

Italy embarrassed by counterfeit olive oil scandal

- [John Hooper](#) in Rome
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It looked like extra virgin olive oil. It even tasted and smelt like extra virgin olive oil. But the alluring, yellowy green liquid that consumers in Germany, Switzerland and the US would have trickled over their salads was actually oil made from soya beans or sunflower seeds - some of it genetically modified - mixed with beta carotene and industrial chlorophyll.

After the discovery in recent months of dioxin in mozzarella and added ethanol in wine, officials yesterday hastened to reassure consumers in the wake of yet another Italian food scandal. On Monday, police arrested 39 people and impounded more than 25,000 litres of counterfeit extra virgin oil. It was due to be exported, or marketed in Italy, in bottles bearing the labels of non-existent companies.

Vincenzo Russo, the prosecutor who ordered the raids, said: "Of itself, the product was not harmful."

But he added that the oil had been manufactured on premises that were not subject to public health checks.

The agriculture minister in Italy's outgoing centre-left government, Paolo De Castro, said the affair was "a demonstration that the checks are there, and are efficient". But the industry association representing Italian olive oil producers said the fraud was "the tip of the iceberg". It added, however, that a new law on mandatory labelling was proving effective.

The latest scandals have caused intense embarrassment to a nation that prides itself on the purity of its foodstuffs. The head of a major farmers' union, Sergio Marini, welcomed the

investigations, but he warned that the damage to the image of Italian produce could be enough to decide whether the economy grew or shrank this year.

A statement from a consumers association, ADUC, said there was a risk that when foreign consumers "buy Italian produce [they] will have the same doubts as when they buy Chinese products".