

TRADEMARKS IN THE ITALIAN OLIVE OIL SECTOR (1868-1942)

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Abstract: *Olive oil immediately emerged as one of the key sectors of Italian agri-food since the unification of the country (1861). The essay aims to contribute to the study of the evolution of this sector, mainly through the analysis of trademarks registered in Italy between 1868 and 1960. The olive oil sector represents one of the earliest and most advanced cases of strategic trademark use within the Italian food industry. Unlike many other agri-food sectors, where trademarks initially functioned primarily as defensive tools against imitation and counterfeiting practices, olive oil producers rapidly developed a more complex and proactive understanding of the brand as a communicative and competitive instrument. In this sector, trademarks did not merely certify origin or protect intellectual property; they became vehicles for building authenticity, geographical identity and consumer trust, especially in export markets.*

Keywords: *olive oil; trademarks; Italy; branding strategy.*

Resumo: *O azeite emergiu como um dos setores-chave do setor agroalimentar italiano desde a unificação do país (1861). O artigo visa contribuir para o estudo da evolução deste setor, principalmente através da análise das marcas registadas em Itália entre 1868 e 1960. O setor do azeite representa um dos primeiros e mais avançados casos de utilização estratégica de marcas na indústria alimentar italiana. Ao contrário de muitos outros setores agroalimentares, nos quais as marcas registadas funcionavam inicialmente como ferramentas defensivas contra práticas de imitação e contrafação, os produtores de azeite desenvolveram rapidamente uma compreensão mais complexa e proativa da marca como instrumento de comunicação e competitividade. Neste setor, as marcas registadas não se limitavam a certificar a origem ou a proteger a propriedade intelectual; tornaram-se veículos para construir autenticidade, identidade geográfica e confiança do consumidor, especialmente nos mercados de exportação.*

Palavras-chave: *azeite; marcas registadas; Itália; estratégia de marca.*

The agri-food sector has historically been one of the key sectors of the Italian economy, not only since the emergence of the *Made in Italy* phenomenon. The first decades after the unification of the country (1861) were characterised by the impact of traditional production structures on the new economic and institutional landscape, shaped by the liberal economic policy of the new ruling class (Chiapparino 1998). At the end of the 19th century, the transformation of the agri-food sector was still limited, with a prevalence of small local businesses linked to traditional products such as olive oil,

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pasta, wine and cheese (Casanova 2012). Olive oil immediately emerged as one of the key sectors of Italian agri-food, as well as a product in high demand abroad for non-food uses (soap production in Marseille, wool carding in England) (Vaquero Piñeiro 2019).

Our essay aims to contribute to the study of the evolution of this sector, which is so important for the Italian economy, mainly through the analysis of trademarks registered in Italy in the century following unification. This study is largely based on the initial results of research conducted as part of an ongoing national research project, which aims to provide new perspectives on the process of Italian economic development, with a particular focus on industrialisation and the relationship between businesses and markets, through the study of trademarks registered in Italy between 1868 and 1960¹.

More specifically, we argue that the olive oil sector represents one of the earliest and most advanced cases of strategic trademark use within the Italian food industry. Unlike many other agri-food sectors, where trademarks initially functioned primarily as defensive tools against imitation, olive oil producers rapidly developed a more complex and proactive understanding of the brand as a communicative and competitive instrument. In this sector, trademarks did not merely certify origin or protect intellectual property; they became vehicles for constructing quality, authenticity, geographical identity and consumer trust, especially in export markets. In this sense, the olive oil industry can be interpreted as a laboratory of early branding practices in Italy, anticipating dynamics that would only later become widespread in other segments of the food and beverage sector.

