

Monitoring salt and sugar in food – – an initiative to achieve reference values in Portugal

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Background

Based on scientific evidence, excess dietary salt and sugar intakes are closely related to health problems. Excessive salt intake increases the risk of developing arterial hypertension while excessive sugar intake is a determinant of chronic diseases such as obesity and diabetes. As part of the strategy to promote healthy eating, the Portuguese Government is committed for a significant and sustainable reduction, from 2018 to 2021, of the excessive consumption, namely of sugar and salt, promoting the availability of foods framed in a healthy eating pattern. To achieve this goal it is necessary, among other initiatives near the industry and distribution sectors, and populations, to monitor the salt and sugar content of different food categories.



Objective

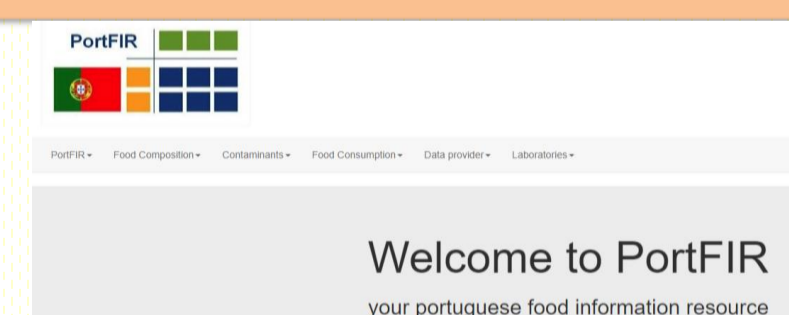
To contribute for drawing the baselines for the salt content of soups, breakfast cereals, bread and cheese, and the sugar content of yogurts and breakfast cereals in Portugal, in 2018.

To gather evidence, for the Portuguese Governmental Authorities to support, validate and promote, near the industry, the necessary reductions to the values that are intended to be achieved in 2021.



Methods

Food Composition Databases from Denmark (DK), Iceland (IS), Ireland (IE), Norway (NO), Portugal (PT), Sweden (SE) were accessed in EuroFIR platform, through FoodExplorer, or on National platforms, for extracting salt and sugar content in foods belonging to the food categories on study. Comparison was done among the countries of interest, where salt and sugar reduction initiatives were enforced, and with the values to be achieved in Portugal in 2021[1]: for salt, 0.2 g/100 g, 1.0 g/100 g, and 0.3 g/100 g, for soup, bread (memorandum of understanding with bakeries), and cheese and breakfast cereals, respectively; for sugar, 5 g/100 g, for solid yogurt and breakfast cereals. To attain these values a global progressive annual reduction of 12 to 16% for salt and 10 to 20% for sugar is envisaged.



