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Laura is a freelance journalist who loves exploring the world and sharing its stories. She also harvests olives in Italy.

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The Allure of Olive Oil

It’s a crisp, early November morning in Puglia, Italy, and I’m piling into a van with six other international volunteers to begin a demanding day of work. There are three Canadian travelers, a woman from the Netherlands, and two men from Central Europe, in addition to myself. Once settled into the vehicle, we drive together from the ancient town of Altamura to an expansive field that’s home to some of the world’s most symbolic wonders: olive trees. As the sun makes its way above the horizon, we crank up the generator, connect a few pneumatic rakes that we’ll use to shake the fruits from their branches, and start laying out a series of large green nets. We pull each one taut, so that there are no gaps between them for

the olives to fall, and wrap burlap sacks around the base of each tree trunk for added measure. We have a lot of ground to cover, but we're not alone. In the heel of Italy's boot, harvest season is in full swing.

Puglia native Tonio Creanza is the man who brought us all here, in the fields where he grew up. Now 53, Creanza has been partaking in his family's olive harvest since he was five years old. He's a sixth-generation olive harvester, a tradition of the landscape that's as much a part of this sun-baked region as its wandering shepherds and communal breadmakers. Over the years Creanza and I have become close friends, and I've spent two consecutive years harvesting olives with his extended family. He's shared stories with me about riding together as a child with his grandfather, a "towering, gentle-giant-type figure," as he describes him, in a mule-pulled carriage to reach these fields; and I've witnessed firsthand his undying commitment to this land, its trees, and their oil—rich with the flavors of quince, almond and pomegranate fruits that grow and flourish beside them.

But while the harvest has long been a family tradition, it's much more a labor of love than it is a profitable endeavor. In fact, the bulk of store-bought olive oil these days is mass produced. Still, for Creanza, a deep connection to both the land and his relatives is reason enough to make the annual journey—one that takes him from his current home in Vancouver, B.C., back to Altamura—and help bring the yearly cycle to fruition.

Since 2010, Creanza has even enlisted the help of volunteers found around the globe interested in cooking, food science, and culinary history to aid with the overall responsibilities—and reap the benefits of the harvest's rewards—in exchange for room and board. The work isn't easy. From sunup to sundown, hours are filled with net laying, hand raking, gathering olives in quick succession so that they're not stepped on and/or destroyed, and plenty of heavy lifting: all in a mad rush to collect the bounty and transport it to the press before the quality of the oil is compromised.

It's a well-honed process, and should be—since the history of olive oil dates back to ancient times.

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THE HISTORY OF OLIVE OIL

A few years ago, I found myself sitting at a dinner in Seville, Spain, at the same table of professional olive oil taster Alfonso J Fernández-López. His family has been in olive oil production for generations, and Fernández-López said something that night which has stuck with me ever since. “One thing I hate,” he said, “is nationalism in olive oil. Olive trees are older than borders and have survived wars.”

Fernández-López’s words couldn’t be more true. Olive trees can be traced back to at least the 8th century B.C.E., long before the dividing lines between oil producing countries like Spain, Italy, and Greece ever existed. In fact, what’s believed to be the world’s oldest living olive tree that’s still bearing fruit, Elia Vouvon, is at least 2,000 years old. Some scientists from the University of Crete (the Greek island where the tree grows) even estimate it might be up to 4,000 years old. Italy’s oldest olive oil dates back approximately 4,000 years as well, which we know thanks to pottery fragments found in a central Italian mountain village called Castelluccio. Indeed, “extending an olive branch” is considered a symbol of peace, perhaps because the trees themselves have such amazing longevity.

Olive trees have always flourished in Mediterranean-type climates, those places with hot, dry summers, and cool, mild winters like present-day South Africa, California, Turkey, and Chile, and across southern Europe and northern Africa, including countries such as Portugal, Albania, Greece, Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria. Spain accounts for the bulk of the world’s olive oil, with the European Union producing approximately sixty-nine percent of the world’s overall production. There are also dozens of olive varieties. The Olivoteca, an olive tree world reference center at Spain’s 16th century Hacienda de Guzmán, is home to more than 150 of them, each grown on individual trees originating from five different continents. These varieties include beldi, a strange-looking olive that’s small, shriveled, and flavorful, and the aromatic arbequina—one of the most dominant cultivars on the planet.

