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# Export Success Factors for Table Olives: The Perception of Greek Exporting Firms

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**Abstract**

Greece has a long tradition as a producer of table olives and is the second largest producer and exporter of edible olives in the European Union. The current economic crisis in combination with the local market' small size has forced Greek companies to expand to international markets the past few years.

The aim of this research paper is to examine the perceptions of Greek table olive exporters, regarding export success factors. The qualitative research method was used and 7 interviews were conducted with well-established table olive exporters. The interviews are structured and in the first part the exporters' profile is examined (export experience, size, quantities exported, trade partners' characteristics). In the second part their perception regarding product's properties (taste, aroma, etc.). The last section examines the table olive exporters' perception of the market trends (consumption patterns, market segments, etc.).


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## 1. Introduction

Exports are very important for the Greek economy and contribute 29% to the country's GDP, while food exports have increased by 22.63% during the 2008-2014 period (Panhellenic Exports Association, 2014; 2015). The Greek table olive sector is the second largest in the world following Spain (FAOSTAT, 2011). There are 30 million trees for table olives in Greece and 80.000 tons are exported in 80 countries worldwide. The value of table olives accounts for 6.5% of the Greek Agricultural products and 1.3% of the total Greek exports (Business & Innovation Center of Attica, 2012).

A reason for the recent increase of Greek food exports is the economic recession, which has resulted to the shrinkage of the domestic market due to the decrease of the consumers' purchasing power. Thus, businesses in order to survive they had to expand to international markets. Another reason is the strong interest regarding the Mediterranean diet, as consumers become more aware of its health benefits. Finally the Mediterranean diet has recently been acknowledged as part of the cultural heritage of Greece, Italy, Morocco and Spain (UNESCO, 2013).

For many centuries, table olives were part of the Greek culture and diet. A study of over 100 food products, including the Kalamon variety, black, green and wrinkled olives from various regions across Greece confirmed that Greek traditional food is exceptionally nutritious and healthy (Vasilopoulou et al., 2013).

Despite the sector's great economic importance, little emphasis has been given to the export success factors of table olives either in Greece or in other countries. This exploratory research is a pilot study since it is, to the best of our knowledge, the first that examines the export success factors for table olives. A qualitative approach is used to analyze seven Greek table olives exporters and their perception on various factors affecting their success.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Greek food exports

The main target markets for Greek food exports are developed countries such as Germany, France, Canada, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom and lately, there is an increased interest for the US market. Although markets like Russia, Turkey, Brazil, China and India, are also of great interest, they have not yet been exploited by the Greek food exporters. The targeted consumers are mainly individuals of medium to high income and of high socio-cultural level; thus they are more aware of the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet and are willing to pay higher prices. In addition, the fact that the products are from Greece (country of origin effect) has a positive impact on their purchasing decision. As Lakasas states in the work of Bizmpiroulas & Rotsios (2014), "*There is a huge value in the name 'Greece'. Our country is full of unique products that combine quality, taste and nutritional value*."

Labels such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) are used by the EU, to promote and protect the image and reputation of food products, their authenticity and their heritage. Many studies have shown the positive impact of these labels (Menapace et al., 2011; Aprile et al., 2012). A study by Erraach et al. (2014) on Spanish consumers and their preference of olive oil, found that price and PDO certification are the two most important factors that affect the consumers purchases.

### 2.2. Factors motivating exports

Firms get involved with exports for various reasons, such as the size or saturation of local markets, the attractiveness of new markets, the development of new products, lower costs, etc. According to Liargovas (2010) "Export performance is the relative success or failure of the efforts of a firm or nation to sell domestically-produced goods and services to other nations". There are several success factors that enhance export performance. A success factor is defined as a set of elements that consent to the firm to operate in a profitable and sustainable way, in order to reach its objectives and goals (Caralli et al., 2004). Thus, export success factors allow firms to achieve their export related goals and objectives.

In an attempt to identify the export success factors Gemunden (1988), analyzed 50 research studies and critically reviewed them. He found that there is a limiting connection between the company's size and its exporting potential. These findings are further supported by several researchers (Wolff & Pett, 2000; Stoian, et al., 2010) who found that export performance and firm size do not have a noteworthy correlation. This is very important for Greek firms since the majority of them are SMEs. However, other studies (Sousa et al., 2008; Leonidou et al., 2002) have found a positive relationship between firm size and export intensity.