As part of this broad project, we have carried out an analysis of the entire F&B sector, and the focus on the olive oil sector is part of this sectoral analysis. The choice of the starting year for the study is due to the fact that the first trademark law introduced in unified Italy was Law No. 4577 of 30 August 1868 «concerning trademarks and distinctive factory signs». The law established the jurisdiction of local prefectures in matters of trademarks, and in the absence of an ad hoc office that could carry out the screening, only a verification of the regularity of the extrinsic part of the trademark was provided for. This remained the reference law for most of the period under investigation, after the enabling law of 25 November 1926, No. 2032, which initiated the process of reforming industrial trademark law, and the subsequent Royal Decree of 13 September 1934, No. 1602, was never actually implemented because the implementing regulations were not put in place. It was only with the approval of Royal Decree No. 929 of 21 June 1942, concerning «Legislative provisions on patents for trademarks», that the rules on trademarks were reformed.

The results of our analysis showed that, in terms of the number of registrations, the importance of the Italian food sector compared to other sectors is clear: in the period

¹ The research project was based on data on trademarks registered with the Trademarks and Patents Office of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, deposited by the Central State Archives in Rome.

considered, it accounted for approximately 23% of the total number of trademarks registered by companies based in Italy, the second largest sector after chemicals in terms of number of registered trademarks.

For the food sector as a whole, the trend in registrations by Italian companies was very modest until the end of the First World War (and therefore the growth phase of the Italian economy in the first fifteen years of the 20th century appears to be underrepresented), before beginning to expand in the interwar period and finally becoming much more pronounced from the 1940s onwards, in the wake of the country's reconstruction process and, above all, the profound socio-economic transformation of the 1950s. A diachronic analysis of the performance of individual F&B sectors shows that most of them are in line with the general trend in the food industry. In this scenario, one of the segments in which the analysis of the F&B sector was divided is that of edible oils and fats, a significant component of which is olive oil brands. For technical reasons that cannot be discussed here, the dataset does not currently allow us to distinguish with certainty the number of specific brands related to olive oil and therefore to analyse the trend over the period considered. What emerges, however, is that the edible oils and fats sector shows a trend that is partly different from the one described above, with a more rapid pace of registrations. Another peculiarity, which we will discuss in more detail below, concerns the graphic design of the registered brands.

If, on the other hand, we focus on the areas of origin of the companies that registered trademarks in the specific olive oil sector in the first fifty years after unification, we can see that they were heavily concentrated in Liguria and, to a lesser extent, in Tuscany (the province of Lucca in particular). This geographical concentration contrasts sharply with the geographical distribution of olive oil production areas, which are mainly located in the southern regions of the country. High-quality olive oil was mainly produced in the Ligurian Riviera and Tuscany (particularly in the countryside around Lucca), and partly also in the Bari area (in Puglia). In some cases, Ligurian entrepreneurs had started production activities in southern Italy, although these were often companies whose primary function was the trade of olive oil (especially export). The significance of the historical heritage of these areas' production and commercial traditions became a key factor in the rise of the major olive oil companies and their international consolidation, not only in the area around the port of Genoa, which has long been an important trading hub for the international olive oil market. In the late ancien régime, the highly specialised olive-growing sector in western Liguria led to a significant enrichment of the cultivated landscape and a concentration of production and commercial facilities (Carassale 2023).

During the nineteenth century, few producers exported their oil directly, while in the marketing phase, the dominant role was played by a diverse group of traders and buyers, mainly from that region. They carried out a systematic process of sourcing olive oil in the countryside, storing it in large warehouses. An extremely relevant role in the international promotion of Italian agri-food products (including olive oil) and

in the development of certain brands was played by universal exhibitions, which, from the mid-19th century onwards, showcased progress in various fields of production (Magagnoli 2015; Pellegrino, ed., 2018).

At the end of the 19th century, in a context dominated by intense global competition, olive oil exports faced a number of challenges, the main one being the excessively high prices of oils from southern Italy, which made them uncompetitive on the market compared to cheaper North African and Spanish oils (*Atti...* 1886). At the same time, lower quality oil, used mainly for industrial purposes, was in ever-decreasing demand on the market due to competition from other vegetable oils, which had more advantages than olive oil, and other resources used for lighting (mineral oils and gas).