Over the years the production and sale of olive oil has become, as some people say, “as corrupt as a politician,” with excessive tampering of the oils and the mislabeling of bottles, passing off poor-quality and/or adulterated oils as authentic Extra Virgin Olive Oil (EVOO). During a 2016 television interview with “60 Minutes,” investigative journalist Tom Mueller actually estimated that between seventy-five to eighty percent of EVOO sold in the U.S. is fake. It’s one of the many reasons that small family producers, like the Creanzas, are so pertinent to the survival of this authentic “liquid gold,” a product that has helped shape and define Puglian culture and history.

THE FIELDS AND THEIR BOUNTY

Puglia produces more olive oil than anywhere else in Italy, though the Creanza’s 700 olive trees account for just a tiny fraction of a sliver. Spread among seven individual orchards that differ in soil and topography and which dot the landscape around Altamura, these “centenarian” beings are extremely hearty, making them capable of withstanding harsh conditions—including droughts and freezing temperatures. The trees produce a mix of three olive varieties, including the dense and mildly spicy **ogliarola**, and **coratina**, a high-yielding olive with an extra fruity taste. From their thick trunks to their oblong leaves, each of these trees has a special meaning to Creanza, as do the fields in which they grow.

There’s the sprawling orchard known as “Appia Antica,” which sits along the ancient Appian Way from Rome. It holds the bulk of the Creanzas’ trees: three-hundred-and-fifty of them in total. Another is “La Mena,” Creanza’s personal favorite. Here, his grandfather and great-grandfather planted dozens of olive trees directly into the limestone bedrock of the Murgia plateau, an easily dissolvable karst landscape dominated by sinkholes and underground caves. It’s a harsh environment for fruit trees. “The only source of water in this orchard comes from the limestone crevices,” says Creanza, “but yet, the trees remain so resilient. It’s impressive.” Perhaps because they have to work harder for their nourishment, Creanza says the olive oil that the trees here produce has a particularly robust and fruity flavor. “My mother actually reserves the olive oil from 20 trees in this orchard only for her kitchen,” he says. The rest goes into their sellable Famiglia Creanza extra virgin olive oil (EVOO).

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Creanza considers olive oil to be one of life’s great elixirs. I’ve seen him drink down tablespoons of EVOO while singing the praises of its antibodies, and slater the oil onto his skin as moisturizer. He pours it generously over pasta, fish, bread, salad…whatever foods he can find, and uses it for cooking, even at high temperatures (contrary to popular belief, EVOO has a relatively high smoking point, and can withstand heats of at least four-hundred degrees Fahrenheit). Creanza also incorporates olive oil, including its history and how to taste it, into Messors—his series of projects and weeks-long immersive workshops that take place in Puglia and focus on everything from art restoration to shepherding and food culture. In fact, Messors newest offering for 2022 will take a deep dive into the region’s food origins, beginning with the abundance of the Adriatic sea and then journeying into the mountains of nearby Basilicata, where food—because it is scarcer—takes on an almost mythical quality.

“Teaching participants about the origins of foods in southern Italy, and the roles that the local landscape plays in food traditions,” says Jennifer Bell, Messors’ program designer and coordinator, as well as Creanza’s wife, “is one more step in helping bust the crime rate.” The more educated people are, the less they’ll tolerate. “This is why the history and culture of authentic olive oil production is so important,” she says.

THE MAKING OF OLIVE OIL

Although Italy’s olive harvest season tends to occur in late fall, most families and businesses decide for themselves when their olives are considered “perfectly ripened” and it’s time to start gathering up the crop. For the best flavor intensity, olives should boast a mix of colors, since the darker the olive (colors typically range from green to purple to black) the riper it is. Greener olives tend to have a more peppery taste, and purple olives are buttery. Together,

they make magic. The Creanzas tend to start their harvest in early to mid November, before the weather turns.

