reflects Pollenzo’s identity as a research university: a place where food is studied as both a scientific and a cultural matter,” **said Nicola Perullo, President and Rector of the University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo.** *“The support of The Rockefeller Foundation and Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo strengthens our University’s capacity to carry out international research projects. CULTSENSE-FOOD will also bring new knowledge to our teaching, to the benefit of our students.”*

Periodic Table of Food Initiative (PTFI)

The project is aligned with The Rockefeller Foundation’s efforts to connect open food composition data with the people who eat the food:

“The Periodic Table of Food Initiative (PTFI) is building comprehensive, standardized ways to describe what is in our food,” **said Dr. John de la Parra, Director for the Food Initiative at The Rockefeller Foundation.** *“CULTSENSE-FOOD adds something that molecules alone cannot show: how people across cultures actually perceive and value food. Connecting these two kinds of knowledge, and making them openly available, can help shape diets that are healthier and more culturally relevant.”*

Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo

The Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo supports CULTSENSE-FOOD as part of its commitment to scientific research, the promotion of well-being and healthy lifestyles, environmental protection, and international cooperation. This support is part of a circular health vision, which recognizes the close interdependence between the well-being of people and that of ecosystems, highlighting the contribution of scientific knowledge to the construction of healthier and more sustainable food models. Through the University of

Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo, the project also contributes to strengthening international scientific collaborations and showcasing the expertise of the Piedmont region.

Nutrition, health, and sustainability are closely interconnected themes that require integrated scientific approaches and collaborations capable of transcending disciplinary and geographical boundaries. CULTSENSE-FOOD fits into this perspective, linking the scientific knowledge of food with the cultural dimensions that influence its perception and consumption choices. By supporting this project alongside The Rockefeller Foundation, the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo reaffirms its vision of internationalization as a structural leverage of its strategy and confirms its commitment to research capable of producing new knowledge and contributing to the development of healthier and more sustainable food models. Furthermore, the scientific coordination by the University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo enhances the expertise of our region and strengthens its role within international research networks, states **Marco Gilli, President of the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo.**

CULTSENSE-FOOD is led by the University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo (UNISG), supported by The Rockefeller Foundation and Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo.

More information: https://www.unisg.it/en/ricerca/cultsense-food/

Notes to editors

About CULTSENSE-FOOD: CULTSENSE-FOOD (*Exploring global food perception: Cross-cultural insights in sensory description and preference*) is a 36-month research project (October 2026 – September 2029). It is led by the SBC Lab at the University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo, supported by The Rockefeller Foundation and co-funded by Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo. The project is part of the Periodic Table of Food Initiative.

About the Sensory, Behavior and Cognition (SBC) Lab: The SBC Lab at UNISG is dedicated to education, research and public engagement. It studies the sensory perception of food and people's behavior in relation to food, with the aim of promoting healthy and sustainable food choices. Its multidisciplinary team brings together expertise from food technology to neuroscience and medicine. Its research focuses on eating behaviors and habits, how differences between individuals shape perception and liking, and consumer responses to innovative foods with health or sustainability benefits. The Lab works independently and with Italian and international universities and research institutions. Its facilities include 24 individual tasting booths and a kitchen. It is directed by Prof. Luisa Torri.

About the University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo (UNISG): The University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo was founded in 2004 by the international non-profit association Slow Food, in cooperation with the Italian regions of Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna. It is a government-recognized, private non-profit institution. Its interdisciplinary approach to food brings together science, culture and sustainability.

About The Rockefeller Foundation: Investing $30 billion over the last 113 years to promote the well-being of humanity, The Rockefeller Foundation is a pioneering philanthropy

built on unlikely partnerships and innovative solutions that deliver measurable results for people in the United States and around the world. We leverage scientific breakthroughs, artificial intelligence, and new technologies to make big bets across energy, food, health, and finance, including with our public charity, RF Catalytic Capital (RFCC). For more information, sign up for our newsletter at www.rockefellerfoundation.org/subscribe and follow us on X @RockefellerFdn, Instagram @rockefellerfdn, and LinkedIn @the-rockefeller-foundation.

About Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo: Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo (www.compagniadisanpaolo.it/en/) is an international philanthropic foundation, an intermediary, a vehicle for social freedoms and an agent of innovation and sustainable development in North-West Italy and nationwide, whose values have centred upon individuals and the community, since 1563.Aligned with the United Nations Agenda 2030, the European/international framework and Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR and post-PNRR), Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo has transposed its strategy into an operational programme for each of its three Goals – Culture, People and Planet – and each of its 14 Missions. Openness to dialogue with national and international partners to foster connections and synergies that can underpin or amplify the impact of actions in the catchment area, combined with a flexible structure, enables Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo to adapt and respond rapidly to future challenges.

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