These changes took place within a legal framework characterised by rather sparse legislation on food products in general and, until the early 20th century, practically non-existent for olive oil. Decree-Law No. 7045 of 30 August 1890 prohibited the sale of adulterated animal and vegetable fats, or oils or fats that were declared as belonging to animal or vegetable species that did not actually correspond to their true origin².

Thus, the complex issue of imitations and the fight against counterfeiting emerged at this stage and became particularly relevant for the Italian food and wine sector from the early years of the century³. Some counterfeiting practices also involved certain olive oils from southern Italy: for example, oil labelled «extra fine della Terra di Bari» was mixed with lower quality olive oil of different origin and bottled for sale in the USA, Brazil, Japan and Australia as Tuscan or Ligurian oil (Ritrovato 2023).

It was no coincidence that the legislator turned its attention to the olive sector in an attempt to curb these practices, with a law that regulated the sector more specifically: Law No. 136 of 5 April 1908, *on measures to combat fraud in the olive oil trade*, introduced an initial classification of olive oils, distinguishing genuine oils from blended ones⁴. The recurring practice of blending or adulterating olive oil with lower quality oils or seed oils damaged the reputation of pure Italian olive oil, as was the case with other quality food and wine products. Despite specific regulations, the legislation often proved ineffective due to the lack of controls and adequate laboratories⁵.

The blending of different types of oil could be considered fraudulent, but in several cases it was in accordance with the legal regulations of the countries to which the product was exported⁶. Furthermore, blending different oils was often an effective way of mitigating the overly strong flavour of certain olive oils, which did not appeal to the

² Available from: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:regolamento:1890-08-03;7045> [accessed 2026-03-30].

³ On the subject of imitations and counterfeits, see Lopes, Lluch and Pereira 2020.

⁴ Available from: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1908-04-05;136> [accessed 2026-03-30].

⁵ It was sufficient to indicate on the labels whether the product was genuine or mixed with seed oil. Simari 1912.

⁶ For example, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was perfectly legal to mix pure olive oil with sesame or peanut oil. This adjustment was partly aimed at reducing the price of oil for consumption and partly at adapting imported Italian olive oil to the taste preferences of Austrian consumers. The only restriction was that these modified oils could not be marketed as pure olive oil and had to be labelled as «edible oil».

taste of some European consumers, who had different preferences depending on their country. The need to create blends, which already existed at the end of the 19th century, also had the aim of meeting market demand in Italy and abroad: light, low-density oils in Germany and Switzerland, fresh, sweet oils such as those from Tuscany in France, to be used as a base for blends, golden yellow oils in England, and so on (Stumpo 2003). There was also another type of differentiation in export marketing models: in Northern Europe, discriminatory tariff policies on canned and bottled olive oil, together with low demand for table and cooking olive oils, were limiting the use of branding, modern packaging and advertising, while in France and Italy most olive oil was imported to be refined, blended, packaged and re-exported. In contrast, in America, pushing European exporters were pushed to market it already packaged and branded (Ramon-Muñoz 2020).

The practice of purchasing oils from abroad, then reprocessing them and exporting them as high-quality Italian olive oil, became increasingly common in the following decades. Because of these blending practices, what was marketed as high-quality Italian olive oil could, in reality, fall into one of the following categories: Italian olive oil, but not of superior quality, because it was a blend of products from various regional sources and only partly composed of Tuscan or Ligurian oil; olive oil that was not entirely Italian (blended with other Mediterranean oils such as those from Spain, Greece or other Mediterranean countries) but marketed as Italian; a blend of olive oil and seed oil (mainly cottonseed oil).

From this point of view, trademarks could serve as a form of protection against unfair competition, although they were not always sufficient to prevent reputational damage. Many producers invested in brand development and management, although not all of them committed to protecting their products abroad. The importance of packaging and label design was already a fundamental part of olive oil exporters' marketing strategies at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly with a view to increasing sales and segmenting markets according to quality and taste (Ramon-Muñoz 2010).

The labels of some products destined for foreign markets feature various elements that incorporate a range of essential information for consumers. First and foremost is the certification of the product's *Italian origin*. In many cases, there was a particular emphasis on the geographical origin of the product: the depiction of the Italian flag and the word «Italia», often accompanied by expressions such as «*prodotti italiani*» (Italian products), underlined the fundamental role of the geographical brand⁷.

