

# The Lady



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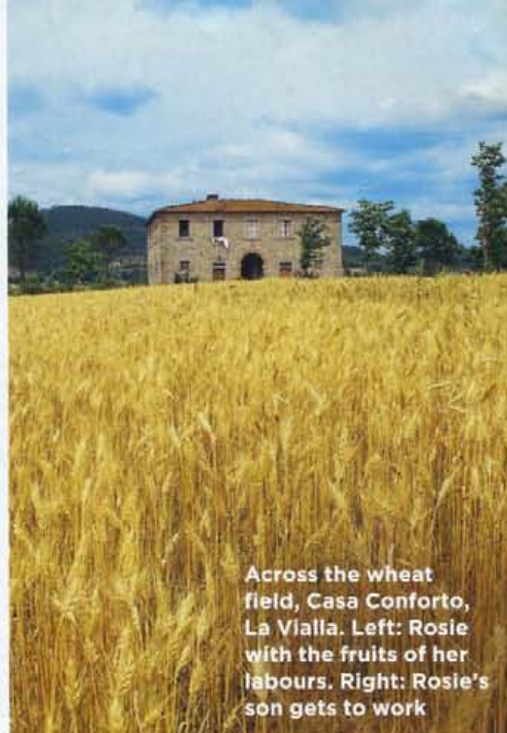
# PRESSING ENGAGEMENT

*Picking olives on a Tuscan farm turned out to be the perfect holiday for Rosie Millard and her family*

**L**IFE, WHEN experienced from the top of an olive tree, is rather beautiful. When you are on the sixth rung of a ladder, and surrounded by the grey-green branches of an Italian grove, the grim concerns of the future seem rather distant compared to the ravishing presence of the present. The autumnal Tuscan sky is turquoise and cloudless, the atmosphere fresh rather than searing hot, and the plump olives are there – in their thousands – for the picking.

In these frugal times, olive picking on an Italian farm might be the perfect holiday; there is a sort of honest virtue about it, but you don't have to travel down some damp, agrarian polytunnel in a hair shirt in order to get it done. And olive oil is far healthier than sun-tan oil, anyway.

'Allora!' says Bandino lo Franco, the youngest of the three brothers who run La Vialla farm in Tuscany, 'who wants to pick ze olives?' 'Me! Me! Me!' yell my four children, aged five to 13, who are hardly ever allowed up ladders at home,



Across the wheat field, Casa Conforto, La Vialla. Left: Rosie with the fruits of her labours. Right: Rosie's son gets to work

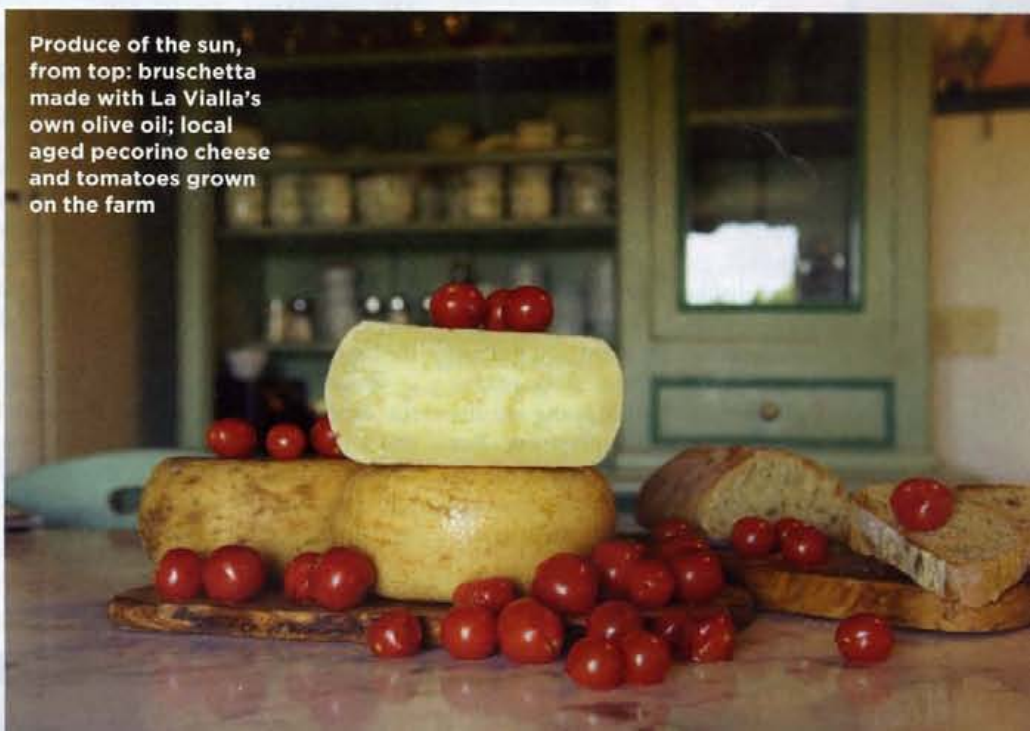


Freshly picked olives and, below, traditional olive pressing in progress at La Vialla





Produce of the sun,  
from top: bruschetta  
made with La Vialla's  
own olive oil; local  
aged pecorino cheese  
and tomatoes grown  
on the farm



let alone when armed with giant plastic orange combs. They can hardly believe their luck. They each grab a comb, ladders are leant against the trees, and up they swarm, combing out olives as they go. They (the olives, that is, not the children) plop down on to netting beneath the trees.