Salt

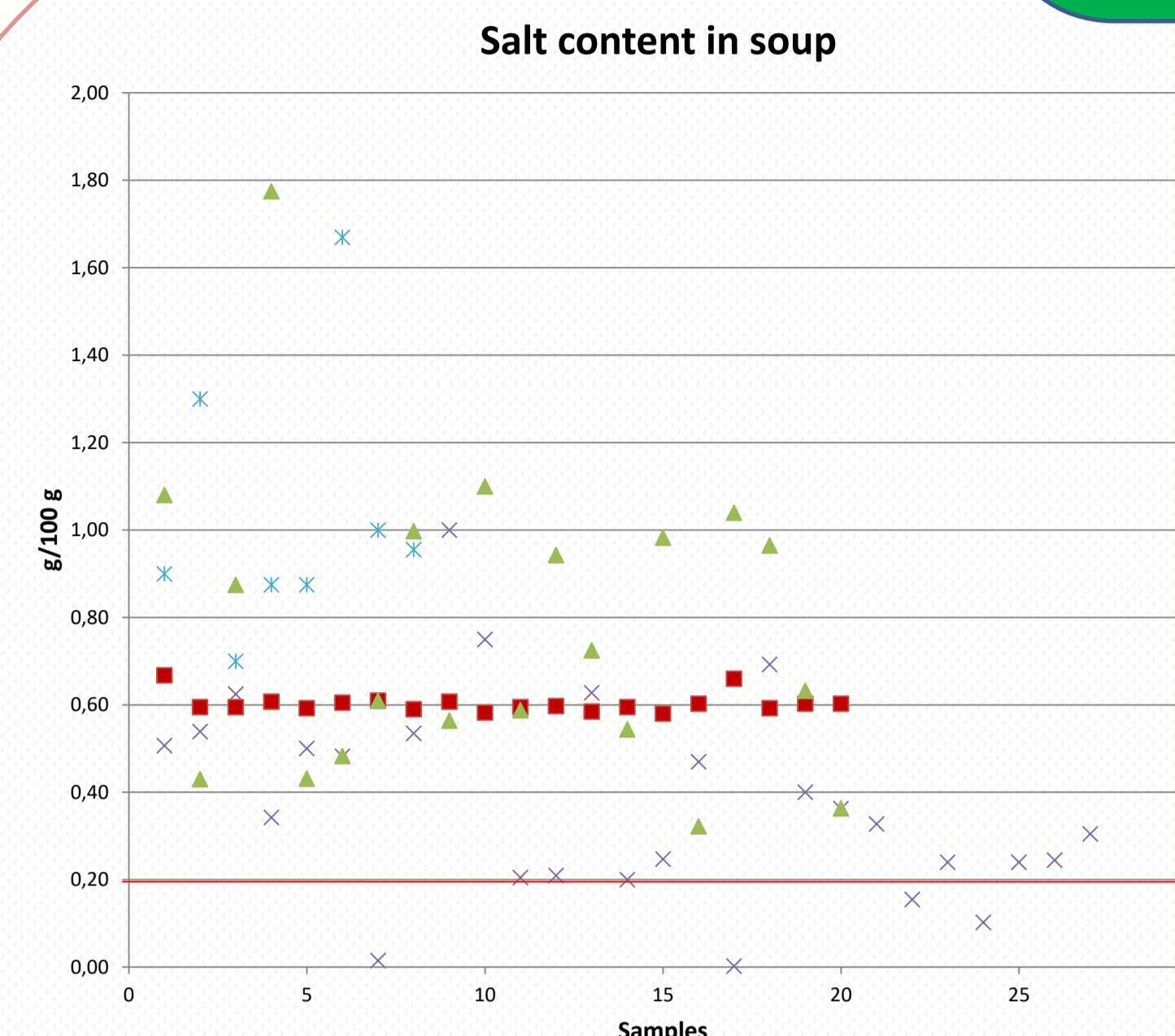


Fig. 1 – Salt content in soup.

