



Wednesday, August 04, 2010 Last Update: 10:32 AM PT

Cooks Accuse Olive Oil Industry of Cheating on Extra Virgin Quality

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LOS ANGELES (CN) - The olive oil industry charges a "hefty premium" for extra virgin olive oil that fails to meet international and U.S. standards, several California chefs, home cooks and restaurateurs claim in Superior Court. Samples from a June study "had defective flavors, such as rancid, fusty and musty," according to the chefs, who include David Martin from Bravo's "Top Chef."

"For years, chefs and home cooks have shared anecdotal tales of extra virgin olive oil that just did not taste right," the cooking enthusiasts claim. "It has now become clear that these tales were based in fact."

The group cites a June study by the University of California, Davis that evaluated olive oil based on criteria from the International Olive Council and the United States Department of Agriculture.

"The results of the tests were shocking," the lawsuit states. "Sensory tests showed that these failed samples had defective flavors such as rancid, fusty and musty."

Despite the UC Davis findings, retailers such as Target, Wal-Mart, Kroger, Sysco, Rachel Ray Digital, Safeway and Albertsons "have convinced unwary consumers to pay an outrageous price for what is, at best, a product worth much less than that of the value for which it is sold," the lawsuit claims.

Substandard olive oil is sold at almost 80 percent more than its worth, the cooks say, and consumers spend "an amazing" \$700 million on extra virgin olive oil annually, "not realizing the products ... are not worthy of their premium prices."

The plaintiffs demand punitive damages for fraud, false advertising and negligent misrepresentation. They are represented by Daniel Callahan of Callahan & Blaine in Santa Ana, Calif.