Consumer Perceptions of 100% Pure Olive Oil: Implications for Marketing

John L. Stanton, Department of Food Marketing, Saint Joseph’s University, Philadelphia, PA, USA
Ekaterina Salnikova, Saint Joseph’s University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand what American consumers believe is 100% pure olive oil. The study is an extension to previous work done but includes the analysis of the perceptions of pomace olive oil and 100% Pure Olive Oil. This research includes a survey of 200 consumers on a national basis. The results indicate that consumers have little understanding of olive oil in general but they specifically believe that 100% olive oil must be made only from olives by can be made from any parts of the olive fruit. A significant number of consumers believed that olive oil from pomace is 100% sure olive oil.

KEYWORDS
Consumer Perceptions, Olive Oil

BACKGROUND

There is a controversial issue which deals with the classification of olive oil. A main concern within the olive oil industry is the use of olive pomace oil, labeled as 100% pure olive oil. The issue is not with the various olive oil associations which require that olive pomace be the labeled as pomace. For the North American olive oil Association (NAOAA), a group that represents importers of olive oil to the United States, maintains that while the new commission’s supporters believe the new standards will ensure California olive oils are authentic and of premium quality, the standards vary significantly from other state, national, and international industry rules specifically requires the identification of pomace on the label. These standards are based on what olive oil professional classify as 100% pure olive oil and have no input as to how consumers define 100% olive oil.

The purpose of this research is not to be a challenge or refute the current classification systems, but rather it to bring into play what consumers believe to be 100% pure olive oil.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Americans know very little about olive oil. According to the UC Davis study while 55% of American shoppers believe they understand olive oil grades no more than 25% of consumers responded correctly to statements about the grades (Wang et.al, 2013). This is due, in part, to a lack of consumer awareness of quality differences. U.S. consumers are generally unfamiliar with the range of olive oil grades and uses (Cord, 2013). More than half of olive oil users agree choosing an olive oil is confusing because they aren’t sure what’s important. In fact, only 25 percent say they are “very knowledgeable” about olive oil, (North American Olive Oil Association, 2014) This finding should not be surprising because in a study conducted by Delgado (2013) she found that the majority of consumers NEVER read the package information and the second largest percentage was consumers who RARELY read the package information.

Olive pomace oil is olive oil that is extracted from olive pulp after the first press. It is controversial in that once the mechanical oil extraction of olive oil is complete, approximately 5-8% of the oil remains in the pulp, which then needs to be extracted with the help of solvents, an industrial technique used in the production of most other edible oils including canola, peanut, sunflower, etc.

While it is clear the amount of olive pomace oil available after mechanical pressing is small, the incremental value can be substantial. Most food manufacturing companies that could increase the raw material usage by 5 to 8% would consider it a very positive result.

The irony in the above statistic is that olive oil usage among American consumers is increasing. It appears that the two motivating factors in the increase of olive oil usage is health concerns and taste. 86% of consumers cited flavor is the most important factor in buying olive oil.38% strongly agree (of consumers in the UC Davis research) indicated that they choose to olive oil over other types of fats and oils because it is healthier (Wang et.al, 2013). That is significantly higher than any other reason given for using olive oil, 29% of the people did indicate that they prefer the taste of olive oil over other fats and oils.

The One issue in the olive oil-cooking oil decision is that in many cases in the US the various types of mixed oils, as well as different qualities of olive oil within the same container.

The issue addressed in this research is significant because American consumers do not understand and/or are confused when purchasing olive oil. “But more than half (56 percent) of olive oil users find choosing an olive oil to be confusing because they are unaware of what factors are important to consider and many myths about olive oil persist” (Butler, 2014).

This study is to focus specifically on what American consumers believe to be 100% pure olive oil. The purpose of this paper is not to examine technical definitions as provided by the various olive oil associations, and certainly not to make judgments about the appropriateness of any of these standards. This study will focus exclusively on consumer beliefs about olive oil.

This research specifically addresses whether or not consumers believe that olive pomace oil is considered 100% pure olive oil.

While there is substantial amount of research on the factors that influence attitudes and choice about olive oil, there is very little research that even mentions the term “Olive Pomace oil.” Therefore the literature review specifically discussing pomace is sparse at best. There is definitive discussion on the grading of olive oil in general which includes oil made from pomace, however there is virtually no discussion of how that oil is perceived by consumers. There is minor discussion on how pomace is evaluated by the expert tasting panels, which provide little insight into consumers attitudes are evaluations. For example Delgado (2013) writes extensively on consumer use of olive oil, but never once mentions the word pomace.
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