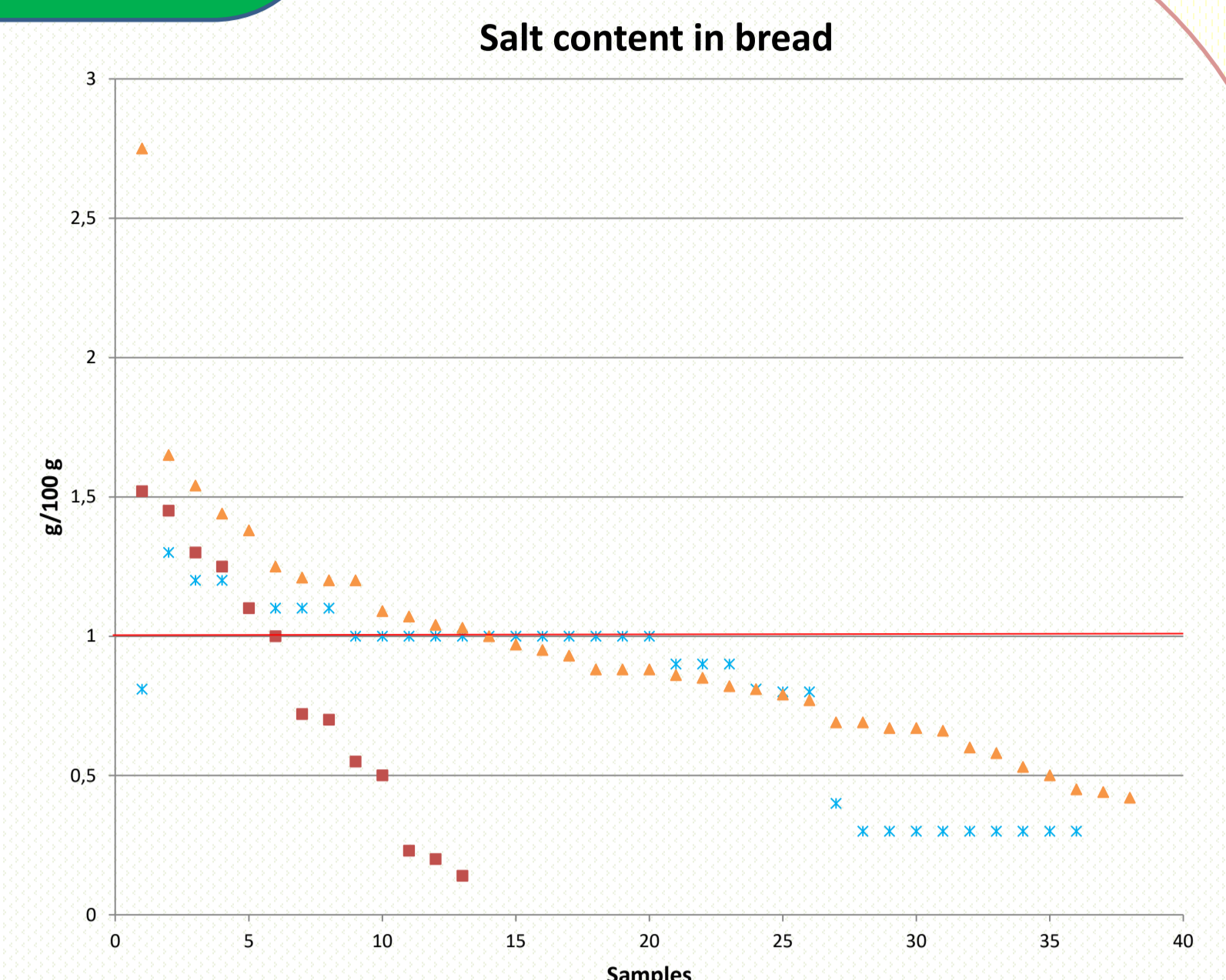


Fig. 2 – Salt content in bread.