**W**hen the tree is considered empty, which takes a pro about 30 minutes, but a five-year-old about two hours, the netting is lifted up and fruit poured into a crate. There is no tiresome picking, pulling, or indeed carrying. Of anything. There are no nasty branches to cut, no thorns, or back-breaking weights. Garnering olives must be the easiest form of fruit picking known to man, and makes the harvesting of hops, apples or blackberries look positively torturous by contrast. Amazingly, this enterprise keeps the children entertained all morning, and the next day too.

'I think it's a bit like combing head lice off your head,' says Honey, eight, giggling within her tree. 'The tree is your head, Mummy. The olives are the lice! Off, off, off they all go!'

Yes, well. Each tree provides about 24 kilos' worth of black and green olives, which will yield a single bottle of extra virgin olive oil, pressed in the ancient mill at La Vialla. From October to December, two giant circular stones press olives from 6am until 10pm, every single day. As the farm runs on biodynamic principles, there is only one pressing, since a second would involve solvents. The residual paste left from this original pressing is recycled and used as fertiliser.

Olive picking jaunts have sprung up in farms all over Italy, and many people have

a small grove in their garden, but La Vialla is the one of the largest. Guests stay in one of around 20 restored 18th-century self-catering cottages which are surrounded by woodland on the tranquil 3,000-acre estate. The cottages are furnished with vintage, country-style antiques and centrally-heated in winter, while wholly shuttered in readiness for the blistering summer. They are also good value at around 54 to 105 euros a night, off peak, 60 to 120 euros a night, peak.

Generous welcome baskets of food, oil, wine and eggs are provided free of charge

### *'Three hours of olive picking included games of lying down and looking intelligently at the sky'*

in the modernised kitchens. This means you can cook your own supper on arrival if you wish, or if you prefer, there is a formal dinner down at the main farmhouse, a nightly extra if you choose. On our first morning, after a monumental feast of rustic Italian food and a perfect sleep under crisp linen sheets, we are ready to give our all to the hillside groves.

After about three hours of olive picking, which included (for the children) games of putting olives down their necks, and (for us) games of lying down on the netting and looking intelligently at the sky, it was time for lunch, which suddenly appeared on trestle tables, *al fresco*, and consisted of a three-course menu of mouth-watering nosh entirely sourced from the farm.

If harvesting isn't your thing, you can go for long walks, or ride. I trot off into the hills on a rather large Tuscan horse, while the elder three learn how to do rising trot

on ponies in the riding school and Mr Millard (a sworn non-rider) takes No 4 for a juice in the tiny neighbouring village of Castiglion Fibocchi. And, discernible from the steep groves, glowing in the Tuscan light, is the bell tower of the Renaissance gem of Arezzo, where you can visit the monumental frescoes by Piero de la Francesca in the town church, listen to musicians playing historic trumpets and indulge in... more delicious food.

The houses are all a good distance away from one another, so there is no sense of being on a 'holiday estate'. There

is no television or wi-fi. Apparently this caused one person such trauma they had to check out straight away, but I regard this as a major attraction, since it allows families to escape en masse from the diverting claims of Facebook and the rest, and relax wholesale in the bosky bosom of Tuscany.

**W**hat we want to do,' says brother No 2, Antonio, over a lunch of Chianti, garlic and tomato bruschetta, Tuscan bread soup, sausages and beans, 'is offer people a way to understand Italian produce. Here, you can see it growing and witness it being picked and pressed. It gives people who work all year in a big city the chance to come and work with nature. *Allora*, let me help you.' He slurps a giant green slug of peppery, pungent olive oil on to my soup. 'Our new oil. Pressed in the same way since the 16th century.'

The brothers; Bandino, Antonio and the eldest, 'El Capo', Gianni, are bursting with pride about the viability of their wholly eco-friendly enterprise. It was founded by their father Piero lo Franco, a textile businessman who sold up and invested his money in the Tuscan countryside around 30 years ago, just at the time when the population was shifting towards the towns. Their website gives you an idea of the farm's wine, oil and tomato sauce; you can order it online and relive the vivid taste of the Tuscan countryside which is La Vialla's speciality. As for me, I'll certainly treat olive oil with more respect the next time I sling it in the frying pan.

**LA VIALLA**, [www.la-vialla.com](http://www.la-vialla.com) or call 0039-0575 430020; fly to Pisa (2 hrs away) or Perugia (30 mins away). The farm will arrange transfers, or hire a car at the airport.



La Vialla's little farm shop