Another factor analyzed in literature, is the knowledge of foreign markets which reflects the exporting experience of a company (Navaro et al., 2010). Export experience can be defined by the number of years the company is exporting (Maurel, 2009) and by the number of countries firms export to (Zaiem & Zghidi, 2011). Several studies have shown that there is no relationship between export experience and export performance (Mavrogiannis et al., 2008; Zaiem & Zghidi, 2011).

There is a consensus among researchers regarding the positive relationship between export performance and the company's commitment to export activities. When senior management is committed and resources are allocated to exports, export performance increases (Lado et al., 2004; Lages et al., 2008).

### 2.3. Current situation regarding table olives

As depicted in chart 1, the consumption of table olives has increased globally over the past 25 years. Albania is the country with the highest consumption in the world, and Spain is the leader in consumption in the EU (4 kg per capita). Greece's consumption is 1.8 kg per capita.

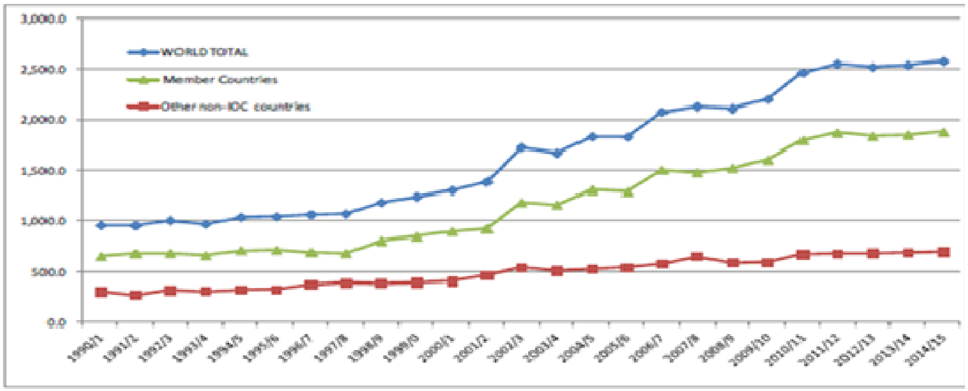


Chart 1. Trend of world table olive consumption (International Olive Council, 2015)

In addition there is an increase of table olives exports (Chart 2). Spain is the leading table olive exporter due to large quantities produced, the economies of scale and the implementation of a national strategy based on the strong cooperation between the exporters and the associations (Gonzalez, 2015).

Greece's exports of table olives have increased the last years and its market share in the US market, the largest importer of table olives, has increased as well. This increase could be explained by the current Mediterranean diet and Greek yogurt trends.

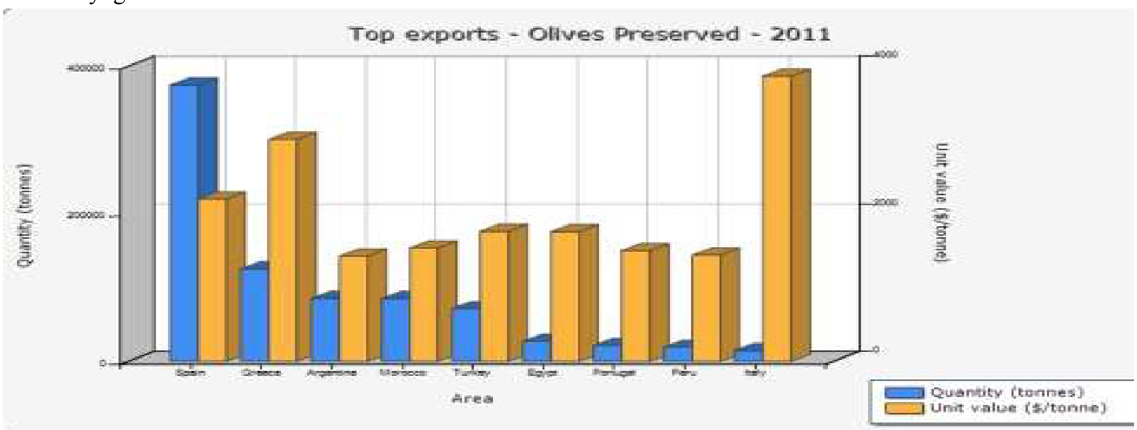


Chart 2. Top exports – Olives Preserved (FAO Stat, 2011)

