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TASTES OF ITALIA MAGAZINE

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47 Easy Recipes
Anyone Can Make

Celebrating the Olive Harvest

Nothing tastes as good as fresh olive oil from fruit picked by hand, enjoyed with bread, cheese and wine.

By Susan Van Allen

I knew by the ring of the church bells it was time for lunch, but I was in no rush to climb down from the olive tree. The view from up there—rolling green hills splashed with red-gold autumn vineyards and the distant ivory hilltop town of Montepulciano against the warm blue sky—was divine. I'd been picking olives in this grove since early morning. The traditional Italian harvest method, called *brucatura*, pulling one olive at a time off the full branches, had brought me to a euphoric state. Back home in Los Angeles it takes hours of yoga to get this feeling. But here in southern Tuscany it came to me through old-fashioned farm work, pitching in with the olive harvest, or as the Italians say, the *raccolta*.

The *raccolta* yields one of Tuscany's most treasured products: olive oil. It begins the first week of November, which was when I arrived to volunteer at Reniella, an organic *agriturismo* in the village of Montefollonico, situated in the Chiana Valley. With 400 olive trees, the British transplants who own Reniella, Elfride ("Elf") and her husband Bob Vaughan, welcome travelers to help.

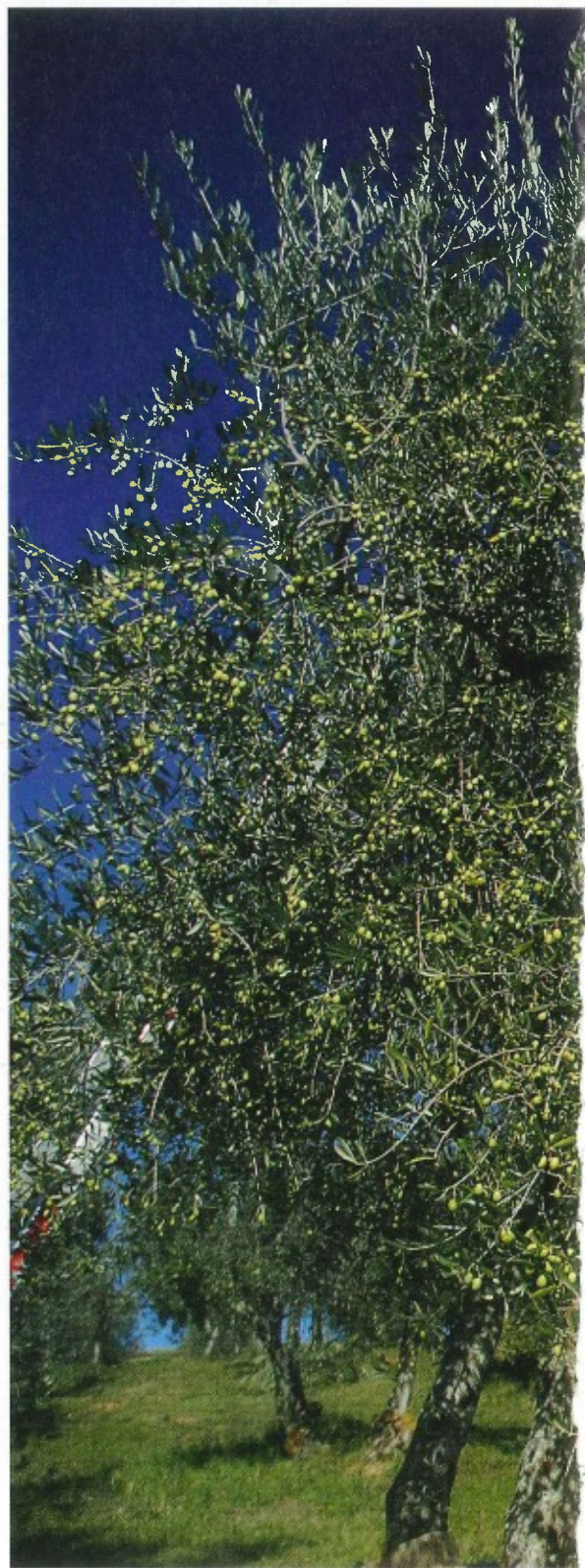
Reniella trees represent the region's typical olive varieties. I learned to recognize the little hard-to-pull-off green *moraioli*, the easier *correggioli*, the large shiny black *leccini*, and the small green-black *olivastre*.

Though Elf had warned me, "Careful to not get whacked in the eye by a branch," during my first enthusiastic hour of picking the inevitable happened. Elf snapped into maternal mode, putting salve on it and apologizing.

"It's my initiation rite," I laughed, putting on my Jackie-O sunglasses to avoid another incident.

A whack in the eye seemed a small price to pay to be part of a 2,000-year-old tradition. Olive cultivation began here during Etruscan times and took hold when the ruling Medicis offered farmers free land if they planted grapes and olives. Over the centuries, workers have endured a full range of hardships, including winter freezes, the most recent in 1985, which wiped out two-thirds of the area's trees.

Though some farms have modernized their harvest methods, the Vaughans have kept with time-honored traditions. Olives are picked by hand rather than rake or machine, just before they ripen and brought as soon as possible to a family-run mill, or to be put through the cold press process.





Traditions

A celebration of the *raccolta* happened everyday at lunch. We'd climb down from our ladders, settle in the shade and pile our plates with pecorino cheese, thick crusted bread, tomatoes, slices of salami, peppers and fennel, as Bob poured us full-bodied Reniella vino rosso.

Finally, we'd pass around *olio nuovo*—cloudy green-gold oil which came from olives that had been in our hands just days before. As I tasted it, I got more than its peppery, fresh grassy flavor. I got the feeling that comes with becoming part of the *raccolta*—peace from doing work that feeds body and soul.

Bruschetta

4 medium tomatoes, peeled, seeded,
and very coarsely chopped

1 tablespoon kosher salt

12 slices crusty Italian bread, about 3 inches
in diameter

1 garlic clove, split

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons sherry vinegar or balsamic
vinegar

15 basil or parsley leaves, coarsely chopped

Freshly ground black pepper

Toss the tomatoes with the salt and drain for 30 minutes in a colander set over a bowl.

Toast the bread slices on both sides in the broiler. Rub the top of each slice with the cut garlic clove. Brush the top of each slice with olive oil.

Gently press the drained tomatoes to extract juices. Transfer them to a bowl and toss with vinegar and chopped herbs. Season to taste with pepper.

Spoon the tomato mixture in small mounds on top of the toasts.

Makes 6 light first-course servings or 12 hors d'oeuvre servings.

