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Attacking an industry's virginity

By FRANK MICKADEIT
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D**an Callahan** is the attorney who sued the Register over the way we paid (or allegedly didn't pay) our carriers, giving us the nudge we needed to file Chapter 11, and he has since sued other large papers. As I told him Wednesday, I'm glad he's found another industry to send into bankruptcy: olive oil.

I ran into a Callahan partner, **Ed Susolik** , in the Westin South Coast Plaza bar after a legal seminar last week, and he told me of a lawsuit the firm was to file against olive oil manufacturers and distributors. I learned we got off easy. Callahan had only questioned my paper's business practices. In the case of the olive oilers, he's questioning their virginity.

What many manufacturers claim is "extra virgin" olive oil isn't, claims the lawsuit, which he ended up filing this week on behalf of some high-profile chefs and restaurateurs. True extra virgin is produced purely by pressing with no additives or refinement, and with less than 0.9 percent acidity. A UC Davis study shows that a lot of olive oil is refined and from poor-quality olives. The industry counters that the report, on which the suit is based, used a "not statistically significant" sample.

Extra-virgin olive oil is estimated to be a $700 million-a-year-business in the U.S., which might end up being the amount of damages, Callahan said.

As it happened , I was already scheduled to have lunch with **Christine Iger** at Antonello on Tuesday, so when owner **Antonio Cagnolo** came by our table to say hello, I asked him about the flap. (He was initially one of those suing, but late Thursday it appeared he would drop out because of a conflict.) Anyway, as Iger and I were finishing our Chilean sea bass, Cagnolo appeared with three bottles of olive oil and a basket of bread still warm from the oven, and proceeded to hold forth on olive oil and the importance of its (extra) virginity.

I asked him, "What's the big deal?"

"If I buy extra virgin olive oil, it better be extra virgin olive oil," Cagnolo said, looking at me as if I'd asked about his sister's virginity, not his oil's.

C**agnolo's grandfather** was an olive oil maker on the Italian Rivera, where it gets cold in the winter. As a boy, living in an unheated house, Cagnolo remembers the oil acquiring a consistency like molasses when the weather turned. "This other stuff (fake extra virgin), you can put it in the freezer and it doesn't change at all," Cagnolo said dismissively.

Right, but does it *taste* any different?

"A good olive oil, you feel everything that goes into it. The taste depends on the soil, the climate, the type of olive. You (refine) it, mix it all up (with inferior oils) you don't get what you paid for."

He opened a bottle of Academia Barilla, which he hand-carried back from Italy. It's from Sicily. He poured

three saucers and dipped his bread. "Smooth, a little bitter as it goes down, but not raspy," he says. "Flirty," said Iger, referring, I believe, to the oil.

Cagnolo next poured Olio, a brand from the Umbria region of Italy. Also hand-imported by Cagnolo. "Bigger, a little spicier, huh?" he asked as we sampled. "Sexy," Iger replied.

At that point, I wasn't opining much myself but just waiting to see what adjective Iger would come up with after Cagnolo poured from the final bottle, a flask of Vita Organic into which he'd dropped several red chilies. A dip, a bite ... and then I unfortunately didn't hear how Iger escalated her review because an explosion of heat and taste had me reaching for the water.

Cagnolo brought out a bowl of pasta and mixed in the Olio with a little Parmesan. You could taste complexity of the oil but it didn't get in the way of the pasta.

"This is how we really eat in Italy," Cagnolo said. "In America, people think it is all about the red sauce and sausage. No. This, you can taste the pasta."

He disappeared and came back with a gold bottle of an Italian bubbly called Lovera di Franciacorta. An empty bottle, but literally gold plated. He's thinking of importing it. "It's like champagne, but they can't call it champagne because it isn't from France," he says, "although some people do put 'champagne' on the bottle when it's not from France."

Wait, does Callahan know about that?