



## An Olive Harvest

# Feeds the Body and Soul

**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 — had the scratches on my arms, the buzzy vibration in my palms and full crates of purple-black, gold-green fruit beneath the trees to prove it.

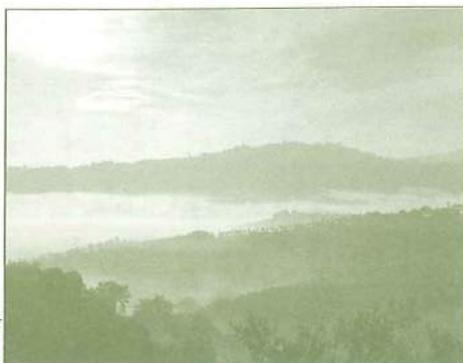
The traditional Italian harvest method, called *brucatura*, pulling one olive at a time off the full branches, had brought me to a euphoric state. Back home in Los Angeles it takes hours of yoga to get this feeling. But here in southern *Tuscany* it came to me through good old fashioned farm work — by 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 help out at *Reniella*, in tiny *Montefollonico* (population: 700), nestled in the *Chiana Valley*. *Reniella* is an organic agriturismo — a working farm with guest accommodations, vineyards, fruit trees, a vegetable garden, a flock of sheep, a couple of pigs, chickens and 400 olive trees.

With such a workload, the British transplants who own *Reniella*, *Elfride*

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Phil Scopelliti



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2 (“Elf”) and her husband *Bob Vaughan*, welcome travelers for a few weeks during the harvest to help out. They provide volunteers with lunch under the olive trees and cozy dinners, including pizza from their outdoor wood-burning oven. Best of all, you get a bottle of freshly pressed olive oil (*olio nuovo*) to bring home. This is a treasure I savored over every delightful drop of, bragging to my dinner guests as I passed it around my Thanksgiving table: “It’s from olives I picked...in Tuscany!”

Their agriturismo is attractively designed and reasonably priced. I stayed in their B&B—a double room with bath that adjoins their farmhouse kitchen. They also have a gorgeous apartment adjoining the building. It encompasses two floors, with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a huge kitchen that opens to a terrace with an extraordinary valley view.

Living and working with the Vaughan family, which includes their 11-year old son *Owain*, a precocious Harry Potter look-alike, gave me the chance to get an insider’s experience of Tuscan country life. Unlike other Montefollonico ex-pats — British, American and German retirees who bought property, hired locals to do the heavy work, and kicked back to indulge in their “Under

The Tuscan Sun” dream — the Vaughans have blended in with the town.



They took on the challenge of *Reniella* five years ago without any previous farming experience. What they did have was loads of energy, a passion to learn and most importantly a shared sense of humor about the whole venture. “That first year,” Bob told me, laughing, “I butchered a pig with a knife in one hand and a manual in the other.”

The older farmers in town were impressed by the Vaughan’s determination and began stopping by to offer help and advice. With their assistance, and Bob and Elf’s hard work, *Reniella* got up and running.

In the damp, chilly mornings, after Bob had taken *Owain* to the school bus stop on the back of his motorcycle, we’d head out to the grove, set up nets under the trees and start picking. The farm’s trees represent the region’s typical olive varieties. I learned to recognize those little, green, hard-to-pul-off *mornoli*, the easier *corregioli*, the large shiny black *leccini*, and the small green-black *olivastre*. We’d click into a rhythm, climbing up and down ladders, our conversations running from books to movies to life stories, with the

rustle of olive branches, birdsongs, the distant muffled shots of pheasant hunters, and neighbors picking on nearby farms filling up the back-ground.

Elf had warned me, “Careful not to get whacked in the eye by an olive branch,” but during my first enthusiastic hour of picking the inevitable happened. Elf snapped into maternal mode, putting salve on it and apologizing as if it was her fault. “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 become part of a 2,000-year-old tradition. Olive cultivation began here during Etruscan times and took hold during the Renaissance when the ruling *Medici* family offered farmers free land if they planted grapes and olives. Over the centuries, workers have had to endure all kinds of hardships, including winter freezes, the most recent in 1985, which wiped out two-thirds of the region’s trees. The Tuscans’ perseverance and commitment to quality through all the ups and downs has resulted in their olive oils being ranked among the most prized in the world.

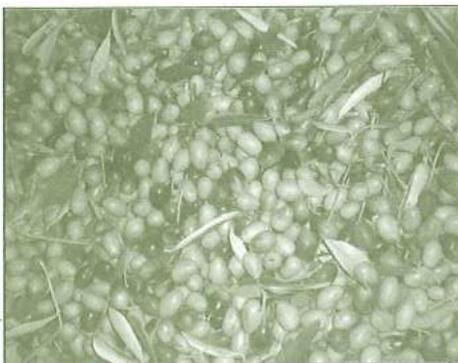
At *Reniella*, time-honored harvest traditions are followed. Oil comes from

Olive oil is the best oil to cook with si

little, green, hard to pull off **moraioli**, the easier black **leccini**, and the small green-black **olivastre**.”



Pam Mesaros



Phil Scoppelliti

fruit picked by hand rather than rake or machine, just before it ripens, and brought to the mill as soon as possible to be put through the cold press process.

Though I tried to blend in during my week's stay, my awe over the whole process set me apart from the Vaughans and the locals. To these people, doing these patient, labor-intensive tasks was second nature. The bleary eyed overworked laborers at the family run *frantoio* where we took the olives to be pressed laughed at me as I snapped pictures of them running our olives through the old stone mills to make a paste that filled the room with a thick heavenly smell.

Rizzi, the Vaughan's 79-year-old neighbor, who I found high up on a ladder harvesting at an admirable break-neck speed with his wife Marcella, laughed as he showed me his scratched, arthritic hands. He kept repeating "la bestemmia, la bestemmia" — ranting about the curse of this work he's been



Pam Mesaros

doing ever since he could stand up, as he happily picked.

Laughing off the challenges went along with celebrating the *raccolta*. At an olive festival in nearby *Montissi*, I wandered the torch-lit Medieval alleyways, stopping at tables set up outside restaurants and shops that offered samples of *olio nuovo* from the nearby farms. A band played in the town square, sausages were grilled, and last year's wine was uncorked.



The celebration of the *raccolta* at Reniella happened with less fanfare every day at lunch.

### The Details

**Agriturismo Reniella**  
53040 Montefollonico  
(39) 0577 660449  
www.reniella.com

Olive harvest volunteers are welcome in 2009 between November 15th and 30th.

**Rates:** The two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment (sleeps four) rents for between 600 and 700€ per week depending on the season (650€ weekly during the harvest). The spacious double room is 50€ per night with breakfast or 45€ per night for stays of more than three days (10€ per night for an additional bed).

Though it was glorious to be in the trees when the sun was shining, ultimately the sight of Elf setting up a picnic brought me down to join her and Bob in the shade. We piled our plates with *Pecorino* cheese, thick crusty bread, tomatoes, slices of salami, peppers and fennel, as Bob poured us tumblers of full-bodied homemade wine.

And finally, we passed around the cloudy, green-gold *olio nuovo* from olives that had been in our hands just days before. As I tasted it, I got more than its peppery, grassy fresh flavor. I got the feeling that comes with joining in from the *raccolta* — peace from doing work that feeds body and soul.

— Susan Van Allen

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