## 3. Methodology

This exploratory research aims to gain insights into the export success factors of table olives as they are perceived from Greek exporters. In order to obtain a more holistic view of the topic and to bridge the gap between general exports success factors and table olive export success factors, a qualitative analysis approach was used. The sample was drawn based on specific criteria in order to draw comparisons between the different cases (Yin, 2003). In depth interviews with seven Greek table olive exporters were conducted in order to explore their perception on the export success factors. A total of eleven firms were contacted; however seven agreed to participate in this research. The participating firms can be considered a representative sample, since they are operating in the main table olive producing areas of Greece. Some of them are among the largest firms of Greece. In order to ensure the anonymity of the respondents and to increase the participation rate, there was no question on financial information. Furthermore, the similarities and differences identified among the firms will result to the creation of new knowledge on the topic (Van Wynsberghe & Khan, 2007).

### *3.1. Sample*

The participating firms were identified with the assistance of the Union of the Processing and Packaging Exporters of Table Olives (PEMETE) in order to obtain a representative sample. The selected firms were established before 2000 and have been active exporters for more than ten years with the exception of one that has been exporting for the past five years. All of them export to developed countries and more specifically to the USA, Canada, Australia and the European Union. Finally, all of them perceive their products to be of premium quality. This purposeful sampling allows for higher confidence in the conclusions drawn (Maxwell, 2007). All participants were contacted initially by phone and despite their heavy workload they accepted to participate without any incentive.

### *3.2. Method*

In order to get a structured conversation but also to allow flexibility so the participants could freely express their opinions, semi-structured interviews were conducted. These type of interviews are often used as the only data source in qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom & Carbtree, 2006). The interview guide was analyzed and discussed with a table olive exporter to check its clarity and cohesion and the appropriate changes were made. The first section includes general questions on the firm's profile; the second part focuses on the product characteristics and the third examines consumer behavior. A cover letter was sent to the firms in advance in order to explain the aim of the study and to inform them about the anonymity of the responses.

In all cases the respondents were either the firms' owners or the export managers, since they have a comprehensive view of the situation, but also due to the nature and complexity of the questions. Their answers were anonymous; as a result, detailed and insightful answers were obtained. The interviews were conducted in Greek to increase the clarity and accuracy of both the questions and answers. Moreover, because of the semi-structured interview guide, the respondents had the opportunity to express themselves and move forward without awkward pauses (Whiting, 2008). The average duration of each interview was approximately an hour.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

A summary of the sample's characteristics is presented in table 1. Information related to the year of establishment, the year firms first started to export, the number of employees and the quantities exported are included. The firms share similar characteristics regarding target markets, export experience, with the exception of

**General Information on the firms**

| Firm # | Established | Exports since | Employees | Quantities |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Firm #1 | 20s | 1960 | 75 | 7000 |
| Firm #2 | 90s | 1993 | 100 | 1500 |
| Firm #3 | 90s | 1996 | 15 | 2000 |
| Firm #4 | 90s | 2009 | 12 | 2500 |
| Firm #5 | 70s | 1979 | 30 | 3000 |
| Firm #6 | 80s | 1988 | 6 | 800 |
| Firm #7 | 90s | 1995 | 12 | 30 |

two (one is an exporter for more than fifty years and the other for five years), and the quality of the products they are selling, which is perceived by all as premium.

Table 1.

As seen in the table above, firm #7 is an outlier regarding quantities exported, since it exports a relatively small quantity; whereas its other characteristics are similar to those of the rest of the firms. This is a specialized company that exports biological table olives. The firm was included in the sample as an outlier, to observe the differences between a specialized firm of smaller size and the larger firms.

### *4.1. Firm size-number of employees*

All firms examined are SMEs. The difference in the firms' size observed can be explained by the range of products they produce. Firms #4 and #5 export only table olives, while #1 and #6 export also limited qualities of other food products, like peppers and pickles. Firms #2 and #3 export a wide range of Greek food products while #7 exports a variety of olive tree products.

