
Viewpoint

Mark Twain on fats and oils

We are indebted to AOCS member Carter Litchfield for calling to our attention the following report by Mark Twain in *Life on the Mississippi*. Twain describes a conversation that was overheard on a riverboat. Since AOCS was not formed until 1909 and Twain's account was first published in the late 1890s, we can assure one and all that the two conversants were not AOCS members. Analytical methodology developed by AOCS has helped eliminate some of the practices discussed, but the question of positive identification of the source of fats and oils is still being resolved.

Speaking of manufacturers reminds me of a talk upon that topic which I heard — which I overheard — on board the Cincinnati boat. I awoke out of a fretted sleep, with a dull confusion of voices in my ears. I listened — two men were talking; subject, apparently, the great inundation. I looked out through the open transom. The two men were eating a late breakfast; sitting opposite each other; nobody else around. They closed up the inundation with a few words — having used it, evidently, as a mere ice-breaker and acquaintanceship-breeder — then they dropped into business. It soon transpired that they were drummers — one belonging in Cincinnati, the other in New Orleans. Brisk men, energetic of movement and speech; the dollar their god, how to get it their religion.

"Now as to this article," said Cincinnati, slashing into the ostensible butter and holding forward a slab of it on his knife blade, "it's from our house; look at it — smell of it — taste it. Put any test on it you want to. Take your own time — no hurry — make it thorough. There now — what do you say? Butter, ain't it? Not by a thundering sight — it's oleomargarine! Yes, sir, that's what it is — oleomargarine. You can't tell it from butter; by George, an *expert* can't. It's from our house. We supply most of the boats in the West; there's hardly a pound of butter on one of them. We are crawling right along — *jumping* right along is the word. We are going to have that entire trade. Yes, and the hotel trade, too. You are going to see the day, pretty soon, when you can't find an ounce of butter to bless yourself with, in any hotel in the Mississippi and Ohio Valleys, outside of the biggest cities. Why, we are turning out oleomargarine *now* by the thousands of tons. And we can sell it so dirt cheap that the whole country has *got* to take it — can't get around it you see. Butter don't stand any show — there ain't any chance for competition. Butter's had its *day* — and from this out, butter goes to the wall. There's more money in oleomargarine than — why, you can't imagine the business we do. I've stopped in every town, from Cincinnati to Natchez; and I've sent home big orders from every one of them."

And so forth and so on, for ten minutes longer, in the same fervid strain. Then New Orleans piped up and said:

"Yes, it's a first-rate imitation, that's a certainty; but it ain't the only one around that's first rate. For instance, they make olive oil out of cottonseed oil, nowadays, so that you can't tell them apart."

"Yes, that's so," responded Cincinnati, "and it was a tiptop business for a while. They sent it over and brought it back from France and Italy, with the United States custom-house mark on it to indorse it for genuine, and there was no end of cash in it; but France and Italy broke up the game — of course, they naturally would. Cracked on such a rattling impost that cottonseed olive oil couldn't stand the raise; had to hang up and quit."

"Oh, it *did*, did it? You wait here a minute."

Goes to his stateroom, brings back a couple of long bottles, and takes out the corks — says:

"There now, smell them, taste them, examine the bottles, inspect the labels. One of 'm's from Europe, the other's never been out of this country. One's European olive oil, the other's American cottonseed olive oil. Tell 'm apart? 'Course you can't. Nobody can. People that want to can go to the expense and trouble of shipping their oils to Europe and back — it's their privilege; but our firm knows a trick worth six of that. We turn out the whole thing — clean from the word go — in our factory in New Orleans: labels, bottles, oil, everything. Well, no, not labels: been buying *them* abroad — get them dirt cheap there. You see, there's just one little wee speck, essence, or whatever it is, in a gallon of cottonseed oil, that gives it a smell, or a flavor, or something — get that out, and you're all right — perfectly easy then to turn the oil into any kind of oil you want to, and there ain't anybody that can detect the true from the false. Well, we know how to get that one little particle out — and we're the only firm that does. And we turn out an olive oil that is just simply perfect — undetectable! We are doing a ripping trade, too — as I could easily show you by my order book for this trip. Maybe you'll butter everybody's bread pretty soon, but we'll cottonseed his salad for him from the Gulf to Canada, and that's a dead certain thing."

Cincinnati glowed and flashed with admiration. The two scoundrels exchanged business cards, and rose. As they left the table, Cincinnati said —

"But you have to have customhouse marks, don't you? How do you manage that?"

I did not catch the answer.