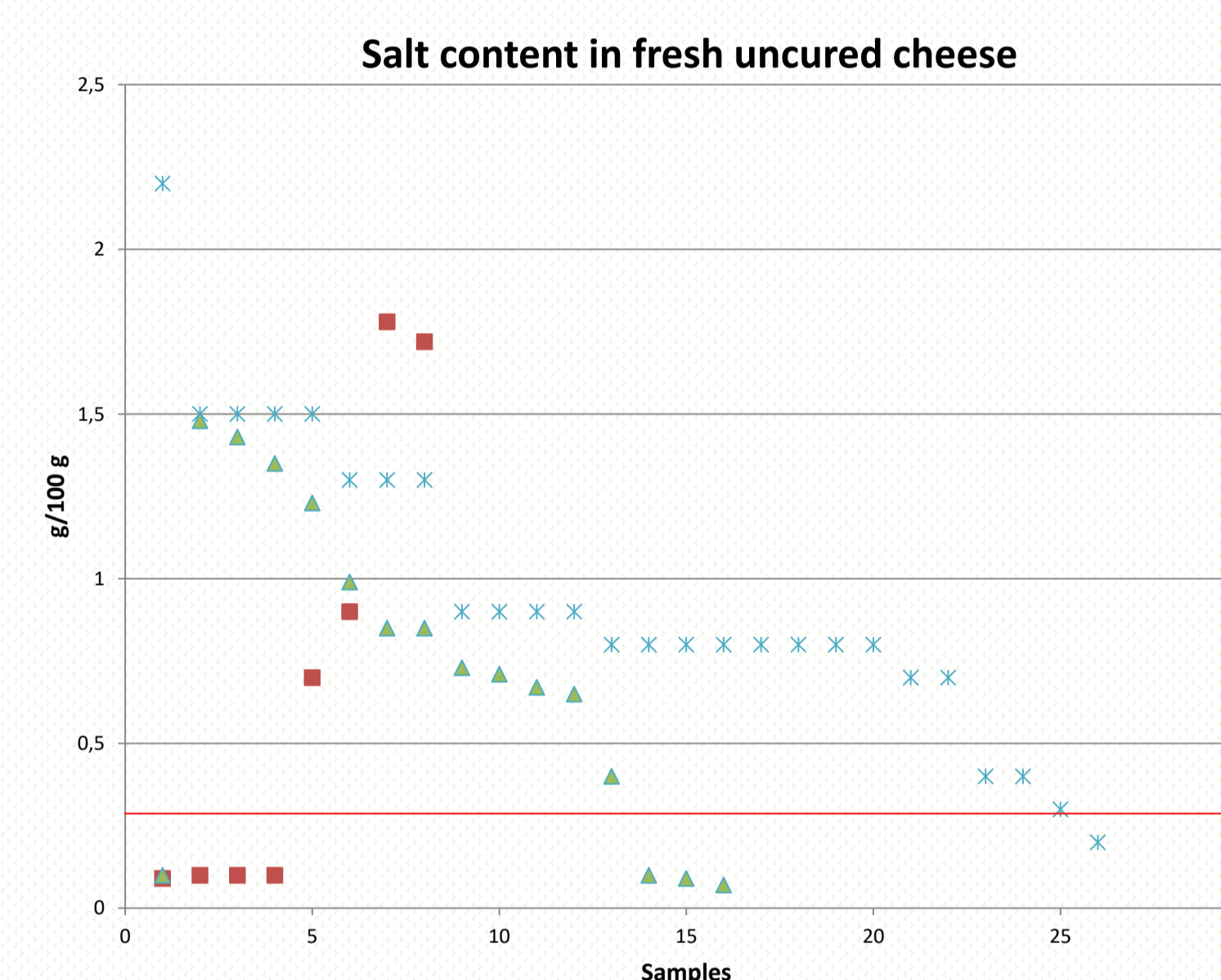


Fig. 3 – Salt content in fresh uncured cheese.

