# Understanding Legume Consumption in Europe: Consumer Behaviour, Cultural Factors and Pathways to Sustainable Diets

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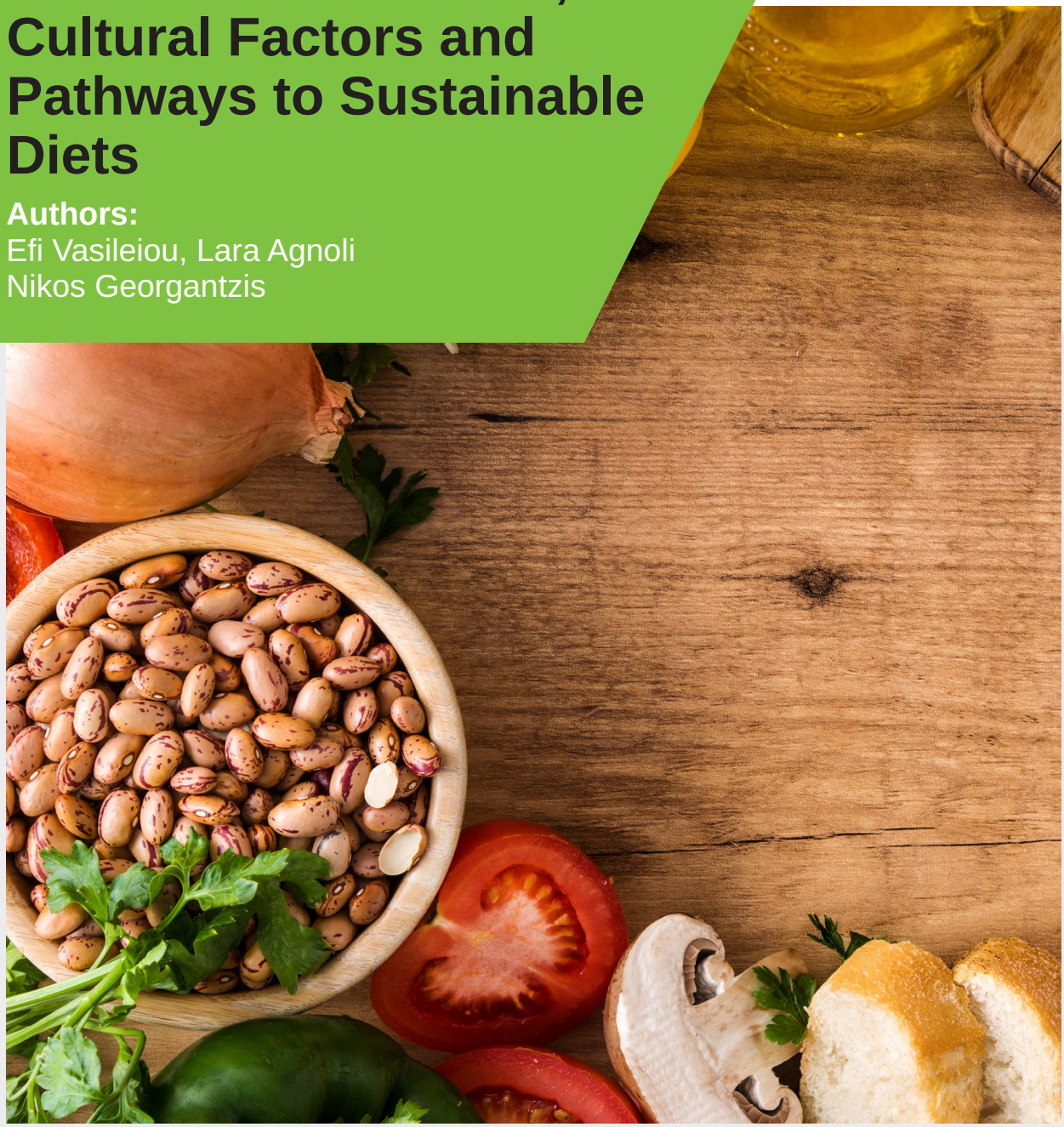

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# Why is Europeans' legume intake so low?

Food systems are a major source of environmental pressure, including greenhouse gas emissions, land and water use, and biodiversity loss. For this reason, the transition towards more sustainable diets has become an important policy objective in Europe.

Legumes can play a key role in this transition. They are nutritious, affordable and beneficial for both people and the planet. They provide environmental benefits, they improve soil health by fixing nitrogen, require relatively little water and are low in fat and sodium, being gluten free. They also have a long shelf life, which helps reduce food waste. However, despite these advantages, legume consumption remains relatively low in many European countries.