### *4.2. Export Experience*

A total of 4 firms started exporting the first year of their establishment (#2, #3, #5, #6) and one right after its establishment (#7). Firm #1, has the longest period regarding exports, while firm #4 started exporting after the current economic crisis in Greece.

In regards to export markets, firm #1 exports to 45 countries, firm #2 to 8, firm #3 to 15 and firm #4 only to 1 country. Firm #5 exports to 10 countries. In the past, firm #6 was exporting in 20 countries, but currently exports in 5. Firm #7 exports only within the EU.

All firms except firm #4 are export experienced, since they have been active in exports for several years and export to many countries. Only firms #4 (Italy) and #7 (mainly Scandinavian Countries) export only to Europe, while the rest have identified the US and Australia as their main markets, followed by EU countries, Canada, and the United Arab Emirates.

### *4.3. Customers*

The sample's exporters serve various customers as depicted in table 2. The most interesting response comes from Firm #2 "Our customers have their own brands, we are their subcontractors" and Firm #5: "Our main customers are traders, restaurants, ships and supermarket chains". Companies #4 and #6 do not add value to their products and sell bulk quantities to their customers. In the case of firm #7 they sell only to delicatessen stores due to the characteristics of their products.

Table 2.

To whom do you sell you products

| Firm # | Industry | Supermarket Chains | Delicatessen stores/Restaurants | Traders |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Firm #1 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Firm #2 | | | | ✓ |
| Firm #3 | | | | ✓ |
| Firm #4 | ✓ | | | |
| Firm #5 | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Firm #6 | ✓ | | | |
| Firm #7 | | | ✓ | |

Regarding customer selection criteria, all respondents have identified trustworthiness as the most important trait. The representative of firm #2 reported “We seek trustworthy customers that have strong presence and network in their representative markets and willingness for innovation and development”. Firm #4 requires customers that “are serious and honest/fair in their payments”. “We want consistency in payments and constant demand” is the answer of Firm #5. Firm #6 expects payment punctuality and seeks partners who demand a large variety of table olives and not only the most well-known. Additionally, they value good communication with their customers.

Table 3.

What do your trade partners seek from you

| Firm # | Quality | Price | Quality Assurance | Agreements honored |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Firm #1 | ✔ | | | |
| Firm #2 | ✔ | | | ✔ |
| Firm #3 | ✔ | ✔ | | |
| Firm #4 | ✔ | | ✔ | |
| Firm #5 | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ |
| Firm #6 | ✔ | | | ✔ |
| Firm #7 | ✔ | | | ✔ |

As depicted above (table 3) all firms have identified quality as a factor that trade partners value, followed by the willingness and ability to honor agreements (quantity and quality delivered, punctuality, appropriate documentation, etc.). Quality assurance is identified only by two firms; however the majority of them have quality assurance systems. Price is mentioned only by two firms as being important, but firm #6 states that “*When they import from Greece they expect to pay a premium price*”. Firm #2 refers to flexibility regarding the products, the packaging and innovative ideas.

### *4.4. Competition*

According to all of the respondents, competition is based on lower prices and all have identified Spain as their main competitor. Other competitors are firms from Italy, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco and Chile. In the case of firm #7, the entrepreneur stated that “The main competitors are Spain and Italy, because they are also producing organic table olives”. Due to their size and quantities produced, enterprises from Spain take advantage of economies of scale, while firms from Turkey, Egypt, Chile and Morocco have low labor costs; however they are identified by Greek table olive exporters as producers of lower quality products.

### *4.5. Product Characteristics*

The respondents were asked to identify the most important product characteristics. The question was purposely abstract and open in order to receive different perspectives. Table 4 depicts the summary of the findings.

Table 4.

Which are the most important characteristics for table olives

| Firm # | Quality | Taste | Texture | Appearance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Firm #1 | ✔ | | | |
| Firm #2 | | ✔ | ✔ | |
| Firm #3 | | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ |
| Firm #4 | ✔ | | | |
| Firm #5 | | ✔ | | ✔ |
| Firm #6 | ✔ | | | |
| Firm #7 | | ✔ | | |

Taste is perceived by exporters as the most important variable, followed by quality. The term quality is very broad and the three firms that identified quality did not present further insights on their perception of quality. Texture and appearance have been identified as important only by two firms. Only one respondent identified the processing method as being important. It should be noted that with the exception of taste, there is no other commonly accepted product characteristic perceived as being important. As firm #7 stated "*Every firm produces its own table olives*".

