



# The aesthetic politics of taste: Producing extra virgin olive oil in Jordan

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## ABSTRACT

Extra virginity as a standard is predicated on a chemical and sensory evaluation according to the parameters set by the International Olive Council. Though a rich literature examines how food and agricultural standards are implemented in local contexts, little work has assessed how certifications redefine the local aesthetic experience of the food. In order to fill this gap, I analyze the aesthetic politics, which redefine who can taste and how they can do it. I argue that incorporating aesthetic politics into analyses of quality and standards enables tracing how this standard becomes regarded as scientific and, return, effects a re-aestheticizing of what is considered a(n) (il) legitimate taste. This re-aestheticization redefines 'best practices' in olive oil production, according to the new aesthetic. This particular configuration of the sensorial experience of olive oil, through its dissemination and employment as part of international-funded capacity building efforts, has social and environmental consequences across Jordan. In sum, this paper—based on 15 months of qualitative fieldwork with farmers, NGOs, mill employees, mill owners, and government officials in the Jordanian olive oil industry—explores how basic taste standards for extra virgin olive oil are discursively instilled in sensory evaluations and physically produced in farm and mill management practices. By tracing these processes, this paper furthers our understanding of how seemingly apolitical, scientific standards travel across scales and affect the ways in which people experience taste.

## 1. Examining quality and production

Selling a culturally important local product on the global market requires meeting international standards that may change several aspects of production. For Jordanian olive producers who are trying to get the best price for their oil, this means producing according to extra virgin olive oil standards. The conditions for extra virginity, the highest grade of olive oil, originated in Europe in the 1960s and have been subsequently established as the global industry norm by the International Olive Council and Codex Alimentarius in 1981. According to the Codex standard, extra virgin olive oil is, “virgin olive oil with a free acidity, expressed as oleic acid, of not more than 0.8 g per 100 g and whose other characteristics correspond to those laid down for this category” (FAO, 2015). The ‘other characteristics’ include chemical and organoleptic qualities. However, this very specific list of qualities are traditionally not how the average Jordanian evaluates olive oil value or quality. This contrast is most visible to consumers in the packaging design (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>. The oil on the left is bottled in a small glass bottle with a colorful label stating that the oil is extra virgin and has 0.8% or lower acidity. The oil on the right is an example of a 16-kilogram *tanaka* in which most Jordanians buy their oil. Although the packaging is the most obvious difference between these two olive oil products, they can

also differ all along the commodity network, from harvest to sale.

This paper, based on 15 months of qualitative fieldwork with olive producers in four Jordanian olive oil producing regions in 2016 and the summer of 2017, examines how extra virginity, both as a concept and as a type of olive oil, is produced in Jordan. Although many scholars have addressed quality standards and taste (Besky, 2016; Lyon, 2010; Meneley, 2014; Wilson et al., 2012), few studies have thoroughly traced the inclusions and exclusions occurring as a result of new taste regimes in standards and how this affects production overall. In order to fill this gap, I consider standards to be a sociotechnical agencement, or a momentary coming together of environment, standards, tasters, producers, and the oil through which a formula (in this case a formula for evaluating quality and taste) succeeds or fails (Callon, 2007). This socio-technical agencement functions as an aesthetic politics that reorders who has the ability to speak and taste. By tracing how this reordering occurs through standards and their implementation, we can identify how standards that are purported as simple indicators of better quality have specific ramification for production and producers in local contexts.

Using this theoretical framework, I analyze how extra virginity defines the taste of olive oil, how people in Jordan are trained to detect taste in this particular way, and how production changes in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Extra virgin olive oil can also be sold in *tanakat* (plural of *tanaka*). However, extra virgin olive oils often have more expensive packaging and marketing designs.



Fig. 1. Extra virgin olive oil in bottle (left) and 16 kg *tanaka* of olive oil (right).

reach these standards. Although the general population has little concern for extra virginity and oil testing is sporadic on the local market, olive producers and other key actors in the Jordanian olive industry are trying to build awareness about extra virginity and to increase the production of extra virgin olive oil. Through an examination of extra virginity standards, their implementation, and the production of the oil itself, I argue that the standards are not only a form of governance but also a form of aesthetic politics. By defining taste and quality, this aesthetic politics of standards establishes new rules for the relationship between the materiality of the oil and the human body. These new rules operate both in shaping the oil and in reworking practices of production and consumption. Viewed from this perspective, extra virgin olive oil is not simply a product of a higher quality. Rather, it is the product of a particular sociotechnical agencement of consumers, producers, institutions, and capacity building efforts that declare extra virgin olive oil as scientifically superior to other forms of olive oil production. Using this framework furthers our understanding of how global agricultural technology and knowledge circulate, take hold, and face resistance in local contexts. Better understanding these processes will allow us to challenge our understandings of ‘best practices’ in capacity building projects and develop more flexible approaches that recognize and allow for multiple, parallel practices and aesthetics.

