

Olive Oil – Who’s Cheatin’ Who?

One fancy bottle is labeled as ‘extra virgin olive oil’ and carries a price tag of \$37.50 for one half liter. On the shelf below is another bottle – also labeled as ‘extra virgin olive oil’ but its price is \$37.88 for three liters - twelve times more product for the same price.

How is it possible for two products of equal quality to sell for such disparate pricing? The answer is simple: It is not possible. When was the last time you saw one egg selling for the same price as a dozen eggs?

Who in their right mind would pay thirty-seven dollars for a half-liter bottle of a product when a three liter bottle of the exact same product, that is its exact equal in quality, is available just a few inches away? Again, the answer is simple: No one would. The price disparity between products claiming to be of equal quality is a tacit admission by retailers that the cheap concoctions they are selling labeled as ‘extra virgin olive oil’ are in reality cheap mixes of cheap oils.

Why is it so hard to find real extra virgin olive oil at an affordable price? In the words of one food distributor: “The distributors control what the customer wants and gets.” In other words, the answer lays not so much in what the consumer wants as what the distributors want to sell. What do distributors want to sell consumers? Again, our food distributor answers: “do you have blends and *pomice* (pomace)?” Without having blends it is not enough.”

What is a ‘blend’? The word seems to imply that it is a ‘blend’ of different types of extra virgin olive oils, the truth is that the word ‘blend’ is a misleading way of saying a mix of different, including non-olive, oils.

Britain’s *The Telegraph* recently reported that "Almost half the 'Italian' oil sold inside Italy is ... from olives of an unknown provenance." And olive oils sold in supermarkets in the UK are "blended" from a variety of different oils before being sold as Italian extra virgin. According to Italy’s agriculture minister, "This sort of fraud damages Italy's image".

Distributors and retailers are telling consumers that they - the consumers – want olive oil that is *packed* in Italy, as if where the olive oil was ‘packed’ had any impact on its quality. However, according to one recent report, between 2006 and 2007, over 3,200,000 liters of fraudulent olive oil was sold under niche (or fancy) labels throughout Italy. And that a “large part of the product ended up abroad”.

Packers misrepresent legitimate olive growers and olive oil mills by purchasing pomace oil, refined oil, refined hazelnut oil and other oils on the open market and reselling the mix – or blend (does that sound better?) - as ‘extra virgin olive oil’, ‘Packed in Italy’.

So then, who’s cheating who? Does the blame lie solely with the packers? Or is there more to it?

Exporters and importers are using false documentation and labeling to present the cheap mixes as olive oil and thereby circumvent national and international laws that require that all ingredients be traced to their place of origin. Exporters and importers also use archaic and misleading terms such as ‘cold pressed’ and ‘first pressing’ to describe the product when in reality none of the olive oil is extracted by an olive press (if it is, then show us a picture of the olive press). They don’t know and they don’t care where the product came from, how it was produced or when it was produced.

Distributors and retailers, rather than simply requiring that importers provide them with proof of quality and origin of the product they sell, (such as a map and picture of the mill where the olive oil is supposedly produced), are concerned more about stocking fees and pricing margins. Distributors and retailers employ a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy when deciding what to stock and sell to the public.

Is it possible for consumers to find real extra virgin olive oil bottled on site at the mill where it is extracted from locally grown olives? Yes it is.

Distributors and retailers need to verify both the origin and the actual – not sales pitch - quality of the olive oil that they sell, regardless of where it is ‘packed’. And they then need to accurately represent this to consumers.

Kelly Martinez

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Antonio Celentano Extra Virgin Olive Oil is extracted from locally grown olives, bottled on site in Córdoba, Spain and most importantly 100% real extra virgin olive oil. Please visit: <http://www.antoniocelentano.com> for details.