# Consumption remains stable

Figure 1 presents the evolution of per capita consumption of legumes in the EU over the period 2010–2023, measured in kilograms (kg) per person per year. Overall, consumption levels remain relatively low and stable, fluctuating between approximately 0.8 and 1.1 kg per capita per year.

Despite some fluctuations, the general pattern indicates that legume consumption in the EU has not undergone a strong structural transformation, remaining relatively modest over time. This suggests that, although legumes are promoted increasingly for their nutritional and environmental benefits, they still occupy a limited position in the European dietary basket.

This relative stability may reflect persistent dietary habits and limited substitution away from animal-based protein sources, highlighting the structural challenges in shifting consumption patterns.

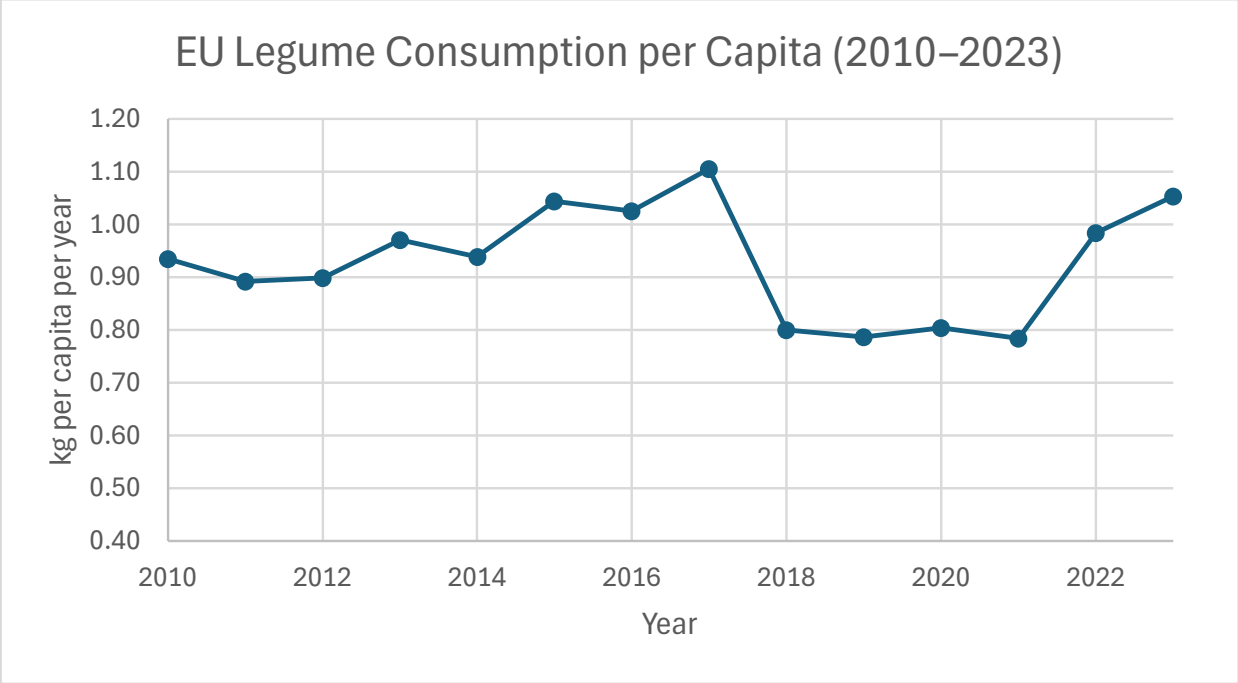


**Figure 1.**
EU Legume Consumption per Capita. Source: FAOSTAT dataset (2010–2023)

# Strong differences among countries

Significant differences in consumption can be observed among countries (Figure 2), highlighting strong geographical heterogeneity in dietary patterns. Countries such as Lithuania, Spain, and Estonia exhibit the highest levels of consumption, exceeding 1.8 kg per capita per year, while others—including Germany, Croatia, and Latvia—show substantially lower levels.

Southern European countries (e.g., Spain, Italy, Greece, and Portugal) generally display higher consumption levels, reflecting traditional dietary patterns in which legumes play a central role. In contrast, Northern and some Western European countries tend to show lower consumption levels.

These patterns are consistent with existing evidence indicating that Mediterranean countries have historically recorded some of the highest levels of legume consumption in Europe. Overall, the results confirm that legume consumption remains unevenly distributed, with cultural and regional dietary habits playing a key role.

