Olive oil - cash crop or loss leader?

An olive grove of your own by: Damaris West

We have about fifty and a half olive trees in the grove below our house. I’m not sure about the fifty – it could be anywhere between forty and sixty – but I am absolutely sure about the half. You see, there is an olive tree that was unwittingly planted bang on the border between our olive grove and that of our neighbours, thereby causing much unspoken hostility. The surveyor who recently established the frontier between the two groves suggested that we uproot the tree (it is probably slightly more on our side than the neighbours’) and give it to the neighbours to re-plant. His advice reminds me of the story of Solomon and the suffocated baby, except that there isn’t an exact analogy for the uprooting.

Olive trees were previously much prized and, somewhat illogically, still are. Once upon a time the gathering and pressing of olives to make olive oil was a lucrative activity. The crop itself required very little maintenance through the year – just some pruning in February and sporadic ground-clearance in the growing season – but otherwise survived cold, heat, flood and drought alike on its hillside until the harvest in November when the ‘liquid gold’ was produced.

Olive trees still survive well. They are as attractive as ever with their silvery evergreen foliage and their knotted trunks with hollows and holes that resemble Henry Moore sculptures. They probably yield as well as they ever did. The trouble is that the labour to pick the olives, coupled with pressing them, costs more than the revenue from the oil. It’s as simple as that.

So people pick their own olives just as they might pick the apples from a few favourite old trees, and derive oil for their own consumption. In our case, because the harvest coincides with the busiest time in our working year, we have an arrangement whereby a couple of neighbours (not the Solomon’s baby ones) pick them as if our grove were an extension of their own.

As owners, we don’t come in for fifty or even forty percent of the oil that our grove has produced, despite what we once heard. Our arrangement is a measure to avoid paying more in labour than we could ever hope to recover, while at the same time preventing the shame of the olives rotting on the twigs. We get a five-litre bottle or two for our own use – which is quite sufficient.

A great deal is talked about the mystical experience of picking olives – those hard purplish-black things scarcely bigger than a baked bean which taste like nothing on earth if bitten into in the raw state (only days of soaking in saline remove the appalling astringency). The quiet, the peace, the sunshine and dappled shade under the olive trees. The story always changes...
after a couple of days of it. Aches in arms and shoulders; bitter cold in cramped fingers. Our neighbours look like a couple of Russian peasants in their scarves and hats, battling their way through the mammoth job in the intervals of clement weather.

And then the result. Not gold but a beautiful clear yellowy green that goes cloudy after a while. Dripped onto toast (‘bruschette’) it has a clean, bitter taste. Better than the oil from the shops which is somehow far more oily. So the whole exercise is worthwhile like other home-grown produce is worthwhile, if only for the reason that it’s so nice to know exactly where something comes from.