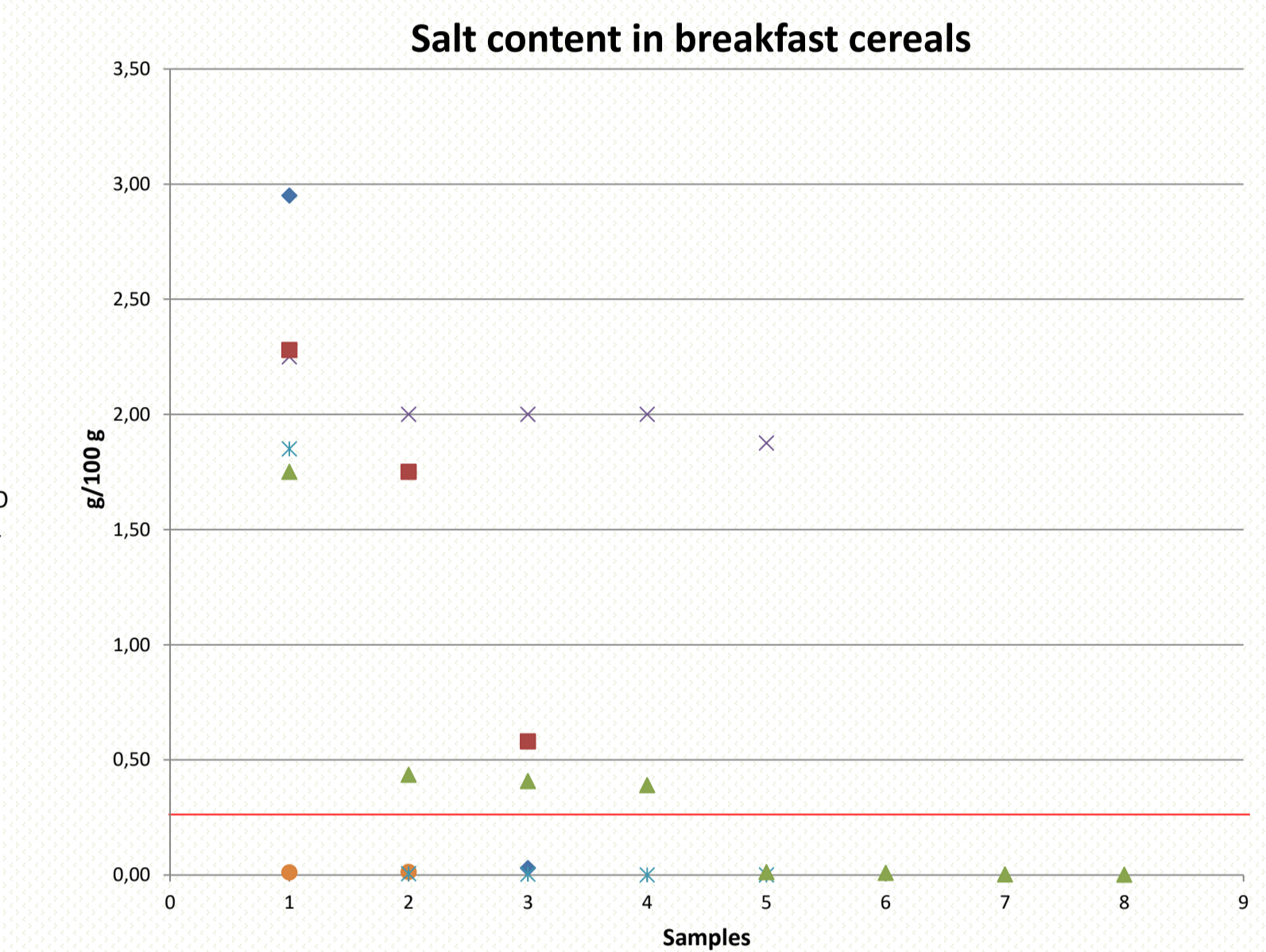


Fig. 4 – Salt content in breakfast cereals.