### *4.6. Table olive varieties*

All firms have identified as the most widely known varieties of Greek Table olives, the ones from the regions of Kalamata and Halkidki. In both regions the PDO certification regarding table olives has been established. Lastly, another variety that appeared several times was Amphissa's table olives which also have the PDO certification.

### *4.7. Price*

All exporters have indicated that the quantity produced each year is the main factor that affects the price of table olives. Firm #1, the sample's larger exporter, also mentioned the quantities available from the previous year. The representative of firm #3 also mentioned "*Except the quantities produced, the price is also affected by the qualitative characteristics of the olives, mainly their appearance*". Firm #4 identified the same aspects and added the aspect of demand. Firm #5 noted the producers' prices, the quality of the olives and lastly the processing methods. In addition to the quantities produced, firm #6 reported the quantities produced in other countries and also added *"…larger table olive exporters often purchase big quantities of olives in order to meet their demand. As a result, the costs of raw materials for small processors increases and the price of our products is higher*". The respondent from firm #7 identified in addition to the quantities produced, other costs (e.g. packaging materials, energy, etc.). All these factors affect the price stability of table olives.

Respondents from firms #1, #4 and #5 state that price is important. Firm #2 reported "*the price should be as low as possible, but that is not the first criterion for us and for our customers*". Company #3 mentioned "*The price depends on the variety, the packaging and the processing. Price changes if table olives are whole, pitless, or sliced*". "*Markets are willing to pay premium for Greek table olives*" according to firm #6. Finally, the firm's #7 representative stated that price is important, and depends on the markets targeted.

### *4.8. Taste, Color, Appearance and Aroma*

In regards to taste, firms #2 and #6 believe that markets demand table olives with strong taste; on the contrary firm #3 noted "*the markets require table olives that do not have salty taste. They want a more neutral taste*". Firm #7 noted that depending on the markets preferences regarding tasty vary. Firms #1, #4 and #5 simply reported that taste is important.

Firms #1 and #4 considered that color is important, however they did not provide any additional information. Firm #7 stated "*…color depends on the market; some prefer stronger colors, other natural colors*". Firm #6 mentioned "*…the majority of our table olives are of a yellow-green color. People start looking for less processed table olives, thus colors are more natural. In the past, chemicals were used to brighten the colors"*. Firm #3 reported that for table olives from Chalkidiki the ideal color is straw yellow-green and for the Kalamon and Amfissa's varieties the color is dark-brown.

Firms #2 and #7 believe that olives should have a relatively homogenous appearance. Firm #3 stated that table olives should be big in size without any flaws. According to firm #6 the appearance is one of the most important characteristics.

The aroma is perceived as an important characteristic by all firms. More specifically, the representative of firm #3 noted "*The aromas should be the ones of fresh olives. Older table olives develop bad aromas and for that reason we avoid using them"*.

Interestingly, there is no agreement on all variables (taste, color, appearance and aroma). There are two contradictory findings regarding taste. In regards to color, only Chalkidiki's table olives have been described in more detail. There is an agreement among respondents that appearance is very important, however they have not identified specific characteristics regarding it.

### *4.9. Packaging*

Packaging is of great importance according to the majority of the respondents. Firm #2 states that packaging must be convenient. Firm #3 utilizes glass jars, tin cans, plastic containers and large bags for bulk sales in retail stores. Firm #4 sells in bulk and uses barrels. Firm #7 mentions that packaging depends on the market.

### *4.10. Quality assurance*

All firms have identified quality assurance systems as very important, but firm #2 stated that "Quality assurance is absolute, especially in the pit removal in this kind of table olives". Firm #7, in addition to the general quality assurance systems, is also certified as an organic producer. The respondents understand the importance of quality assurance schemes for their export efforts; however one of them argues that quality is not limited to certifications.

