
Olive pickin' tales

SO, WHAT ABOUT US AT THE SHARP END? WE'VE ALL READ THE ARTICLES ABOUT MEDITERRANEAN TYPES GOING OFF TO WORK WITH AN OLIVE OIL SANDWICH, SOMETIMES GARNISHED WITH A SUN-DRIED TOMATO, IN THEIR LUNCH BOX...

...of leathery 102-year-old Cretan peasants siring further sturdy little Creations after quaffing their daily bottle of yellowy potion; of Vestal Virgins daintily pressing out the elixir with their sensual toes ... sometimes prepared to do extras; of the technicalities and titillations of tritulating; of picholines and negrettes; of the miracle tree of remarkable longevity from whence they came... on Crete there are trees over a thousand years old... And so on...

Never much about the pickers, though!

I arrived at the job by a tortuous route unnecessary to detail here although Love played its part. Not that I was a fan of olive oil. In Lancashire we either associated it with Popeye (Miss Olive Oyle)... or rubbing into the skin, usually when we were «poorly» and it took time to adjust to the foreign concept of mixing food

with skin oil ! But suddenly, twenty years ago, I was father to eighty-six mature olive trees in the French Camargue.

Their gnarled and twisted forms were picturesque... symbolic of all sorts of positive features - peace, venerable wisdom, indestructibility and timelessness, fruitfulness... And picking was pleasant at first....

Indeed, stuck in the rush hour to work or at work itself, picking olives in sunny south France might have a certain allure. The first tree has. By the eightieth the practice has lost its charm ! Olives are harvested from November into January when it can become decidedly brisk ... especially if the Mistral blows. The process then takes on all the attraction of painting the Forth bridge.

My predecessor on the job had been a wily old Spaniard named

*“...although
he looks like
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Christmas...”*





“At the sharp end”

José who garnered by gauling which involved beating the tree about the branches causing olives to fall on to plastic sheets. Knowing no better, we adopted the same procedure and I do believe a variant is now used in vast Spanish olive groves where tree and tractor are connected and huge vibrations shake the olives into suspended netting.

The disadvantages of gauling became increasingly apparent. The warming effect of beating with the long pole was offset by the cooling-off period when the olives were picked up and by one's body and clothes becoming increasingly covered in an oily paste (resulting from wasteful direct hits with the pole). Gauling was replaced by tree climbing.

Pruning and fertilizer increased yields so that in one bumper year we gathered 1300kg... well over a metric tonne... This also represented many frozen extremities and cut hands and eyes (olive leaves are surprisingly sharp)... These increasing yields and the torture of working in extreme conditions is due in large part to a harsh task master - Jean-Marie Ivars – whose military background gives him a « joy through suffering » approach which I don't share! Picking has to be done in inclement weather to profit from Jean-Marie's free days from controlling the French railways, but also because he enjoys it and, although he looks like Father Christmas, because he is a mean ex-sergeant with only one squaddy left in his platoon and who he enjoys seeing suffer... me! Jean-Marie is a Pieds-Noirs, (born in Algeria and so called because of the original white settlers' black boots). He left, with thousands of others, when that country wrested independence from France in 1962. The Algerian connection had begun with his Russian great-grandfather who settled there after trying France, Spain and Morocco. His grandfather finished as colonel in the French Foreign Legion, mostly in the Algerian desert; his father was a gendarme there.

He is not a loquacious man and olives are silently plucked. Rare snippets of conversation are exchanged. He has told me tales of going to school with a gun in his boot during the Algerian troubles, how his father was injured in a bomb blast there; of his own army days. His other grandfather was at Verdun. Food supply duty to front-line trenches was usually done in threes and casualties were high. Days went by with no supplies getting through. Whilst on the duty, a shell fell nearby, killing the third man. They reassembled the remaining food, struggled on through mud and blood and issued the soup. One poilu held up a bony object.

« What's this ? »

« Ah, that will be Henri's finger », grandpa replied laconically. The poilu chewed at it all the same !

Another time, in a ruined civilian cemetery at night, the three guards made out an object moving towards them. As it approached they perceived a jumping skull ! His two comrades fled, but grandpa stood his ground, inspected the skull... to find a large frog trapped inside !

Such tales have their macabre interest, but at one tale per hundred thousand olives, the days don't exactly speed by.

Still, to be fair, Jean-Marie, has done me favours; without him the olives probably wouldn't be picked... and, once, he took me with him from Nîmes to Mendes via La Bastide on his train. Riding in the cab gives a different perspective to rail travel. What impressed me most was how little the driver can see at night and in tunnels. A headlight throws a feeble glow a few yards ahead.... Which is all a long way from olive trees... a constant ambition of mine!

They have diseases – including La Teigne (a tree-eating spider); La Psylle (a parasite that produces a white cottony substance... and opens the way to)...; La Fumigine (they go black) ; L'oeil de paon (yellowing leaves); La Cochinelle (they are covered in shells containing some devouring creatures)... All can kill the tree... which may well grow again from the bottom (the secret of its longevity)..., but who can wait another hundred years? Rapid growing the olive tree isn't ! So out comes the back-crushing hand sprayer again with its swirling mists of toxicity... some of which fall on the tree...

Detailing these toils and tears may convey a certain negativity about branch life. A moaning sort of message. When I moved to



“Their gnarled and twisted forms were picturesque”

France I certainly didn't expect to spend quite so much of life hanging about in trees (and not just olive trees..., but that's another story).

Non the less, I do sometimes reflect, when up a tree on an English-summer-like winter day gazing beyond rippling silver olive leaves over the Camargue étangs... or beyond the vines towards Spain... or just into the wide open spaces, that it is better than being stuck on the way to work or being at work itself (“whatever work is”, as Prince Charles might have said).

The hard labour of harvesting did eventually encourage me to acquire a taste for olive oil which, added to garlic, sun-drenched tomatoes and red wine... and ratatouille... and bouillabaisse... (and a dash of Bordeaux cocktail), produces a life-preserving daily gruel that courses constantly through my veins and should ensure I'm still picking olives (if nothing else), when I'm 102, too.

by Harry Hanson