

**California Olive Oil Council
Oral Statement of Patricia Darragh, Executive Director
Before
The U. S. International Trade Commission**



COOC

December 5, 2012

**Investigation 332-537 - Olive Oil: Conditions of Competition
between U.S. and Major Foreign Supplier Industries**

My name is Patricia Darragh. I am currently the Executive Director of the California Olive Oil Council (COOC). I have been working with the COOC since 1997. The COOC is a trade and marketing non-profit association that was founded in 1992. The COOC is dedicated to promoting fresh, quality extra virgin olive oils made in California. With 400 members, the COOC represents over 90% of the production in the state. The membership includes members from every olive growing region in California. While the largest membership segment is growers/producers, the COOC also represents industry affiliates, academia, retailers, and food professionals. The COOC provides a number of services including an education and marketing program, supporting a sensory taste panel, a certification program and upholding standards. The COOC formally established the first North American sensory taste panel for olive oil in 1998.

There are three related purposes of the COOC seal program. The first is to provide producers and marketers with a standardized method of grading their 100 % California olive oil. The second is to provide consumers and retailers with assurance that the product that they purchase is in fact extra virgin grade. And the third is to provide producers and marketers who meet the standard with a means of distinguishing their products in the marketplace.

During the course of each year, the COOC also collects random samples from retail store shelves and blind-tasted by the COOC panel. This includes both imported product and California produced oils. It should be noted that the number of defects detected in imported oils deemed to be virgin or lower grade closely tracks the findings of the University of California research studies. Approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of the imported product is evaluated at virgin or below, which indicates that these products are mislabeled and/or adulterated. While rancidity is found in most samples, defects such as fusty, musty, and winey are also commonly found. Unlike rancidity, which is an indicator of age, the other defects are caused by poor or sub-standard production methods. It is not uncommon for large importers to bottle mixed lots of various years and origins.

On November 27, 2012, I purchased a bottle of olive oil labeled as “extra virgin” from a large chain supermarket store in Albany, California for \$ 6.99. In a large font on the front label, the oil was noted as extra virgin and imported from Italy. In a small font at the bottom of the back label, there was a notation for source, which indicated E.V. olive oil from ES and TN. This refers to Spain (Espagne) and Tunisia. This coding is not helpful to the average consumer, as they would have no indication of what ES and TN stand for. Additionally the “best before” date indicated February 10, 2014. On November 29, 2012 the COOC taste panel blind tasted this oil using a random code. No prior information was revealed. The oil had multiple defects including rancid, fusty and musty and was deemed to be ordinary grade.

The COOC’s objective is to ensure a level playing field so that all olive oils are properly labeled and identified by their actual grade. Oils that are mislabeled and

adulterated flood the grocery shelves. This creates a barrier to trade and an unfair competition for our American producers who strive to achieve the highest quality product and incur additional fees to ensure best practices in their production process.

In summary, the American olive oil producers wish to compete competitively in an atmosphere free from fraud and tainted product. The current situation presents a myriad of questions and concerns for American consumers and retailers who wish to provide a standardized, quality product to their families and customers. Americans needs to feel confident that when they purchase olive oil, they are paying for the actual grade that is noted on the label. Consumer protection is vital to the American consumer and to the success of the American olive oil industry.

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