Another recurring element for high-quality oils was the mention of the *geographical brand*: in the case of oils from Liguria, the expression *Riviera Ligure* was often used, but even more frequent was the presence of the words *Lucca* or *Toscana*, intended to indicate the superior quality of the product through its place of origin — a sort of transposition of *terroir* from the wine sector to that of olive oil (Fig. 1): these are the

⁷ *Letizia* oil trademark of the Bertolli company (1911). Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereinafter ACS). *Ufficio Marchi e brevetti* (Trademarks and Patents Office, hereinafter UMB), Registration number (hereinafter r.n.) 11683; *Italian Flag* oil brand of the Costa brothers (1906), ACS. UMB, r.n. 7252.



Fig. 1. Bertolli's olive oil brand (1911)

Source: ACS, UMB, r.n. 11683. Available from: http://dati.acs.beniculturali.it/mm/local/detail.html?ACS_031.P004114_11601-11700.WEB.11601-11700_0086.jpg [accessed 2026-03-30]



Fig. 2. Label of Gianolio's *Vergine* olive oil (1903)

Source: ACS, UMB, r.n. 5822. Available from: http://dati.acs.beniculturali.it/mm/local/detail.html?ACS_029.P004056_5801-5900.WEB.5801-5900_0024.jpg [accessed 2026-03-30]

so-called «gastro-toponyms» (place names linked to food and drink), which have been the subject of specific studies⁸.

Another element that almost always recurred in trademarks registered to protect oil labels was a form of quality certification based on the physical characteristics of the product. A wide range of terms were used to emphasise the quality of the product, such as «*superfine*», «*refined*», «*first quality*», «*guaranteed pure*», «*very fine*», «*extra fine*» and «*superior extra*», while the expression «*virgin olive oil*» or «*guaranteed purity*» was sometimes used to emphasise the degree of purity. Some trademarks also emphasised the consistency of the oil as a fundamental characteristic of quality.

The explicit reference to «*virgin*» olive oil appeared among the trademarks registered by Italian companies for the first time in 1903. One of the many trademarks of the Gianolio company featured an image of the Virgin Mary on the label, probably intended to create a conceptual link between the purity of the iconographic subject and that of the product (Fig. 2). Similarly, in 1912, Bonavera & Daffieno marketed a pure olive oil from Lucca under the name *La Vergine*⁹.

In addition to these elements, the brands explicitly referred to the awards won at international exhibitions as a direct indication of the product's quality. At a time when the sector suffered from a substantial lack of laboratories capable of certifying product

⁸ See Capatti and Montanari 2005.

⁹ Oil trademark of the Bonavera & Daffieno company (1912). ACS, UMB, r.n. 12519.

quality and before certification bodies came into play, these attestations, conveyed by labels and protected by trademarks, represented to some extent a pioneering tool for measuring and defining «quality».

However, this certification was mainly present in countries with stricter regulations on food fraud. Compliance with foreign regulations, through certification by the competent control authority, reflected the need to combat the most widespread forms of adulteration in those countries. A fourth type of information sometimes found on the labels of such products was *certification by the regulatory authority* of the importing country¹⁰. The United States is a case in point, as recognition by the US Food and Drug Administration has clearly played a crucial role in the success of certain Italian food products. The United States was the main market for Italian olive oil exports, and the spread of counterfeit products in that country was particularly worrying, not only for Italian trade representatives but also for local health authorities, who considered it a clear violation of municipal health codes. In the 1930s, there were frequent investigations and complaints about the widespread adulteration of Italian olive oil arriving in the United States, sometimes mixed with cottonseed, peanut or other seed oils¹¹. Deceptive marketing appeared to be uncontrolled at that stage: historical or fictitious Italian names, emblems, flags and even royal or government symbols were used freely¹². In an attempt to combat the misuse of claims such as «Made in Italy» or «Italian product» on product labels, the Italian Chamber of Commerce in New York launched a fundraising campaign among Italian entrepreneurs, but without success¹³.

