

THE OLIVE HARVEST IN TUSCANY

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A trip to Italy invariably leads to olive oil. The good stuff, of course. A taste or two leads to a purchase, one bottle leads to a half dozen and, eventually, your suitcase hosts a growing library of flavors, colors, and intricate labels on elegant shapes. This is the kind of luxury you justify as a gift and then cannot give away, the kind of flavor a cook measures out in drops, hoping to make it last, but in the end, self-control gone, pours on everything. And, if you are lucky, if you leave the cities for the countryside at the right time, you can improve upon this and catch lightning *before* it is caught in a bottle.

The right time is November, the month of the olive harvest and its festivals. The lightning is the *extra vergine*, the oil from the first cold pressing, sampled fresh at the press by farmer and friend alike: pungent gold, with a shade of verdant green, light, somehow sweet and pungent at once, the delicacy lasting on the tongue. Its bottled cousin cannot compare. *So good*, a friend remarks, *you could drink it straight*. Though the locals, of course, suggest *bruschetta* or *focaccia* as a complement! Bright nets in the Italian tricolor (red, green, and white) stretch from hill to valley, from orchard to grove, growing heavier each day. Olives that resist gravity and the wind are knocked into nets by farmhands, families, enthusiasts, and anyone who wishes to climb a ladder with a bamboo pole. The daily activity becomes, nightly, the festival and the evening meal. A glass of *Chianti* on the patio. Then a walk, perhaps, in the moonlight, among the trees.

The opportunity to enjoy a week or two of the harvest in this manner is now available. Doorways, Ltd. provides a chance to reside on an olive estate in the Tuscan countryside around Florence, a region widely celebrated for the quality and variety of its *artigiani* (small growers who are responsible for many of the excellent boutique olive oils). Tuscany is likewise famous for its pastoral beauty, which remains in many ways what it was centuries ago. Temperate winds drift across slowly rising and gently rolling hills. These features, so familiar in romantic cinema (*A Room with a View*, *Stealing Beauty*), are ideal for cultivating olives, as well as wine. Taste a local vintner's *Chianti Classico*, the mellow specialty of the hillside vineyards between Florence and Siena. Stop at a roadside stall for some herb-scented honey. Hike through forests and over meadows dotted with sheep. Explore sleepy medieval towns and Baroque churches off the beaten track.

The pleasures of the country villa do not preclude the pleasures of the city. *La Novellina*, for example, is a sixty-nine acre estate, which has as its central structure a tower from the 11th Century, and actively produces its own extra virgin olive oil. A mesh of vineyards, olive groves, and cypress trees in the Chianti region, *La Novellina* appears languorous, far removed from the hustle and bustle. But the farm is only ten miles from the *autostrada* (highway), only forty-two miles from the airports and action of Florence and Pisa. The coast is an hour away. San Gimignano, fourteen miles away, is one of Italy's best hill towns. Its ancient stone towers, all slightly askew, mark the view from *La Novellina's* patio, where guests watch the sun go down, dining *al fresco*. The neighborhood grocery store is but a mile away, a short walk over the fields. *Podere Simpatico* is similarly an active olive estate in Chianti (150 acres), run by an English-speaking Italian woman and her family. While horses and tennis can be found nearby, the leather market in Florence is only twenty miles away, the Gothic palaces and steep back streets (not to mention the mouth-watering pastries!) of Siena only eighteen. The *Caminino* estate, in the sunflower-rich region of Maremma, features a thousand-year-old chapel, an historical landmark, converted into a spectacular living room and olive oil tasting room.

Modern convenience has made the pastoral retreat more accessible (and less risky) than ever before. A quick trip on-line yields extensive photos for each villa, comprehensive information about each villa's amenities and location, and an opportunity to have your questions answered. Everything from airline ticket to car rental can be handled at once. An extended visit to an olive estate paradoxically provides both peace of mind and plenty to do. Cook at home if you want to or head out to Tuscany's renowned restaurants. The venerable is present, from a centuries-old fireplace to a landscape filled with fertile soil and favorite towns, as is the modern, from the stereo in the living room to the dishwasher in the kitchen.

The right time is also 2001. The dollar remains strong and each dollar will stretch a little further in November than it will this summer. Peak rates end with October. The cost of your airline ticket, for example, is cut in half. More importantly, the off-peak Autumn Italy is a little more yours than it would be in July. The bus tours are over. Backpacking students are back in class. Furthermore, if you needed another reason, November is truffle-hunting season!

Doorways, Ltd., a company based in Bryn Mawr, PA, will happily assist anyone who wishes to experience the festivities of the olive harvest and the emerald *extra vergine* firsthand. Just head to the website, **www.villavacations.com**. You can also contact Doorways by phone at either (610) 520-0806 or 1-800-261-4460.