

## Group sues olive oil producers, retailers amid claims of mislabeling

*Chefs, restaurants and cooking enthusiasts have filed a complaint in Orange County against such retailers as Gelson's and Target over sales of extra-virgin products that failed in quality testing.*

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A cadre of chefs, restaurants and cooking enthusiasts with a mutual love of olive oil are accusing several companies of diluting the product with cheaper alternatives while still branding it as "extra virgin."

The group filed a complaint in Orange County Superior Court this week claiming that several retailers and olive oil producers, including such varied outlets as Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Bristol Farms, have misled Californians for years about the actual quality of the olive oil on sale.

The slew of defendants also includes Gelson's Markets, Kmart, Target Corp. and others, who are accused of charging a high premium for imposter oil. The suit doesn't name several retailers such as Trader Joe's and Costco because, attorney Daniel Callahan said, their olive oil products aren't adulterated.

His firm, Callahan & Blaine of Santa Ana, also filed a class-action complaint last month against 99 Cents Only Stores alleging unfair and deceptive business practices and misleading advertising because the discount chain raised some prices to 99.99 cents.

Plaintiffs are seeking an injunction preventing the questionable oil from being distributed and may also request hundreds of millions of dollars in restitution for "fraudulently obtained profits," Callahan said.

But with so many defendants, the case will probably plod along for two years before it makes it into court, he said.

The suit draws heavily on a July report from the UC Davis Olive Center that found that consumers shell out \$700 million a year on olive oil, yet 69% of the imported oils sampled and one of 10 California-produced samples didn't meet international standards for extra-virgin olive oil.

Some restaurateurs, Callahan said, went so far as to throw out dishes that didn't taste right because of the suspect oil.

"This cost many of our restaurateurs a lot of money due to destroyed product — they were dissatisfied with their meals," he said. "And customers expected the taste of extra virgin olive oil instead of what they were getting." Antonio Cagnolo, who owns Antonello Ristorante in Santa Ana and is a plaintiff in the suit, said he uses blind tastings to separate out musty, cheap options from the purer varieties of oil. He has just returned from Italy bearing freshly cold-pressed extra virgin olive oil.

But consumers aren't just duped by diluted blends, he said. They also get distracted by the attractive labels on bottles of so-called Italian olive oil and don't read the fine print noting that the olives are actually from Greece or Spain and the product is packaged in the U.S., he said.

"Definitely, people have all been buying something that's probably not real," he said. "Someone's lying. But I'm very fussy — I'm not going to let those guys take me by the nose, because I know exactly what I'm buying."

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