

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Starved for Italy? Mark Your Calendar for Next Fall's Harvest Time

For one recent visitor, a working-vacation in the olive groves of Puglia was well worth savoring—and repeating



ESSENTIAL OILS Puglia produces nearly half of Italy's olive oil. Many family-owned farms rely on friends, relatives and sometimes tourists to help harvest the olives every autumn.

By Ben Yagoda

Sept. 3, 2020 6:30 am ET



IT'S BEEN 10 months—though it seems like 10 years—since I stood under an olive tree outside Altamura, in the Puglia region of southeastern Italy, and was instructed by Tonio Creanza on how, literally, to get the low-hanging fruit.

The tree was one of 700 that Tonio's family owns on seven separate plots, and, for six generations, have harvested to produce olive oil. It was mid-November, right in the middle of the short but intense harvest season. Nonstop running, Tonio calls it. The operation is too big for his family to pick all the olives themselves, but too small to let them hire extra workers without plunging an already iffy balance sheet straight to red. So several years ago they started relying on volunteers, one of whom, last November, was me.

The technique Tonio showed me is pretty simple, and, with minor variations, the way the harvest has been done for millennia. With one hand, grab a bright-yellow hand-rake. With the other, bunch some branches, laden with that low-hanging purple fruit. Then start methodically brushing the olives out. They came loose easily, landing on netting spread out under the tree, with satisfying plunks. They were so plentiful that after I'd been at it for 10 minutes, Tonio rushed over to gently inform me that I'd been stepping on the olives and crushing them, spilling the oil and ever so slightly diminishing the yield. "Look where you

are putting your feet,” he said. “Work from there, then find a new spot for each foot. It’s a mind-set.”

With minor variations, the harvest has been done this way for millennia.

It was a lesson I would absorb over the coming days of work: although the trees collectively yield 20 tons of olives, each tiny fruit is precious.

I’d first met Tonio the year before, when my wife, Gigi, and I participated in one of the art-restoration and conservation workshops he conducts each summer in Puglia. When he mentioned the olive harvest one night at dinner, our ears pricked up. We knew we wouldn’t be typical volunteers: Tonio asks for a commitment of three weeks in exchange for room and board, and attracts mostly 20-somethings. We’re Medicare age and wanted to work for only four days. But he welcomed us. So when November rolled around, we flew to Rome, boarded a four-hour train to the seaside city of Bari, drove 30 miles to our elegant \$55-a-day Airbnb in the heart of Altamura, then strolled to the Creanza house for dinner.

There we found Tonio’s 85-year-old mother, Grazia, hard at work grating cheese. At the stove was his sister-in-law, who lives upstairs with Tonio’s brother and their two grown daughters. The volunteers drifted in. There was Faith, on sabbatical from the food industry in New Orleans; Dylan, on sabbatical from construction work in Ontario; Marie, a native of Switzerland on sabbatical from her work as a chocolatier in Vancouver. Everybody seemed to be on sabbatical from something, delighted to spend part of their downtime working in the green-gold olive groves of Puglia.

The meal was as fresh, local, and fabulous as you might imagine: pasta with cabbage dressed with homemade croutons and Grazia’s grated cheese; delicately fried slices of zucchini; red wine from a neighbor’s vineyard; and, for dessert, caramelized onions and a

local melon. On everything but the dessert, we poured olive oil that had been pressed the night before from olives picked the day before that. It was green, nutty and invitingly pungent. In the groves outside of town the next morning, the group, with a scant week of experience, worked like a well-oiled machine. and Gigi and I hustled to keep up. Tonio, Dylan and Faith poked the higher branches with long-handled pneumatic devices with two flapping rakes at the end; the rest of us started raking branches. It took 15 or 20 minutes to denude a tree. At that point, we'd pour the olives into crates. When three or four crates were full, four or five of us would form a "train" to pick them up and carry them to the vans. Then repeat.

Tonio sells the oil in boutique food shops in Vancouver, where he lives most of the year, and world-wide by mail-order. But even the 2,500 liters his operation produced in 2019, an excellent year, didn't make for a financial bonanza. He says his real goal is to preserve his family's—and Puglia's—heritage.

As we said our goodbyes, I thought about how privileged we'd been, not only to enjoy the great meals with fine company, but to have been part of a process and culture that has continued for centuries. Gigi and I immediately talked about going back to the groves this November.

Then coronavirus struck. Tonio isn't recruiting volunteers for this year's harvest. American tourists are still banned from Italy, but he isn't even taking visitors from within Europe, because of the vulnerability of his aged parents. When I spoke to him by phone in August, he told me his extended family and a network of friends will help with the harvest this year. Perhaps olive-grove volunteers will be welcomed back next fall, he said. The last six months have taught us that planning ahead is a mug's game. Nevertheless, when I get our 2021 calendar, I plan to open it to the November page and in the first box write one word: "Olives."