To dislodge the olives from their branches, the family and its volunteers uses a mix of pneumatic rakes and hand rakes, though many large-scale producers—such as the California Olive Ranch, which encompasses thousands of acres of olive trees and is headquartered just north of Sacramento, California—opt for high-density mechanical harvesters that forgo the laying of nets, because the olives are collected before ever reaching the ground. There are also hydraulic trunk shakers, which collect fruit by vibrating the entire tree. No matter what method is used, it's extremely important to get the olives to the mill as soon as possible once they're taken from the trees. The sooner the oil's extraction, the fresher the product.

Ancient mills used heavy rotating grindstones to crush the olives into a paste, then stacked that paste onto round pads called *fiscoli* to literally press out the oil. Today, most mills employ a more modern process of extraction, one that utilizes a centrifuge to separate the olives' solid matter from its liquids. Clean tanks and healthy olives are essential to the finished product, and the fewer the steps, the purer the oil. In fact, if a mill uses heat or chemicals in its extraction process, then the olive oil is not considered extra virgin.

PURCHASING AND STORING EVOO

"One thing that happened during the pandemic is that there are a lot more people requesting my olive oil," says Creanza, who's been selling twice as much as usual—thanks to a global refocus on home cooking and a switch toward healthy, high-quality ingredients.

Although he occasionally ships cases of Famiglia Creanza to the U.S. for individuals and/or groups of friends who pull together to split the cost of a case, Creanza's main customer base is in Canada. In Vancouver there are three shops that regularly stock bottles of the family supply: Zara's Italian Deli & Fresh Pasta at the city's Granville Island Public Market, Le Marché Saint George Cafe in the residential Mount Pleasant neighborhood, and Chinatown's Harvest Community Foods.

Thankfully, Famiglia Creanza olive oil is just one of many quality EVOOs out there. Look for them at specialty markets, or for an even more personalized experience, pay a visit to a dedicated tasting room, such as Figone's Olive Oil Co. in California's Sonoma Valley or Olea

Farm and Tasting Room in San Luis Obispo. When sampling an olive oil, a burning sensation on the back of your throat is a good thing. This means that the EVOO is both fresh and authentic. Fruitiness, bitterness, and pungency—these are all good qualities in olive oil.

> "Remember, choosing an olive oil can be like selecting a fine wine."

Wherever you decide to purchase your oil, Creanza recommends choosing an EVOO that is traceable, meaning that the product contains information on not just where its olives were grown, but where they've been processed and bottled. Another thing to look for is the harvest date of the olives, which tells when the olives were actually *picked* from the trees. This will help assure that your oil is fresh, since most EVOO is best within 18-24 months of harvesting.

Store your olive oil in a cool dark place where the rays of the sun can't get to it, and make sure your tin or bottle (plastic can leach into oil, so avoid it) are properly sealed. An EVOO's polyphenols (naturally occurring antioxidants) become milder over time, reducing both the oil's flavor and its health benefits. After the "best by" date it will start to go rancid, so for a primo experience, use up your oil within the first three months of opening it.

Remember, choosing an olive oil can be like selecting a fine wine. The notes of the product will differ depending on factors such as the local terroir, the various types of olives blended together, and whether that particular year saw heavy rain or endured an excess drought. Still, you're the ultimate judge, so have fun with it. Sample oils from different countries or terrains, try infusing your olive oil with various herbs and spices, like dried chilis or thyme, or embark on a day of tastings. One of my favorite things to do is to bring back bottles of local olive oil as souvenirs from my travels.

BACK IN PUGLIA

Despite all the work that goes into each annual harvest, it's our daily lunch in the fields that makes the difficulty of each day worth it. This is the time that we get to sample the rich oil from

the same trees that surround us, and have been producing their fruit for generation-upon-generation. While one volunteer winds down the generator, another turns over some of the empty crates we use for collecting olives and lays a tablecloth across them. Then comes the food that nonna Creanza has packed for us: leftovers from the night before include foods like ear-shaped *orecchiette* pasta and sauteed broccoli rabe, *cialledda*—a traditional shepherd's salad made with onions, cherry tomatoes, onions, and water-soaked chunks of days-old Altamura bread—and containers brimming with meatballs and burrata cheese. We spread it all out before us, along with a carafe (or two) of homemade red wine, and start drizzling the oil on every edible item. It's a well-earned feast, for sure. One that the harvesters who came before have gifted to us, and—as long as we keep the chain going—others will partake in as well. Here in the silence of the fields, these trees unite us.

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