

Douglas and Elizabeth Manuel

moved to Puglia four years ago, and here they reveal all about the effort and excitement of their first olive oil harvest.



Virgin oil

We've owned Masseria Due Torri near Monopoli in Puglia, the sunny and beautiful heel of Italy, for four years and have been restoring the 17th-century house and surrounding farmland during that time. We eventually got the house habitable enough to enable us to move in by January 2007.

In early November last year, we had the most exciting two days as we collected our first olives, took them to the *frantoio* [olive press] to watch them being pressed, and then taste our very first extra virgin olive oil. It was nectar. Our farm has never had chemicals used on the land and as we're preserving the natural balance, our crops are of the highest quality, with *biologico* (organic) oil, olives and nuts.

We have around 400 ancient olive trees, many of them several hundred years old, and many other trees including almonds, figs, *fica di india*, carob, oak and chestnut. Many of these trees are like huge works of art with magnificent gnarled and twisted trunks that are beautiful to draw, paint, photograph, hug, climb or just look at.

The house and farm have had little or no maintenance for many years – probably 50, according to our neighbours – so it has been a major undertaking to bring the farm back to economic life. We've

achieved this by undertaking major pruning of the olive trees and almonds, and are gradually working our way through all the trees, mainly to preserve them and their appearance. At the same time, we've been working on the house in order to get our bed and breakfast and apartment accommodation business running, as well as working on the gardens, rebuilding many hundred of metres of drystone walls, planting fruit trees, building a pool and laying large areas of lawn.

Unfortunately, our olive crop at the end of 2005 was ruined by an infestation of an olive mite which, in common with large parts of southern Europe, rendered the crop useless but gave us an opportunity to prune the trees hard again. Normally pruning is carried out on a rolling cycle so that there's always a crop, but not all trees will crop in any one year. Of course, the way we manage the trees here is just one of a multitude of different ways the management is undertaken and every farmer and locality has the best way, just like each area's cook always makes the best pasta.

We had no rain from the end of February to September so we were very worried that our crop would fail. However, in September we were blessed with the arrival of a lot of rain, which was spread over several



From left: Some of the olive trees in the grounds of Masseria Due Torri are hundreds of years old; using mechanical hands to pull down the olives from the tree; some of the fantastic harvest that will be made into delicious extra virgin olive oil