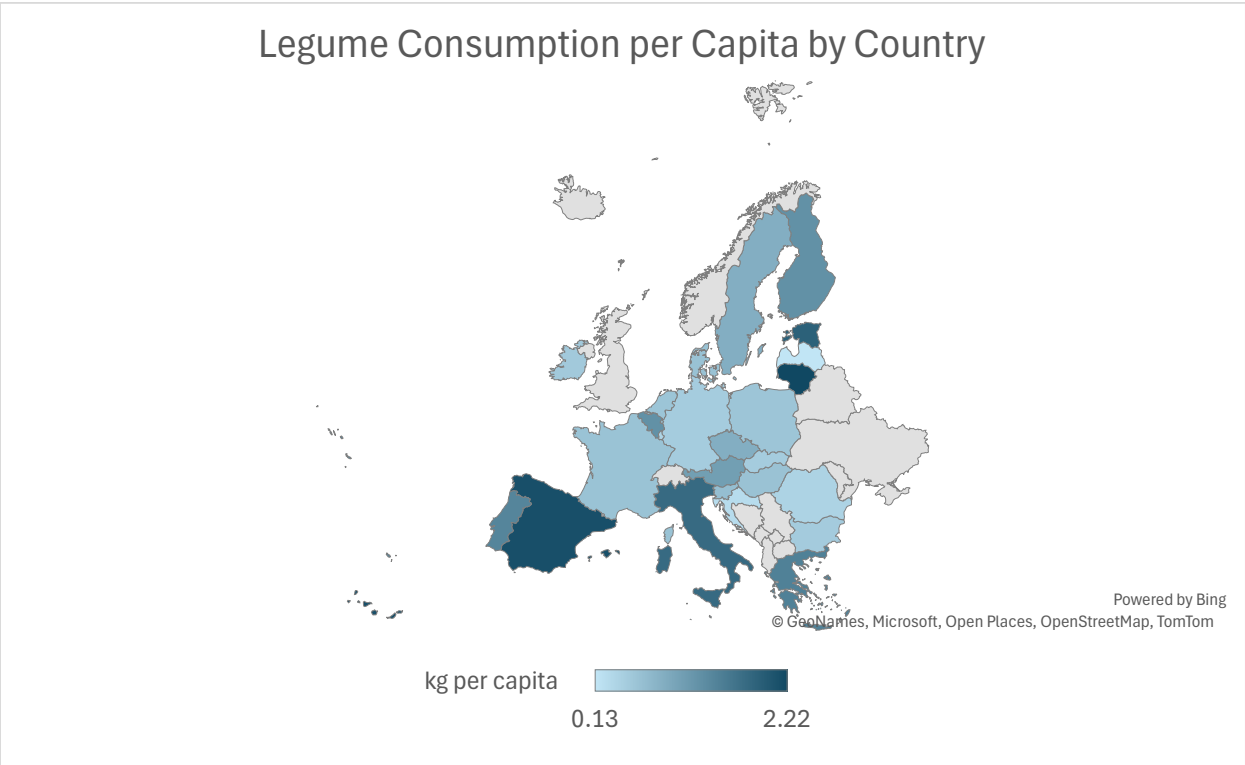


**Figure 2.**

Geographical distribution of legume consumption in Europe. Source: FAOSTAT dataset

# Why does legume consumption differ so much across countries?

Economic factors such as income, price, and food availability play an important role in shaping food choices. However, they do not fully explain why legume consumption differs so widely across countries.

Research has shown that culture also influences food choices through shared values, eating habits, social norms, and traditions. For example, legumes and olive oil are central components of the Mediterranean diet, while potatoes and meat have traditionally played a larger role in many Northern European diets. These long-established dietary habits continue to influence food choices today.

Previous studies have linked cultural values to a wide range of food-related behaviors, including wine and alcohol consumption, overall dietary patterns, and sustainable consumption. However, much less is known about the role of cultural values in explaining cross-country differences in legume consumption. A better understanding these differences may help explain why some populations are more receptive to sustainable diets than others.

# Behavioral strategies to promote legumes

While changes in dietary habits require long transition periods, informational campaigns and direct or indirect nutritional education may prove useful inputs into an increased uptake of legume-based diets. Building on this evidence, the VALERECO project develops and tests behavioural interventions (“nudges”) to encourage healthier and more sustainable dietary choices. By understanding the factors that influence consumers’ food choices, the project aims to design more effective strategies for increasing legume consumption across different European contexts.

## Key messages

- Legume consumption remains low across Europe.
- Important differences exist between countries.
- Consumer behaviour is a major barrier.
- Behavioural interventions can complement agricultural and market policies.
- Increasing legume consumption can support healthier diets and more sustainable food systems.

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