



New Study Finds Most Top-Selling Imported Olive Oil Sold in U.S. is Mislabeled as “Extra Virgin”

Further Proof that Consumers Are Unknowingly Buying Mislabeled Olive Oil

DAVIS, Calif. (April 13, 2011) – A new study finds that most olive oil imported into the U.S. fails to meet the international criteria for “extra virgin.” With American consumers spending more than \$720 million each year for olive oil, the study’s results indicate that a great majority of consumers are paying a premium price for mislabeled “extra virgin” olive oil which fails to meet recognized standards and is often rancid or adulterated with cheaper refined oils.

“This study is further proof that consumers are unknowingly buying mislabeled olive oil,” said Patty Darragh, executive director of the California Olive Oil Council. “The evidence continues to build that substandard foreign olive oil is being intentionally dumped in the U.S. to take advantage of the growing demand for olive oil among American consumers.”

According to the new study released by the Olive Center at the University of California, Davis, most of the top selling imported olive oil brands regularly failed to meet the international standards for “extra virgin” olive oil. Among the findings were that 73 percent of the 134 samples of the five top-selling imported “extra virgin” olive oil brands failed the International Olive Council (IOC) sensory standards based on the results of two IOC-accredited sensory panels. Sensory defects are indicators that these oil samples were oxidized, of poor quality or adulterated with cheaper refined olive oil. The five top-selling imported brands are Filippo Berio, Bertolli, Pompeian, Colavita and Star.

Additionally, 70 percent of the samples of the five top-selling imported brands failed a 1,2-diaclycerol content test and 50 percent of the samples of the five top-selling imported brands failed the pyropheophytins test. Both of these tests are used to assess olive oil quality and were conducted in addition to the IOC’s chemistry and sensory testing methods.

This is the second and final study in the past year focused on the quality of “extra virgin” olive oil conducted by UC Davis’ Olive Center. A study released in July, 2010, found that 69% of the samples of imported olive oils labeled as “extra virgin” and sold in California supermarkets and big box retail stores, failed to meet internationally-accepted standards to be called “extra virgin” olive oil since the oils were deemed to be too old, poorly made and/or adulterated. This new study analyzed fewer brands than the first study but more samples of each brand to improve the

analysis of each brand and it utilized two sensory panels instead of the one panel used in last year's study.

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Both studies were initiated to investigate a number of confirmed reports that imported olive oils available for purchase in the United States labeled as "extra virgin" were actually lower quality oil. The California olive oil industry and many retailers have long been worried that consumers may be purchasing bottles labeled "extra virgin" but actually receiving something quite different.

"While there are many excellent imported and domestic olive oils available, our tests indicate that there are serious quality problems out there," said Dan Flynn, executive director of the Olive Center at U.C. Davis and a co-author of the new report.

"Extra virgin" is the highest grade of olive oil and must be extracted from the olive without heat or solvents. International and U.S. Department of Agriculture standards also require that "extra virgin" olive oils meet specific criteria for chemical makeup and sensory qualities including flavor and aroma. Because of these required standards, "extra virgin" olive oil commands a top price. Federal law prohibits a company from not disclosing that it is selling a blend of oils on the label. Yet, olive oil can be exported to the United States and labeled as "extra virgin" even if the same oils would not meet the standards for "extra virgin" in Europe.

"It is time that we tighten our standards to prevent mislabeled olive oil from being sold to unsuspecting consumers," said California State Senator Lois Wolk, chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Olive Oil Production and Emerging Products. "This study further confirms that California's olive oil industry can compete and thrive in a fair marketplace. A level playing field will protect consumers and reward producers who meet or exceed high standards."

The United States is the third-largest olive oil consumer in the world. Ninety-nine percent of the olive oil that the U.S. consumes is imported. Demand for "extra virgin" olive oil has soared in recent years thanks in part to cable food channels, celebrity chefs and the health benefits of the popular Mediterranean Diet. Food savvy American consumers are reaching for "extra virgin" olive oil to combine great taste and healthier choices. As a result, according to the latest figures, more than 75 million gallons of olive oil was sold in the U.S. in 2009, up from 47 million gallons just ten years ago.

"This is why we established a certification program in California to ensure that when consumers buy a California-produced olive oil with the Certified Extra Virgin seal on it, they know they are buying real "extra virgin" olive oil," said Darragh. She added, "The time has come to stop this deceit and force these companies to meet the standards."

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Note to Media: The report is available online at <http://olivecenter.ucdavis.edu/>