Olive oil is one of the segments of the food industry that has been export-oriented since the 19th century, where the use of trademarks is particularly important (Ramon-Muñoz 2020): this focus is not only functional to the protection of intellectual property, but also to the need to promote sales and segment the market based on quality and taste. Within this overall picture, the olive oil sector is one of the most obvious examples of the particular attention paid since the beginning of the 20th century by some companies to the design of labels and packaging. Within the extensive literature on brands and trademarks, it is important to remember that the Food & Beverage sector has been the subject of international studies for at least twenty years, studies that have shown, mainly on a microanalytical scale — but sometimes also from a broader geographical perspective — the role of brand management not only in a defensive sense, understood as protection against counterfeiting and imitation, but also in a broader business strategy perspective¹⁴.

¹⁰ *Rivera olive oil brand of the Sasso company* (1911). ACS. UMB, r.n. 11787.

¹¹ *Against fraud*, 1934.

¹² *Let's protect it*, 1932.

¹³ *The defence of oil*, 1935. The growing phenomenon of *Italian Sounding* was closely linked to counterfeiting and imitation practices. Ceccarelli, Grandi and Magagnoli, eds., 2013; Magagnoli 2019.

¹⁴ There is extensive literature on this topic: see in particular Lopes 2002, 2007; Duguid 2003; Fernandez 2010; Van den Eeckhout and Scholliers 2012; Mollanger 2018; Lopes, Lluch and Pereira 2020.

Sometimes it was not only the name of a product or company that was protected, but often the symbolic and communicative content of the image associated with it. The product label (or part of it) was therefore often the subject of protection, with everything that it entailed. The brand also had to be a vehicle for identity, personality and image, designed to communicate directly with consumers, reducing the intermediary role played by wholesalers and retailers and thus increasing the visibility and attractiveness of the company (and its profit margins). The corporate function of the brand sometimes lies precisely in its ability to promote brand awareness and recognition (Schultz 2005).

These aspects emerged in the Anglo-Saxon world as part of branding strategies as early as the first half of the 20th century: in particular, there was a growing awareness that the role of the brand went beyond simply certifying (and protecting) the origin of a product, as it also involved the creation of social desires (Schwarzkopf 2010). The symbolic content, socially shared and incorporated into brands (through labels and packaging), became a decisive factor in these commercial strategies. The brand thus emerged not only as a tool for protection, but also as a strategic lever for competition (Flikkema, De Man and Castaldi 2014).

In the case of olive oil, the use of the registered trademark took on a wide range of aesthetic and symbolic functions quite early on, unlike many other Italian food products. The Sasso company, founded in 1866 by the Novaro family of Oneglia, near Imperia, and the Fratelli Berio company, also founded in Oneglia on the initiative of Paolo Berio in 1870, were among the first companies in the sector to use advertising in newspapers or on posters, and to exploit the advantages of free warehouses and refineries, focusing not only on the purity of their edible oils, but also on blends (with Spanish or southern Italian oils) that would satisfy consumer tastes (Stumpo 2003). It is no coincidence that they registered trademarks with these characteristics.

Italian olive oil brands often stood out from other agri-food brands due to their frequent use of carefully designed graphics and messages, particularly on product packaging labels. The emphasis is usually placed on the pictogram and logo, while the slogan associated with the brand is less important and less frequent. In the case of export-oriented companies, these brands were often adapted to the target market, and the language of the labels varied accordingly (Spanish for the South American market or English for the US market); the flags of the destination country were also a recurring element in the visual representation of these brands. Numerous labels referred to classical deities, such as Minerva, associating the product with the splendour of ancient times. Pastoral scenes were also frequent, often depicting shepherds or peasant women as symbols of rural authenticity¹⁵. The aforementioned Emanuele Gianolio company registered more than 30 olive oil trademarks in the space of just twenty years, between the late 19th century and the First World War: some of these were for products intended for foreign

¹⁵ See, for example, the *Graziella* oil brand of the Martino e Muratorio company (1900). ACS. UMB, r.n. 4684.



