

Olive Harvest Time, and the News is Good!

Judith Harris (October 11, 2017)



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ROME -- The olive harvest has come to Italy early this year. Even so, despite the overheated summer and scant rain from June through early September, the good news is that quality and production are both excellent. Typically production surges every two years, and this looks to being the good year. The experts here remind us that the year 2016 was the worst in a quarter century, especially in Central Italy, but that this year's production is expected to surge by 18.8%, for a total of 288,600 tons. Puglia seems to be leading the pack.



This is terrific, but still lagging far behind Spain, whose production is enormous. The quantity of Spanish oil is expected to have a minimal increase (1.8%) but even so the country is expected to produce a whopping 1.3 million tons.

Also ahead of Italy is Greece, whose expected production is of 294,100 tons, or up 13.1% over last year. Tunis is also faring well, with its production soaring up by a record 201%, for 202,900 tons; on the other hand that upsurge reflects the last year's disastrous production of barely 80,000 tons.

We personally care deeply about this, and not only because we use far more olive oil than butter, and never anything but cold-pressed extra-virgin oil -- a luxury but important. This is relatively easy for us because we have 30 cherished olive trees, which we harvest for our own oil.

Fifteen of those trees were already on our little acre of land 25 miles north of Rome when we bought it a quarter century ago. Among the first things we did was to plant another 15 trees, which are now regularly producing.

Our British acquaintance in Tuscany does things on somewhat a grander scale (understatement). He has 1,000 olive trees, and every autumn, at just the right picking time, he convokes his relatives from afar. Every year they converge for a week of picking olives and enjoying a wonderful annual autumn festive holiday.

To return to our modest production, every two years the trees must be pruned, preferably in late January or February. Pruning is an art, and our friend Anselmo, who supervises our pruning as well as the picking, took a special course in pruning, offered by our little town's serious agriculture experts. Picking the olives today is easier than in the past, when people climbed up on ladders and picked them one by one. Today, after nets are spread below each tree, a hand-held machine plucks the olives, which fall into the nets and are then gathered up and put into baskets or, these days, plastic crates.

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