### *4.11. Consumption patterns*

In regards to per capita consumption and to the increase of consumer numbers the firm's #2 representative said "I don't really know about the per capita consumption, but I believe more and more people consume table olives". Firm #3 noted "Yes, per capita consumption is increasing but also the number of the consumers is increasing since there is an increase of exports due to promotional efforts". Firm #4 and #6 stated that there is an increase in demand, so probably both the per capita consumption and the numbers of consumers have increased. Firm #5 provided statistics on the per capita consumption. Moreover, the firm's representative reported "Currently, with the implementation of new technologies for table olives with low sodium content, table olives are also becoming attractive to people that face hypertension". Finally, the representative from firm #7 in both cases said "Because our products are certified as organic, I do not know".

According to the respondent of firm #7, table olives are not becoming part of the consumers' diet, while the representative of firm #4 replied that he did not know. On the contrary, firm 1# believes that they become a part of the diet, while firm #2 said "the consumption of high quality, naturally processed table olives becomes more important for the consumers' diet. However this does not apply to cheaper, chemically processed table olives". Similarly, firm #5 stated "Certainly it becomes more important because the natural character and the health benefits of table olives are highlighted". Firms #3 and #6 refed to the increased sales and expressed their belief that the consumption of table olives has become part of the consumers' diet.

The consumers are not aware about the health benefits of table olives according to the respondents of firms #2, #4 and #7. Firm #6 replied "The consumers are aware that table olives are good for them, but nothing more specific". Similarly firms #3 and #5 referred to the Mediterranean diet and that table olives are a major part of it. Firm #1 just stated that consumers are aware of their health benefits.

The ways of consuming table olives were also examined. Firms #1, #2 and #5 mentioned that consumers use table olives in salads; firms #1 and #2 identified their usage in pizza. According to the respondents, table olives can be consumed as appetizer (#1), an aperitif (#2) and as a snack (#6). Firm #7 said "Table olives can be consumed in the everyday diet in many different ways". Firm #4 did not reply to this question.

### *4.12. Consumers*

Respondents from firms #1, #4 and #7 have not identified any specific market segment neither their final customers' socio-cultural status. In addition, representatives of firms #3, #5 and #6 stated that table olives are consumed by a wide range of consumers, since they can be used in various ways and are affordable. On the contrary, firm #2 reported "Greek table olives are more expensive than the rest, so the sociocultural status of the consumers is higher".

The representative of firm #2 has identified travelers, specialty magazine readers and individuals that visit websites related to unique/special food products as their typical consumers. Firm #3 has identified countries in which Greeks live. The respondent from firm #7 stated that “We learn about our consumers in the food exhibitions that we participate”. Firms #1, #4, #5 and #6 they did not identified any specific market segment.

The above findings reveal the lack of marketing research on the markets they are exporting to. As a result, the majority of Greek firms have not identified nor addressed specific customer needs.

### *4.13. Future of Greek table olive sector*

In all cases with the exception of one, the Greek table olive exporters are optimistic about their sector’s future; some of the words used to describe it are: positive (#1), great (#2), very promising (#3), rising (#5), positive explosion (#6). Firm #4 added that the situations would be even better if coordination and collaboration between exporters and producers is improved. On the contrary, firm #7 stated “I do not have an opinion about the future of the Greek table olive exporting sector. What I know though is that our customers are very concerned about the current financial situation. For instance, they no longer place large orders and do not make any advance deposits and payments”. The respondent from firm #7 referred to the country’s financial problems and the potential Grexit.

### *4.14. Barriers of Greek table olives*

According to firm #1 “One of the main barriers is the large number of firms in the sector; the uncontrolled small production and processing units are an issue”. Firm #2 stated “We have to prove that we are consistent and we need to educate markets that Greek table olives justify their higher price due to the special characteristics”. Firm #3 identified as barriers the numerous small firms, the business approach of some firms, the lack of a specific strategy, the insufficient knowledge about the markets and the lack of R&D departments. Firm #4 identified as a barrier, the intense competition from other countries. Firm #6 added the lack of coordination and collaboration among Greek producers/processors of table olives. In addition, the respondent from firm #7 identified bureaucracy and lack of available funds as main export barriers.

