



Strengthening the food supply chain

## Harvesting new collaboration – The International Olive Council

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**T**he olive oil market is a distinctive one. Its development is influenced heavily by factors such as the geographical location of olive growing in areas that are subject to cyclical periods of drought. Olive production is also distinctive, being characterized by an alternating pattern of large and small crops resulting, inevitably, in price instability.

No wonder then that the countries with interests in olive growing felt the need to join forces and set up an international forum, not only to find remedies to the problems and boost the market, but also to develop a united framework to defend and safeguard the olive tree and olive oil.

From this common desire came the first International Agreement on Olive Oil and Table Olives (1956) and the subsequent founding of the International Olive Council (see **Box**), both known under the acronym IOC.

For most of the parties to the Agreement, olive farming must necessarily be taken into account in any detailed consideration of agriculture, employment,

rural depopulation, trade in agri-food stuffs, soil and environmental conservation, and many other subjects of fundamental socio-economic importance.

### Setting standards for legislation

One of the most significant regulatory tasks of the IOC is to develop the definitions and analytical characteristics of all the grades of olive oils and olive-pomace oils included in the trade standards adopted by members for compulsory application in international trade.

The standards drawn up by the IOC are trade standards. They are adopted by consensus of the members, which



## Main Focus

pledge to incorporate them into their legislation. Revision of IOC standards takes place in the light of scientific advances that help to make testing methods more accurate, or of technological and commercial developments.

Ever since it first started to be involved in the standardization of olive products, the IOC has cultivated a solid cooperative relationship with a number of international organizations, including the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC), the World Customs Organization (WCO) and the European Union. Its aim in doing so is to define the minimum compositional, quality and purity requirements of olive oils and to harmonize the methods of analysis in use.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission is responsible for the joint FAO-WHO programme for the development of food standards with an eye to consumer health protection and fair trading. The World Trade Organization (WTO) takes into account the standards and recommendations of the CAC in the application of the WTO Agreements on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT Agreement). The CAC standards for olive oils and table olives are currently under revision to bring them into line with the IOC trade standards.

### Accounting for 98% of the world's olive oil

The International Olive Council (IOC) is the intergovernmental organization mandated to administer the International Agreement on Olive Oil and Table Olives, negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development.

Since its creation in 1959, the IOC has been headquartered in Madrid, Spain. At present, it has 15 members (Algeria, Croatia, Egypt, European Union (with its 27 Member States), Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Montenegro, Morocco, Serbia, Syria and Tunisia). A further five countries are currently negotiating membership.

The olive tree provides a source of income for over 12 million people around the world. Current IOC members account for 98% of the world's olive oil.

However, at its meeting in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in April 2007, ISO technical committee ISO/TC 34, *Food products*, subcommittee SC 11, *Animal and vegetable fats and oils*, passed a resolution to take the first steps for the IOC to participate fully in ISO/TC 34/SC 11. Subsequently, in May 2008, this closer cooperation bore fruit with the proposal of an initial set of three IOC testing methods for ISO adoption. These methods, which are specific to olive oil and included in the IOC trade standard, are:

- determination of the aliphatic alcohols content by capillary column chromatography (COI/T.20/Doc. No 26);
- determination of the percentage of 2-glyceryl monopalmitate (COI/T.20/Doc. No 23) – although ISO already has the lipase method, this IOC method is specifically for olive oil;
- determination of wax content by capillary column gas chromatography, (COI/T.20/Doc. No 18/Rev. 2).

The associated ISO standards, currently under development as ISO 12871, ISO 12872 and ISO 12873 respectively, will use the fast-track procedure for comment by ISO members. The three standards are targeted for publication during 2009, after which it is expected that other COI-referenced methods will be proposed.

### Building on the relationship

The IOC has a long-standing collaborative relationship with ISO, albeit, until quite recently, as a liaison body.

### ISO member from a major olive oil producer

Clearly, since Spain is a major producer of olive oil, this work is keenly followed by *Asociación Española de Normalización y Certificación* (AENOR), the ISO member for Spain. AENOR has a national subcommittee that is responsible for standardizing testing methods for vegetable oils and other fat products. Methods connected with olive oil, especially concerning the requirements for compliance during the extraction process and in the final product, are of particular interest. AENOR has several national standards specific to olive oil, as, e.g. UNE 34606:2003, UNE 34601:2003 and UNE 34605:2003, which, respectively, set out requirements for packing, product specifications and mill production requirements with respect to extra virgin olive oil.

### About the authors



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ence in the development of methods of analysis for the determination of the quality and purity of olive oils and participates in various committees of chemistry experts, including those of the IOC, ISO/TC 34/SC 11 and the EU.



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collaborative work on physico-chemical and sensory testing of the compositional and quality characteristics of olive products to provide input for drawing up international quality control standards, harmonizing national and international legislation to ensure fair international trading, protecting consumer rights and preventing fraud.



## Winning factors

Every year the IOC assembles groups of expert chemists and sensory analysts from a range of countries to study and, if necessary, revise the testing methods to determine the quality and control the purity of olive oils and olive-pomace oils. Methods are constantly being improved to adapt them to industry needs and technological developments. This review process generates a large body of knowledge which the IOC can relay to the ISO committees in which it participates.

A key function of the IOC is the forum it provides for its members to draw up rules for olive products, which are then adopted by consensus. The aims of these rules are manifold: firstly, to enhance and control quality, but additionally to ensure transparency on the international market for olive oils, olive-pomace oils and table olives, and to promote their consumption.

Both the IOC and AENOR believe full involvement in ISO to be of crucial importance as an effective way of both introducing specific methods for olive oil and of participating in the conception and development of new standardized methods that include olive oils among the substances evaluated. The IOC and AENOR share the same priorities of harmonizing methods of analysis to ensure the application of a single unified method for laboratory accreditation purposes and to facilitate inter-comparison of multi-country results.

## Old wisdom

The fact that the prestige of olive oil is growing stronger by the day – far beyond its Mediterranean borders, and no doubt linked with increasing awareness of its benefit to health – confirms that our ancestors were right in their wish to defend and safeguard this age-old and generous tree. It encourages the entire olive community to continue working for all those who earn their livelihood from olive farming. ■