



CONFESSIONS OF A NOVICE OLIVE FARMER

Alex Martin

Olive oil is in the news this year. Bad weather, olive fruit fly and a blight, *Xylella fastidiosa*, have brutally reduced the olive crops in France, Italy, Spain, and Turkey. Average reductions are 30 – 50 per cent, but many farmers have lost their entire production. Wholesale prices have risen and olive oil consumption has declined as people buy cheaper oils such as rapeseed, palm, and soya. Greece, the

world's third largest producer of olive oil, suffered poor harvests in 2013, but was generally luckier in 2014. Farmers are less likely to benefit from the rise in price, however, than the wholesalers who buy their stocks.

Bad harvests are a hazard of farming and a reminder that nature is not entirely at our command. In 2013 I learned this lesson with my own modest olive production in Greece. It's a painful

business, a sign of the debt we owe to those who grow our food.

There are widespread misconceptions about olive oil, even among those who enjoy it and seek out the better oils in delicatessens and supermarkets. It is surprising, for example, how many people believe that olives are pressed by treading. Or that oil improves with age - in fact it deteriorates. I was among the ignorant myself until



Manolis had looked after the land for 50 years before we came along ...

recently. The knowledge I have gained has only increased my awareness of how much more there is to learn, but I hope that my experience as a parvenu may prove instructive.

We started making olive oil on the island of Kythera in 2012. Our 45 trees produced a fine crop that year. We had a happy apprenticeship, which began when our neighbour Matina took time off harvesting her own trees to show us the short-handled rake, like a child's beach toy, used to comb the olives off the branch, the ladder for reaching the top of the tree, the fine-mesh nets laid out on the ground to catch the falling fruit. 'You hold the branch with one hand and pull the rake down with the other. It's simple. Just start and carry on until it's done.'

More serious lessons began with Manolis, who had looked after the land for 50 years before we came along. He told us to report at 8 a.m. Monday morning, ready for work. We turned up at nine to find him already busy, with nets

Many people believe that olive oil improves with age - in fact it deteriorates

spread out and a generator powering a machine known as a koupépé. This is a pole with a whirling head that batters the olives off the branch in a blizzard of flying fruit: noisy, but very fast. While his two Albanian helpers wielded the koupépés, Manolis strode about with a chainsaw, ripping through the heavily laden branches that crowd the centre of each tree.

Swallowing our shock at this frenzied scene, we showed Manolis our plastic rakes, and asked what we could do. He said, 'You can amuse yourselves by taking the olives off the branches I've cut.' Feeling slightly patronized, we obeyed, noting from time to time that one of the men would lay down his koupépé and start operating a kind of table-football machine that did precisely what we were doing, only at 60 times the speed.

When a tree had been stripped and the ground was carpeted with fruit, we would lift the edges of the net and roll the olives into the centre, then pour them into jute sacks. The sacks, bulging with 45 kilos of olives, were tied off with twine.



We paused for *tsipouro* at 11, and again for lunch at one - vegetable pies made by Manolis's wife, followed by more *tsipouro* and a cigarette, enjoying the comradeship of the harvest and the intoxication of fresh air in the autumn sun. After lunch we worked until four, then rolled up the nets and hid the machines out of sight under the trees.

The routine was repeated over the next three days. As an experiment we tried picking one tree by hand, just to see how long it would take. The results were stark: exactly five times as long. But when the noise of the machines stopped we could hear the birds singing and the waves breaking on the seashore. As we gathered the fruit we felt like figures from an ancient vase, actors in an antique ritual, connected not only with the generations who have worked this landscape for thousands of years, but also with the earth and the whole force of nature. One day, we resolved, we would pick the whole crop by hand, never mind the inefficiency.

But now a new and urgent task was upon us: carrying two tons of olives to the press. The sacks were loaded onto a trailer and driven to the agricultural co-operative in Potamós, a roadside barn equipped with gleaming Italian machines: one to wash and separate the olives from the leaves, a second to grind them into a pulp, a third to extract the oil by pressing, a fourth to centrifuge the oil, which pours in a beautiful emerald stream into a stainless steel basin. You watch your olives being fed in at one end and your oil flow out at the other. Each producer's olives are dealt with separately, the name chalked up carefully on a little blackboard. There is no mixing or adulteration. Everyone watches their olives go through with hawk-like vigilance.

The oil (some 400 litres, less 12 per cent for the press) was poured into 17-litre tins, which were taken by lorry to Athens and then to London, where we hoped to sell it. At this point new challenges would arise. Finding the right bottles, labels, wording, permits, storage, retailers and means of advertising, calculating costs and keeping records - all this is complicated, bureaucratic, expensive. It quickly grinds the romance out of the whole business. Yet as you sit with friends on a winter evening and pour this vital green peppery fluid onto a dish, releasing all the perfumes of summer, the magic of the harvest is suddenly with you again.