Sugar

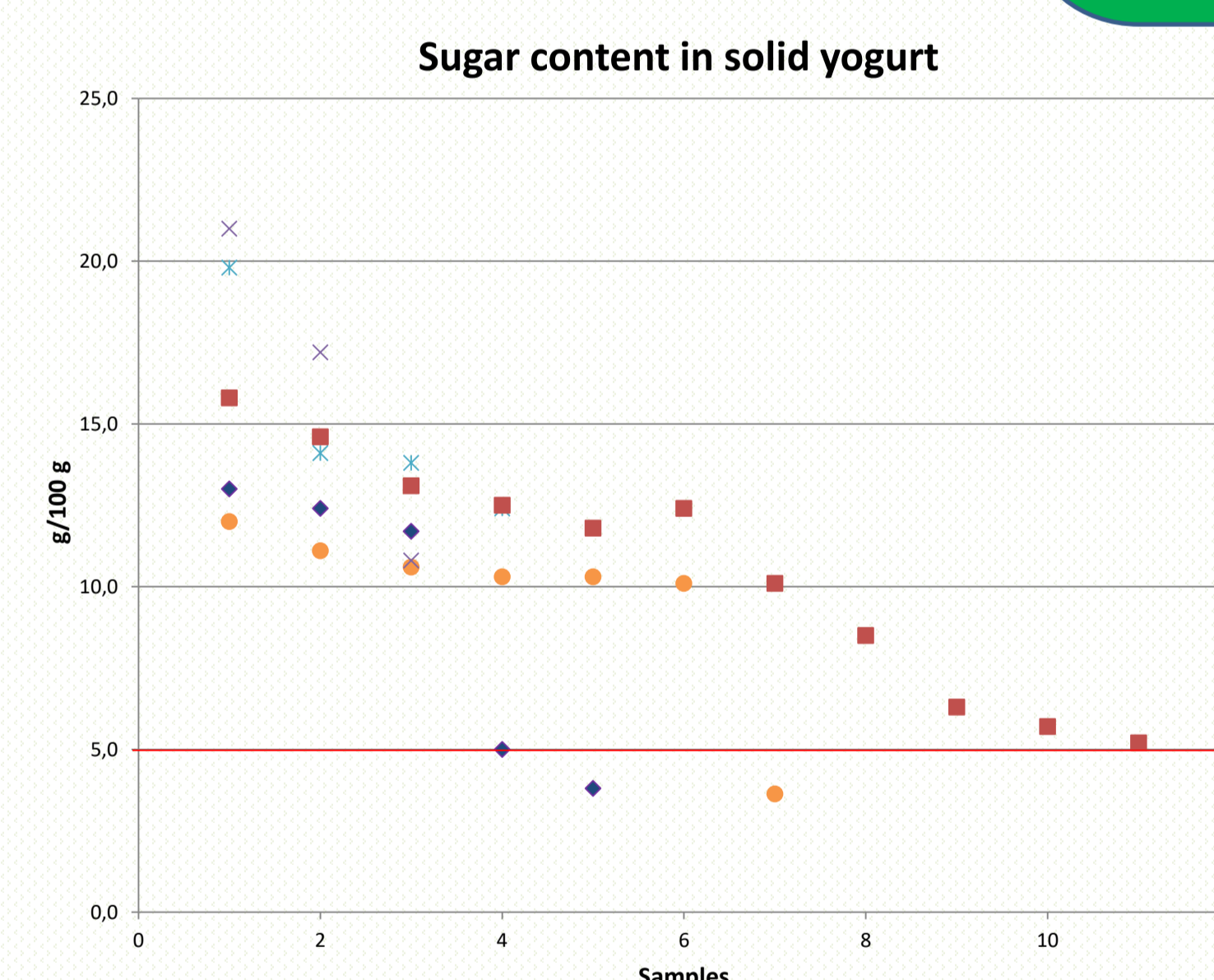


Fig. 5 – Sugar content in solid yogurt.

