

**TESTIMONY OF JOHN SESSLER**  
**CEO, JCS TRADECOM, INC. and**  
**CHAIRMAN, NAOOA**  
**Before the**  
**U.S. International Trade Commission**  
**December 5, 2012**

Good morning Chairman Williamson, members of the Commission, and staff. My name is John Sessler, and I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's hearing and to describe my company, JCS Tradecom, Inc., a family owned importer of olive oil and other specialty foods. I am also the current chairman of the NAOOA. The Commission is hearing a great deal in this investigation about the quality of imported olive oil – a subject that has been very close to my heart ever since I began to import olive from Europe nearly two decades ago.

After an early career that included a brief stint here at the ITC as an economist and several years on Wall Street, I returned to work with my father in our family business and learned the ropes of gourmet food distribution. My involvement with olive oil began in 1993 with trip to Crete and a visit to a family-run olive oil production facility. At a time when most Greek olive oil was exported to Italy, I was able to work directly with a number of small growers and producers to create a high-quality and extremely flavorful Greek olive oil to import to the United States.

Since that time, in addition to developing a customer base in the foodservice industry, I have worked to develop the "ZOE" retail brand of gourmet extra virgin olive oils sourced in Greece, Spain, and now California. Each product in the ZOE family has a unique taste profile and different price point. As you will see, much like wine, olive oil can be produced from a

single type of olives, or a blend of varieties. Flavor can change based on the type of olive, soil, weather conditions, and year of production. I'd like to describe a few of our products that benefit from these unique characteristics.

- ***Zoe Extra Virgin Olive Oil*** – is Zoe brand's everyday product. Like all extra virgin olive oil, it is manually extracted without the aid of heat or chemicals. This olive oil is produced from Spanish varieties such as Cornicabra, Picual, and Hojiblanca to ensure a consistent fruity flavored oil. We are particularly proud of this olive oil as it was awarded "Best Choice" and "Fruitiest Oil" by *The New York Times*. Its flavor has been described as a balance of fruit and butter, along with hints of pepper, basil, almond, and artichoke heart. A liter of this olive oil sells for about \$11.
- ***Zoe Diva Select Koroneiki Extra Virgin Olive Oil*** – is the product of olives grown on the Greek island of Crete. The hand sorted Koroneiki olives create a versatile and flavorful olive oil. This product won the prestigious 2008 Sofi Silver for Outstanding Shelf-Stable Foodservice Product. A ¾ liter of this olive oil sells for about \$10.
- ***Zoe Diva Select Cornicabra Extra Virgin Olive Oil*** – is the product of a limited run harvest from the groves of Denominacion de Origen Montes de Toledo. For this olive oil, ZOE has focused not only on a single variety of olive, but a specific location known for fertile soil and positive climate resulting in robust olive oil. A liter of this olive oil sells for about \$18.
- ***Zoe Diva Select Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil*** – is considered Zoe brand's signature organic olive oil. It is a distinctive blend of the prized Cornicabra and Hojiblanca USDA

certified organic olives that are carefully processed without chemical pesticides or additives. A half liter of this olive oil sells for about \$8.

- ***Zoe Diva Select California Extra Virgin Olive Oil*** – is produced from Arbosana and Arbequina olives grown in the Central Valley of Northern California. This light floral olive oil is the product of sustainable farming methods and olives are always pressed within twenty four hours to capture their unique fruity freshness. A half liter of this olive oil sells for about \$10.
- ***Zoe Diva Select Arbequina Extra Virgin Olive Oil*** – is produced from the mechanical pressing of a single type of olive, in this case Spanish-sourced Arbequina olives, which results in a delicate fruity flavor. A liter of this olive oil sells for about \$18.

While these are some of my distinctive products, I want to emphasize that extra virgin olive oil is not an elite or luxury product. Olive oil has been consumed for thousands of years because of its health benefits, versatility, and flavor. It should be enjoyed by all consumers.

Any business like mine must be built on our integrity and on the confidence and trust of the consumer. Regardless of the source or flavor of the olive oil, we work to ensure that the ZOE brand products – and, for that matter, everything else we sell – are of the highest quality. Not only do we work directly with the growers, producers, and packers in Greece, Spain, and California to ensure our internal quality requirements are met, but we require that *each* shipment, whether in bulk or packaged, arrive with a full battery of IOC-endorsed chemical analysis confirming authenticity and quality. This is imperative as our products are primarily packaged for retail in the source country. Additionally, we participate in the NAOOA Seal Certification Program.

We distribute ZOE brand olive oils to independent gourmet shops, high-end grocery stores (such as Whole Foods), as well as through online retailers such as Amazon – where I am proud to say we are currently the leading olive oil provider. Our customer base also includes foodservice companies and private labels for large retailers. We sell our product through all channels of the consumer products market.

As we have grown, we have found that there is increasing market segmentation and product differentiation in the olive oil market as interest in the product in the United States has grown. While to some extent olive oil remains an everyday necessity, there is a growing U.S. consumer interest in unique high-quality artisanal oils which is served by the ZOE brand products and a number of our competitors that source both domestically and abroad.

We embrace the fact that the U.S. consumer is becoming more discriminating, and considering factors such as taste, type of olive, source of oil, potential uses, methods of production, environmental impact, and many factors other than price when determining which oil to purchase. To underline this point, we sell a premium product, which, due to its quality, small lots, and artisan nature, competes on factors other than price.

Thank you for your attention. I will be glad to answer your questions.