### *4.15. Increase of competitiveness*

A better coordination between the sector’s stakeholders would increase the competitive advantage of the Greek table olives according to firm #1. Firm #2 mentioned the need to increase the firms’ size in order to achieve economies of scale. Firm #3 emphasized the need to establish a strong national brand and to promote the special characteristics of Greek table olives. Firm #4 believes that a stable price of raw materials and of the product’s price in international markets could provide the ground for increased competitiveness. Firm #5 stated that “Firms should obtain more market related information and communicate in order to establish a common strategy regarding the purchase of raw materials and the marketing of table olives, in order to become more price competitive. “*It is important for firms to invest on facilities and upgrade their equipment, but also to become more knowledgeable about their product, the processing and the markets*” according to firm #6. Similarly, the respondent from firm #7 stated that “*Greek table olive exporters need to improve themselves at all levels*”.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this research is to gain insights on the perception of Greek table olive exporters regarding export success factors. The table olive sector is of increasing importance for the country’s exports and economy. Due to the lack of related literature, a qualitative approach was used.

Regarding the foreign customers, trustworthiness is considered as the most important characteristic by all Greek exporters. On the other hand, international customers require by Greek firms high quality products, capability and willingness to honor the agreements, good prices and quality assurance certifications for successful and long-lasting collaborations.

The exporters of Greek table olives are facing price-related competition mainly from Spain. Other competitors are firms from Turkey and Egypt; however the quality of their products cannot compete with Greek table olives according to Greek exporters.

There are several channels that firms are using to make their products available to final consumers. Most of the sample's firms sell to traders, followed by industry, delicatessen stores and restaurants. The retail stores are targeted only by a smaller number of exporters.

Price is perceived as an important factor and to a large extend depends on the quantities produced every year. However, price is not considered as a limiting factor for export success, since Greek table olive exporters perform well without focusing on competitive pricing strategies.

A number of product characteristics were identified as important for export success. Taste is considered to be the most important one, although there is no consensus about the "ideal" taste. In addition, product quality is also perceived as important, as well as the quality assurance systems. Some of the firms also referred to product's texture and appearance. The color preference varies with the markets; however specific colors are associated with specific varieties. Respondents also identified the "good" aroma as another crucial product characteristic for export success.

Packaging is an important factor according to respondents, however because they export through different channels, no specific packaging size and method was identified. Apparently the packaging type depends on the market, the distribution channel and the final customers.

Regarding their final consumers, no specific segments and sociocultural status has been mentioned by the majority of the firms. Moreover, no specific product consumption patterns have been identified by the majority of the firms, with the exception of three, according to which table olives are used in salads. These results indicate that limited market research has been conducted regarding this product. By conducting a market research, the firms would tailor their offers to suit the needs of the market that they are exporting to. This would reduce risks and increase the chances of choosing the best possible market and the best way of exporting (Delaney, 2013).

The export barriers identified are the large number of small firms and the lack of cooperation between the stakeholders; as a result the implementation of a common strategy becomes more complex and difficult. Interestingly enough, taxation and bureaucracy were not identified as export barriers. Through cooperation, firms could invest in new product development and market research. It should be noted that cooperation among agribusiness firms in Greece that seek to export, is becoming a requirement due to the firms' small size and the complexity of the international markets. However, the overall sector's future is perceived to be positive by all of the respondents with the exception of one (the firm that produces organic products and exports the lowest quantity). Apparently it is very challenging for smaller firms to stay competitive and expand to international markets.

The main contribution of this paper is that it expands the current knowledge on food export success factors and provides insights on the specific product. Furthermore, the identification of the above factors sets the framework for future qualitative and quantitative research on the topic. In addition, there are practical implications for entrepreneurs, since it provides insights into exporting challenges as well as product characteristics valued in international markets.

### *5.1. Research limitations and recommendations for future research*

The main limitation of this study is that no triangulation method of data gathering and analysis was conducted. In order to generalize the results to the Greek table olive sector, the quantitative approach should be used.

It is suggested to explore the consumption patterns of table olives in addition to the factors that affect consumers purchasing behavior, since to the best of our knowledge there is no previous research on these issues. Furthermore, a quantitative research examining the factors identified in this paper could allow for a better understanding of the whole segment of Greek table olive exporters. Finally, similar research could be conducted in other table olive producing countries, in order to compare the findings.

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