

Olive Oil

By Susan Peters

TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLIE AUGELLO AND FRIENDS



Tarps on the ground collect olives stripped from the trees by hand.



To everything there is a season, and for olive oil the season is fall.

Lost in ancient times and civilizations, the exact history of the olive is illusive. Fossilized remains of the modern olive tree's ancestors dating from twenty million years ago have been found in Italy, and it is well documented that the olive tree was cultivated around the Mediterranean starting in 5,000 B.C. The oil from the olive symbolized strength and wisdom in the Golden Age of Greece and winners of the ancient Olympic Games, as well as conquerors in battle, wore crowns of olive branches. In Egypt, olive branches were placed in the tomb of King Tut as a symbol of purification. Through time, olive oil has been used for cosmetics and medicine, food and fuel.

Back in the first century A.D., the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder remarked that Italy had "excellent olive oil at reasonable prices...the best in the Mediterranean." Today, olive oil from Italy still ranks among the best in the world and it is an indispensable ingredient in many kitchens. It is revered not only for its flavor, but also for its romance and tradition - a recipe that leads many modern food cognoscenti on quests to Italy to tour the olive groves. If the season is right, lucky visitors can even pluck ripe olives destined for the *frantoio* (olive oil producing facility).

Near Perugia in the Umbrian hills, the private villa of Le Vigne welcomes guests to its pension accommodations set amid 16 acres

Above: Charlie Augello, the proprietor of East 48th Street Market in Dunwoody, supplies his customers with Italian olives and olive oils, along with insights about harvesting them. Photo courtesy of Robert Peters.

Olives at the ready to be pressed into oil.



in season

of woods, farmland, and olive groves. Owned by retired Atlantans Joan and Roger Arndt, Le Vigne serves as a gathering place for family and friends. In November 2004, one such arrival at Le Vigne was Charlie Augello, the proprietor of E. 48th Street Market in Dunwoody. His purpose was twofold: to enjoy the company of his old friends, the Arndts, and to assist with the olive harvest.



Le Vigne's olives ripe for picking.



Charlie Augello (left) and friends sort through the olives, removing stems, leaves and debris.

Le Vigne's "liquid gold" fresh from the extractor.

Picking olives at Le Vigne is no mean feat. There are 700 olive trees scattered around the property, 100 of which are prolific old stock that produce 90% of this property's olive yield. The other 600 olive trees are 6-year-old stock that has yet to come into its prime. On any given harvest day there would be four to ten people picking in the Le Vigne groves. Charlie says, "Our days started early and we harvested olives until we heard the peel of the midday church bells, at which time we gathered for a restorative communal meal. Then, it was back to the tedious work of laying tarps on the ground to catch the olives we stripped off each branch with our bare hands. Proper timing was essential; the olives had to be picked at the peak of ripeness and the oil extracted without delay. Olives picked early in the 5-day harvest period at Le Vigne were spread out in thin layers and we set up fans to blow on them to keep them dry so they would not ferment and become rancid before the harvest was completed."

Packed into crates, the olives were hauled to the local frantoio, accompanied by their owners, pickers, and family friends. This day was one to be celebrated, especially since



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the 2003 harvest was poor and the Arndts' supply of olive oil was dwindling. The olives were weighed, washed, crushed and centrifuged until a stream of pure first-pressing, fruity oil poured into the vat. This sight made it understandable why Homer called olive oil "liquid gold." The Arndts' entourage gathered in the frantoio's tasting room. In true Italian fashion, they opened bottles of wine. Over the flames of the frantoio fireplace, they toasted bread, rubbed it with fresh garlic, and sprinkled it with salt, thereby creating a perfect base for savoring the flavors of this year's bounty of "liquid gold."

Throughout Italy, olive growers keep keen watch over their groves each fall waiting for the precise time to harvest their crop. Roger Arndt says, "In our area, olives can be harvested between early November and late January. An early picking provides high quality while a later picking yields a higher quantity."

During the harvest season, traditional food festivals called *sagres* are staged to celebrate the seasons' bounties. These celebrations stem from pagan times and offer villagers and tourists the opportunity to sample the new olive oil, feast on local fare, dance and be entertained. Charlie says, "The sagres went on in nearby villages nearly every night. They were wonderful family outings that took our minds off the day's work of picking olives back at Le Vigne."

As is typical for small Italian olive growers, multiple varieties of olives are harvested and pressed together for the resulting oil, and Le Vigne is no exception. Roger says, "We have six varieties of olives planted (frantoio, leccino, pendolino, moraiolo, picholine and ascolano) and they all go into the mix to create our oil. Olive oils from this part of Umbria are exceptional: extra virgin with less than one percent acid."

In addition to the blend of olive varieties, olive oil can vary based on the grove's soil composition, altitude, and microclimate, making each year's olive oil a unique artisan product. It's worth noting that each olive consists of only 20% oil, and it is not uncommon for a single tree to yield only one or two quarts of top-quality olive oil. Le Vigne's 2004 harvest yielded 1100 pounds of olives, enough to produce only 90 quarts of boutique quality, extra virgin olive oil. When one considers the time and energy it took to harvest these olives, not to mention the year-long pruning and maintenance work, producing olive oil in this fashion may not make economic sense. It is, rather, an age-old venture celebrating camaraderie, tradition, and connection with the earth.

To savor a taste of Le Vigne's accommodations, visit www.LeVigne.net.

Culinary travelers in search of Italian olive harvesting adventures will be interested to know that there are many autumnal tours such as the 8-day Italian Olive Harvest Tour departing November 4, sponsored by *Cooking Light* magazine and the olive oil producing family Colavita. For information, call 888/258-7477 or visit www.Colavita.com.