

Olive oil quality expectations for Asian, North American and European consumers

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Introduction

Most of the bottled brands and DOB available on the marketplace in European, Asian and North American markets are blended formulations. Producers carefully use different selected raw materials to formulate a final product that fully satisfy the consumers.

Consumer satisfaction can be measured with several market research tools: with consumer sensory analysis, emotional instinctive reaction to different product formulation can be measured in so called blind test to measure acceptance of a product or preference when more than one product is tested. This is typically done with large number of consumers in the different markets of interest. With sensory analysis and a selected and reduced number of testing subjects it is also possible to describe and quantify language used without any technical knowledge or expertise.

Finally in classical market research expectations measurement of product quality, brand awareness, usage and attitude, brand strength, potential volumetric measures, brand-price interactions and so on can be measured. In other words the marketing mix is the center of such research steps. In this presentation some facts for these 3 different steps of products research in the olive oil category will be presented. The focus will be on difference and or similarities in the European, Asian and North American markets.

Descriptor used by consumers to characterize olive oil.

Visual terms: cloudiness, yellow, green and red color, consistency. For visual terms no major geographical effect can be found among different geographical regions.

Olfactory terms: unripe is only terms with the larger discrimination potential. The term fresh is used also in Europe and to less extent in North America. In Asia consumers do discriminate far less with this term.

Gustatory term: fruity, apple, unripe, fresh, eucalyptus, almond, nutty, green, bitter, sweet, vegetable, woody, artichoke, spicy, cooked and rancid are mostly used in Europe.

Mouth feel terms: consistency, sharp, scratching, pungent and astringent are major sources of product discrimination in Europe and North America. In USA the term creaminess was largely used to describe a specific mouth feeling perception. Aftertaste related attributes play an important role in North America. In Asia a less large vocabulary being used.

Acceptance of olive oil in different markets

For a product of long tradition like olive oil one would expect to see major regional, national and continental differences in product acceptance. This kind of situation is very often observed with traditional products like, wine, coffee, tea, beer or bread. For olive oil this is also seen, however with less large amplitude. In fact acceptance values in Japan, Canada and for instance Switzerland for a representative selection of products is quite similar. This is valid for a testing situation with the raw products or for the product used as an ingredient to taste or cook.

Expectation of olive oil quality in different markets

Basically the consumers expect in all non producing regions the following countries as most representative for good quality olive oil: Italy (by far the most mentioned), Spain, Greece and Portugal. This quality expectation changes of course quite dramatically when the same question is submitted in a producing country. So for instance in Spain 85% of the population declares that the best quality of olive oil has to be expected from Spanish oil.

The language used by consumer regarding the expected product characteristics includes the several items like balanced, harmonious, rich and so on. These words contain as well objective perception terms as well as hedonic preference elements and expectation values. Sensory marketing is the discipline that helps transforming such information into successful products.