Fig. 3. Carlo Aliprandi's olive oil brand (1936)

Source: ACS, UMB, r.n. 53713. Available from: http://dati.acs.beniculturali.it/mm/local/detail.html?ACS_023.P002117_53701-53900.WEB.53701-53900_0017.jpg [accessed 2026-03-30]

markets (South American in particular) and others for the Italian market. All of these are characterised by highly refined iconographic representations, in which the symbols and messages mentioned above can be seen to alternate. Rarer were the cases in which the concept of refinement was conveyed through graphic representations evoking the elegance typical of upper-class ladies of the early 20th century¹⁶. In some cases, images of cooks or culinary practices were used to emphasise the main use of oil in cooking (Fig. 3).

Unlike in the Anglo-Saxon context, where changes in trademark legislation have significantly influenced — at least in some sectors — the transformation of trademarks into actual brands, in the Italian case, the regulatory framework — which remained stable for almost the entire period analysed — does not appear to be an exogenous variable capable of having a particular impact on trademark registration practices. While other European countries had embarked on a path of reform and regulatory adaptation, both in line with the evolution of international treaties and in response to changes in the economic context, attempts to reform trademark regulations in Italy failed during the Fascist era, and a new trademark law was not passed until 1942.

The most significant changes during the Fascist era, compared to other sectors, were in the regulations governing food products and olive oil in particular, especially with regard to counterfeiting and adulteration. First came Royal Decree No. 2033 of 15 October 1925, *Repression of fraud in the preparation and trade of agricultural substances and agricultural products*, which addressed the problem of counterfeit food products in general and introduced forms of food safety control, with a partial focus on olive oil¹⁷. This was followed by Law No. 1986 of 27 September 1936, which established objective criteria for the classification of olive oil and remained the reference law until the new legislation of 1960¹⁸.

¹⁶ *Toscana* oil brand of the Gianolio company. ACS, UMB, r.n. 8111.

¹⁷ Available from: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:regio.decreto:1925-10-15;2033> [accessed 2026-03-30].

¹⁸ Available from: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:regio.decreto.legge:1936-09-27;1986> [accessed 2026-03-30].

Event during the interwar period, the communicative role of the trademark in olive oil sector, which is not limited to indicating the origin of the product but also extends to creating consumer interest, seems to have acquired particular importance in the strategies of Italian companies, which, with an early sensitivity and attention compared to companies in other F&B sectors, invested in the iconographic aspects of trademarks, understood as a possible marketing lever.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the evolution of trademark use in the Italian olive oil sector between 1868 and 1942, situating it within the broader transformation of the agri-food economy and the development of modern branding practices. By analysing registered trademarks as both legal and communicative artefacts, we have shown that the olive oil industry stood out within the Italian food sector for the precocity and sophistication of its branding strategies.

While in many agri-food sectors trademarks initially functioned mainly as defensive instruments against imitation and counterfeiting, olive oil producers quickly deployed them as proactive tools of market construction. Through labels, pictorial elements, gastro-toponyms, quality claims and references to awards or regulatory compliance, firms actively shaped narratives of purity, authenticity and geographical identity. In doing so, they responded not only to the challenges posed by adulteration and fraud, but also to the opportunities opened up by expanding international markets, particularly in the United States.

The case of olive oil therefore suggests that trademarks in liberal Italy cannot be interpreted solely as passive legal devices embedded in a relatively stable regulatory framework. Rather, they became strategic levers through which firms articulated competitive positioning, negotiated reputational risks and engaged with evolving consumer expectations. In this sense, the olive oil sector functioned as an early laboratory of branding practices, anticipating communicative and symbolic dynamics that would later become central to the broader Italian food and beverage industry.

By integrating quantitative evidence on trademark registrations with qualitative and iconographic analysis, this study contributes to the historiography of brands and business strategy, highlighting the importance of trademarks as sources for understanding the interplay between law, markets and the cultural construction of quality in modern capitalism.

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