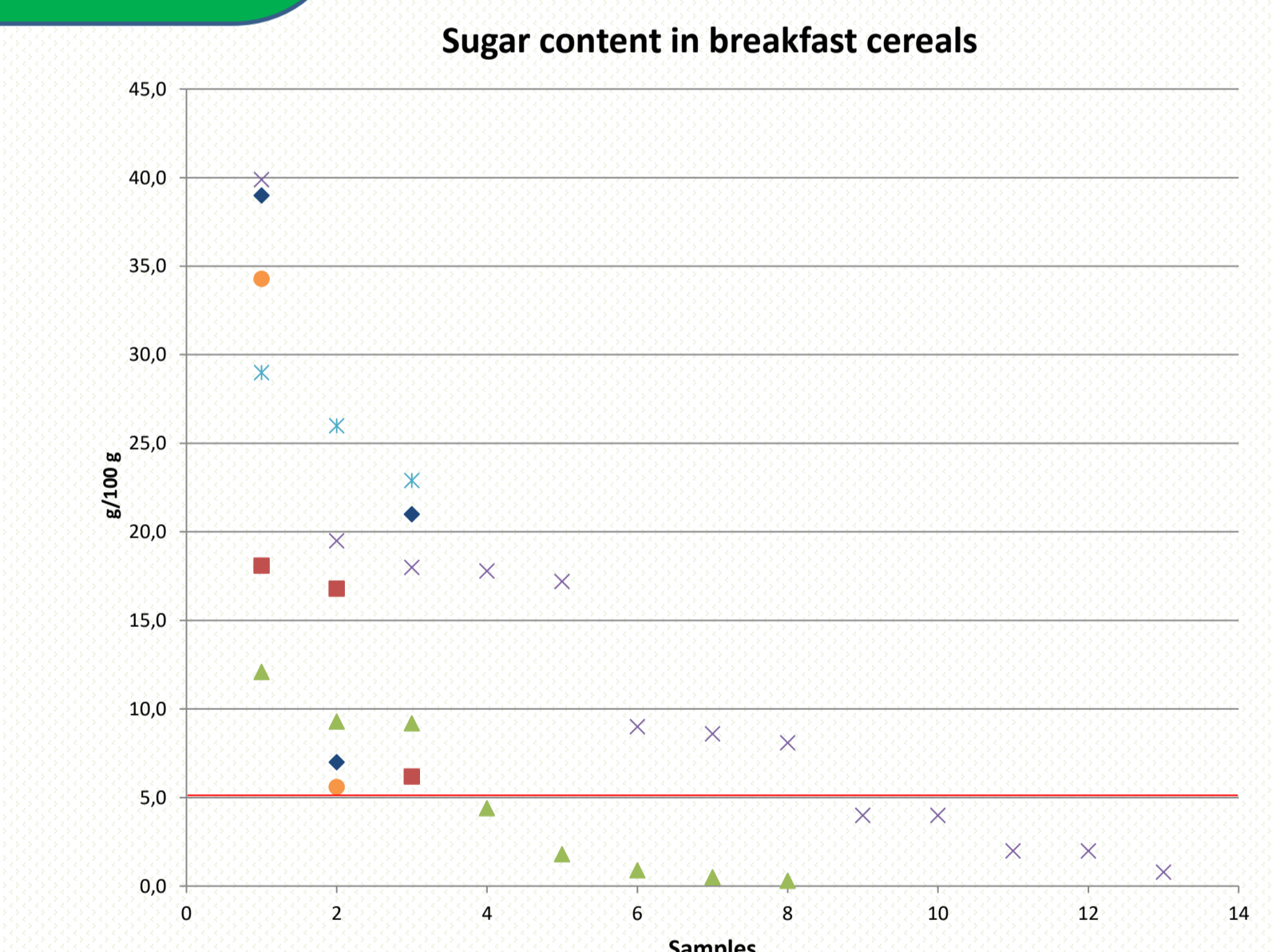


Fig. 6 – Sugar content in breakfast cereals.

Results

From the data points extracted (total of 301 for salt and 58 for sugar), the number of values below the Portuguese goals for 2021 were: for salt, in soup – 8 (7 from IE, 1 from PT), in bread – 61 (28 from NO, 8 from PT, 25 from SE), in cheese – 10 (2 from NO, 4 from PT, 4 from SE), and in breakfast cereals – 7 (2 from DK, 1 from IS, 4 from NO); for sugar, in breakfast cereals – 3 (1 from DK, 2 from IS), and in yogurts – 10 (5 from IE, 5 from SE). For the analysed categories, the great majority of the products had a salt and sugar content two to three times higher than the referred goals, except for bread. For Portuguese data, medians in g/100 g, were 0.60, 0.72, 0.40 and 1.8 for salt in soup, bread, cheese and breakfast cereals, respectively, and 11 and 17 for sugar in solid yogurts and breakfast cereals, respectively.

Conclusions

- Using Food Composition Databases, as first approach to evaluate salt and sugar in selected food categories, in Portugal, very few products met the intended goals, evidencing the need to intervene near representative associations of food industry, distribution and consumers to obtain an effective and consistent salt and sugar reduction.
- The presence on the European market of products that satisfy the defined goals evidences, at least, the possibility of the industry to make the necessary reductions.
- Based on the median in Portuguese data, for each category and considering the progressive annual reduction, it seems possible to achieve the defined goals for salt in soup, fresh uncured cheese and bread; an additional effort has to be made to reduce the high content of sugar in solid yogurts and the high content of salt and sugar in breakfast cereals currently on the market.
- Complementation of this approach with laboratory analysis of a convenience sample, taking into account the major contributors to the ingestion of these nutrients, selected accordingly to the market data, is necessary to monitor intermediate goals until 2021.
- Other food categories, contributing to 80% of the intake of salt and sugar, in Portugal, will be targeted for study.

References

[1] Diário da República (Official Journal of the Republic of Portugal), 2nd serie, nr. 249, office nr. 11418/2017, the 29th December 2017.