## 2. Producing an aesthetic politics

Standards and tests are essential in the creation of commodities because they classify objects, determining value for exchange, and through this process change the relationships between objects and people along the chain (Tanaka and Busch, 2003). By examining food standards, scholars trace how production and its associated values and meanings occur across multiple scales yet take root and function in local contexts in particular ways (Coq-Huelva et al., 2014; Higgins et al., 2008; Higgins and Larner, 2010a; Loconto, 2015; Miller and O’leary, 1987; Timmermans and Epstein, 2010). Although there is a rich body of work on how international standards affect local agricultural production (Gibbon et al., 2008; Higgins and Larner, 2010b; Jaffee, 2014; Lyon, 2010; Mutersbaugh, 2004), little work has investigated how the adoption of standards affects the politics of who has the authority to determine ‘good taste’ and how this distinction affects production practices within and outside of the market-in-the-making. In order to fill this gap, this paper incorporates the idea of aesthetic politics, which focuses on changes in who has the ability to speak and taste, into an analysis of extra virginity as a sociotechnical agencement or a particular coming together of standards, social relations, and material objects.

Agencement theory and other network-based theories have been a useful tool for examining how standards work as a form of governance in the globalized agro-food network (Busch, 2000; Busch and Tanaka, 1996; Li, 2007; Mutersbaugh, 2005; Oliveira and Hecht, 2016). While these network approaches are not collapsible, they evidence a united effort to consider the relationship between power, politics, and space as a socio-material process (Müller, 2015; Murdoch, 2006). In particular, I consider extra virginity to be a sociotechnical agencement, or a coming together of socio-material resources alongside particular tools and knowledges that add value to products (Callon, 2007; Ouma, 2015). Ouma uses this idea in order to demonstrate how the market is not an existing system, but is a performative agencement of market making. In other words, agencement calls attention to the ways in which these academic and governmental knowledges are used as sociotechnical tools for creating a market. In this paper, the market is exportable Jordanian extra virgin olive oil. Instead of considering standards as top-down governance, this paper traces exactly how standards work in order to understand how local producers use these standards to meet their own needs and in ways that differ from the written regulations (Loconto, 2015).

Extra virginity, with its focus on regulating taste, is unique from other standards that focus on safety. Taste is an important part of quality standards and can be one lens for examining standards in local contexts (Busch, 2000; Jaffee, 2012; Wilson et al., 2012). Although there are specific taste parameters tied to extra virgin sensory analysis, they unavoidably touch ground and mix with local tastes and discourses. The production of taste is simultaneously discursive and connected to physical environmental factors of production. In the case of coffee, Wilson et al. (2012) found that the correlation between quality standards and particular geographic factors contributed to the uneven development of gourmet coffee. Besky (2016) explored how embodied algorithms drive uneven development. An embodied algorithm is the calculation of the value of a commodity, which is determined by the interaction between the body, cultural meanings (value), and the materiality of the resource. In other words, it is the embodied experience of tasting and its connection to the particular resource materialities in which natural resources are not just physical things, but are “complex arrangements of physical stuff, extractive infrastructures, calculative devices, discourses of the market and development, the nation and the corporation, everyday practices, and so on, that allow those substances to exist as resources” (Richardson and Weszkalnys, 2014, p. 7). The strength of embodied algorithm as a concept is the way in which it emphasizes the bodily experience of taste in the creation of value in its physical and social context.

While the idea of the embodied algorithm draws attention to how the body, the material object, and environment come together, further work is needed to push how this translates into value as established through taste. Although Besky (2016) is engaging with ideas of aesthetics and taste, she, citing Bourdieu (2000), argues that taste and judgment are often a masked expression of social class. Furthermore, she focuses mostly on the judge’s sense of taste, and less on taste in society as a whole. However, Bourdieu’s approach to aesthetics is limited by the way in which it conceptualizes taste and appreciation of quality as a mask for class distinction (Rancière, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2010). While class certainly plays a role, the vocabularies of taste and olive oil are not relegated to a particular class in Jordan; conversations about oil quality and distinction cross class boundaries. Instead, Rancière (2004) argues that taste and distinction are a redistribution of who can sense and how they can do so. He suggests that this redistribution can be traced as a horizontal topography that forces something to appear as either a fixed or transformable reality. In his theorizing, aesthetics is a dialectic between the social, political, and aesthetic. Therefore, Rancière’s attention to the distribution of the sensible provides a model for tracing how extra virginity standards function through horizontal relations in order to enforce a particular distribution of the sensible in the olive oil-tongue experience.

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