



December 5, 2012

Testimony by Thomas B. Mueller

United States International Trade Commission

Hearing on Olive Oil: Conditions of Competition between U.S. and Major Foreign  
Supplier Industries

My name is Tom Mueller. I'm a freelance journalist, and have been based in Italy for the last 20 years.<sup>i</sup> For 6 years now I have explored the olive oil industry worldwide, while writing a series of publications on olive oil quality and fraud,<sup>ii</sup> most recently a book entitled *Extra Virginity*, published in December 2011 by W. W. Norton.<sup>iii</sup> During my research, I have travelled extensively in olive-growing areas in the Mediterranean, Australia, Japan, South Africa and the United States, and consulted with experts in a wide range of fields: agronomists, food chemists, medical researchers, legislators, law enforcers, and hundreds of olive oil producers, large and small. Today I'd like to examine 3 closely related topics: olive oil fraud, the poor quality of olive oil generally available in the United States of America, and how this poor quality penalizes American consumers.

Fraud has plagued the olive oil business for thousands of years, and continues to this day. Why? Because of an age-old recipe for profits: buy low and sell high. Extra virgin olive oil is among the most expensive vegetable oils to make, yet is easily diluted with cheap, inferior oils. Most vegetable oils are extracted from seeds or nuts, but extra virgin olive oil is extracted from a fruit – olives are in fact stone fruits, like cherries or plums. So extra virgin olive oil is a fresh-squeezed fruit juice, demanding and expensive to produce. Yet it is sadly easy to mix in cheaper oils – cottonseed, soy, sunflower – or low-grade olive oil, and sell the resulting concoction as

“extra virgin olive oil.” Particularly in America, where quality testing in olive oil is basically non-existent.

Most Americans buy extra virgin olive oil for two reasons: health and flavor. They want its unique health characteristics, demonstrated by a large and growing body of medical research as a central part of the Mediterranean dietary regime. And they want its delicious flavor, a vital ingredient in many great Mediterranean cuisines. Unfortunately, most Americans aren’t getting what they’re paying for. Major recent surveys of olive oil quality suggest that two thirds of olive oils currently sold as “extra virgin” in America are mislabeled: they fail to meet the major legal definitions of the extra virgin grade.<sup>iv</sup> 98% of olive oil sold in America is imported, so much of this substandard oil is imported, largely from the Mediterranean.

American consumers who buy these false extra virgins are being duped. They expect to get the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet, and instead get low-grade liquid fat with few benefits – and often with free radicals, peroxides, and other unhealthy characteristics into the bargain. They expect excellent flavor, and instead get rancid, smelly oil that spoils rather than enhances their food.

Here I want to stress: olive oil quality, good and bad, is not a matter of nationalism. Some extremely bad oil is made right here in the USA: my book describes several high-profile American fraudsters.<sup>v</sup> And much of the world’s finest olive oil is made in the Mediterranean, especially in Spain, Italy and Greece. But in volume terms, little of this high-quality oil reaches the US. A lot of bad oil does.

Much responsibility for this unacceptable situation lies with US authorities, who do not enforce existing legislation. In my view, responsibility also lies with certain international olive oil organizations, which claim to promote olive oil quality, while in reality pushing hard to preserve the status quo. The North American Olive Oil Association is a trade group of major international importers, and as such they naturally look after the interests of their members; yet by doing so, they sometimes perpetuate unfortunate business practices that short-change rather than benefit consumers.<sup>vi</sup> The International Olive Council, an intergovernmental agency based in Madrid with an illustrious history in olive oil regulations, is now moving far too slowly to improve quality standards, and vigorously resists the formation of any new quality standard, which they seem to regard as a threat to their authority. In reality, recent advances in olive

cultivation, oil production technology and chemical testing of olive oil have made the current International Olive Council quality standard obsolete. Sticking to this obsolete standard, in my view, means holding olive oil quality to the lowest common denominator, which serves the interests of large olive oil bottlers with lots of shoddy oil to sell, but penalizes consumers who buy that oil, thinking they're buying excellence.

I believe a stringent new standard for olive oil quality, seriously enforced, would remedy this unacceptable situation, and safeguard American consumers. What is more, clearly distinguishing high-quality oil from bad in the United States of America, the world's second-largest importer, would be a godsend to consumers and quality oil producers everywhere, including throughout the Mediterranean – everywhere that excellent oil is being made, and where, right now at least, real extra virgins are forced to compete with cut-rate impostors bearing the same “extra virgin” label.

---

<sup>i</sup> I have contributed to a range of publications, including the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *National Geographic Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Business Week*, and the *New Republic*.

<sup>ii</sup> See also including “Slippery Business,” an article that appeared in 2007 in the *New Yorker*: [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/08/13/070813fa\\_fact\\_mueller](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/08/13/070813fa_fact_mueller)

<sup>iii</sup> See [www.truthinoliveoil.com/extra-virginity](http://www.truthinoliveoil.com/extra-virginity)

<sup>iv</sup> The most important studies including 3 performed by the Olive Center at the University of California, Davis; and a review of supermarket olive oils published by Consumer Reports in September 2012. These results are mirrored by similar studies in other countries, including the regional government of Andalucía, the Australian consumer magazine *CHOICE*, by documentaries on Swiss and German television. Most recently, in November 2011, the Spanish consumer group Organización de Consumidores y Usuarios published a study entitled “‘Aceite de Oliva ¿Virgin Extra?’ Algunos nos engañan.” (“‘Extra Virgin’ Olive Oil? Some are Tricking Us”). This study found that, of 34 “extra virgin” olive oils tested, 10 were actually of a lower grade. The resulting firestorm in television, radio and print media, with threats of lawsuits by criticized companies and the intervention of the Spanish minister of agriculture in their defense, shows how olive oil in the EU can be more a political and economic substance than a food.

<sup>v</sup> See *Extra Virginity*, Chapter 7, for details, including a gentleman in Los Angeles who takes soybean oil, colors it, flavors it, and sells it as extra virgin olive oil – with a “USDA Organic” seal, no less.

<sup>vi</sup> For example, they continue to support ambiguous marketing terms like “pure” and “extra-light,” which mislead people into thinking low-grade refined oils are better or lower in calories than they actually are. These terms that have been outlawed in the European Union. The oils of several NAOOA members have failed in recent studies by the UC Davis. In the latest UC Davis study, two oils (“Auguri” brand) of a NAOOA member corporation, Mediterranean Olive Oil, were found to be adulterated with canola oil.