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Opinion Piece

Rising Olive Oil Prices Raise Alarm in the Sector Over Fraud Risks

The EU is the world’s largest producer of olive oil, accounting for around 65% of global production. However, due to unfavourable climatic conditions, recent harvests have been poor. In 2022/23, EU olive oil production fell by around 40% compared to previous years, and in 2023/24, production dropped by 25% compared to the five-year average. This trend is reflected globally with olive oil production in decline across many regions. As a result, prices for olive oil have surged worldwide, with increases ranging from 100% to as much as 175% for extra virgin olive oil, depending on the market.

In this context, consumers may be drawn to cheaper alternatives while traders might be tempted to offer lower-cost options, thus increasing the risk of fraud in a market known for its quality and centuries-old traditions. Unfortunately, fraud in the olive oil sector is not a new threat. Olive oil is a high-value product and the temptation for unscrupulous actors to maximise profits at the expense of consumers and product quality persists. When consumers are unfamiliar with the differences between various types of olive oil, fraudulent practices become more prevalent.

That is why it is crucial to toughen the administrative responses and criminal sanctions for fraudsters while investing in consumer education. Once consumers are aware of the distinctions between extra virgin, virgin, lampante, pomace, and refined olive oils, as well as the processes and flavours involved, the rate of fraud will fall. Educated consumers will be able to make informed decisions and avoid lower-quality products.

A practice that is customary in the olive oil sector is blending of different vegetable oils. On this matter, I must raise an important issue with the current EU marketing standards that Copa-Cogeca has long called to reform: the ability to prohibit the sale of olive oil blends in countries where their production is not allowed. Currently, EU rules permit legitimate blending of olive oils with other vegetable oils, and Member States can choose to ban such blends within their territories. This policy is designed to protect and promote the quality of pure olive oil and reduce the risk of misleading consumers. However, there is a loophole: if olive oil from a member state that prohibits blending is exported to another EU country where blending is allowed, the blended oil can be re-imported and sold in the original state. Although this is technically legal, it undermines the intent of the original ban as it allows the blend to “leave through the front door and return through the back.” Consumers deserve to know that when they buy olive oil, they are getting pure olive oil, not a blend with lower-quality products.

In addition to addressing the issue of blends, we need to focus on how olive oil is presented to consumers. Some Member States have implemented stricter regulations requiring non-refillable bottles for olive oil in restaurants and catering establishments. These bottles ensure that what is being served is genuine olive oil and not a lower-quality substitute. Harmonising such rules across the EU would not only promote internal market cohesion and facilitate trade, but also ensure consistent product safety, quality, and consumer protection.

I urge the olive oil sector, consumer organisations, and EU institutions to work together to enhance traceability and consumer protection, with a focus on blends and packaging. We need stronger safeguards to ensure olive oil remains a premium product that consumers can trust.

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the competition from neighbouring countries in the Mediterranean basin, such as North Africa and the Middle East. Even though these regions face similar climatic challenges, their production costs are much lower than those in Europe. Countries like Tunisia, for example, have been exporting more than 56,000 tonnes of olive oil to the EU annually, duty-free, since 1998. While these imports can help lower prices during times of scarcity, they should be viewed as a temporary solution. Turning European consumers towards non-EU olive oil poses a threat to the EU’s high-quality production standards. In recent years, due to reduced EU production, imports from third countries like Chile and Argentina have increased. While European producers are committed to upholding labour rights, environmental standards, and economic sustainability, these same guarantees do not always apply to imports from non-EU countries. It is essential that we reflect these values in international trade agreements and prioritise European production.

Olive oil is one of the pillars of the Mediterranean Diet which is considered a complete and balanced dietary model with proven health benefits and considered world intangible heritage by the UNESCO. Olive oil is a product of high nutritional quality as it is composed of monounsaturated fatty acids, vitamin E and β-carotenes, which gives it cardio-protective properties.

I remain confident that the new EU legislative mandate will prioritise the protection of olive oil and it is imperative that we take swift action to preserve the integrity and quality of this iconic product, ensuring its future in an increasingly competitive global market.

**Fernando do Rosario – Chairman of Copa-Cogeca Working Party on Olive Oil, Olive Producer**

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Translations will be available in DE, ES, FR, IT, PL and RO on the Copa-Cogeca website soon.

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