26 Reconstructing Greece

Text by Ashley Parsons
Photos by Quentin B



The morning's soundtrack is the soft thuds of olives sprinkling the ground. On this soft November morning, we've joined Dimitris Psathas and Nikos Kofokotsios to assist with a tradition dating back thousands of years: the olive harvest.

An hour before, as daylight broke through the leaves, we laid nets around the trees to catch the olives. Then it was time to pluck them from the branches, tossing them to the ground. We spent twenty minutes on the tree. Dimitris hopped from branch to branch. We preferred to use a stepladder.

Eyeing the olives on the ground, Dimitris grabbed two packing crates. We folded the edges of the net together, gathering the olives in the middle. "There's about 20kg here I bet." Just as he predicted, the olives captured in the net from one tree poured out to exactly two crates. An hour later, with his expert eye, Dimitris let us know that we'd picked enough olives to account for the annual olive oil consumption of one Greek: about 80 kilos of olives, which yields 15 kilos of oil.

"Olive oil is representative of our culture, and the base of our diet," recounts Irini Kokolaki, expert of virgin olive oil tasting, and olive grower in Crete. Irini is also a professor and thought leader dedicated to providing Greek olive producers opportunities and resources.

Before arriving in Greece we contacted Irini, on a quest to meet a grower who produces high quality olive oil and table olives using old methods. This turned out to be a challenge; according to her, "These days, there aren't any producers who harvest using the ancient methods. Handpicking the olives for table olives only happens in Halkidiki." This is the comment that sparked our decision to head for Halkidiki, the region just south of Thessaloniki, to meet Dimitris.

Even if the old methods are dying out, the olive industry is thriving. From the day we arrived in Greece, we noticed that almost every patch of arable land is covered in olive trees. The groves closest to villages are home to the oldest trees, their trunks fat and warped, their branches tangled. Outside settled areas, the plains unrolled before us. Here we saw a different picture: younger groves dominated the landscape, with rows of perfectly aligned trees as far as the eye could see. These are often industrial groves, and their agricultural methods have room for improvement.

Greece is the world's third largest exporter of olive oil. And yet, how often is a bottle of pure Greek olive oil spotted in the grocery store? Many times, it's not. Italian and Spanish companies buy the majority of exported Greek olive oil, blending it into their own.

Selling blended oils under the Italian or Spanish label is authorized under EU and North American regulations. This practice reduces the access of Greek producers to the international market. It also reduces the price they can get for their oils.

In the case of industrial olive oil, the typical supply chain in Greece works this way: producers press their olives into oil at local cooperatives. The oil of many producers is mixed together before being exported in bulk. Other olive oils are added to this blend, and the product is a grocery-store-ready extra-virgin olive oil.

If one grower treats his groves with chemicals or is less stringent with the quality of olives he presses, the quality of the group's oil drops. According to Dimitris, at this stage of the supply chain there is little accountability. Commercial producers sell by volume. There is little to motivate the regular farmer to shift towards more sustainable practices if these threaten to reduce his yields.

Sitting on the porch at Dimitris' home after a long day picking olives, we learned about these challenges. He is striving to change these attitudes. He plays a part in a growing, unofficial network of olive oil producers from all over the country, and they have since been making great strides in building a sustainable Greek olive industry. The dream is to create enough change to help producers bring home a fair price for their crop.

But economics aren't the only factor hindering the industry. Dimitris tried to impress upon us the psychological toll of the 2009 crisis. The dusk turned into night as the conversation rolled on. His antique silhouette flickered on the wall behind us in such a way that we believed we were speaking to a great philosopher. Maybe we were.

In his calm and reasoned way of speaking Dimitris laid it out for us from a farmer's point of view. During the crisis, no one had a job or money to pay workers. And even if someone did work, no one in town had the money to buy the product. As the saying goes, you can't eat dirt. The resources needed for growers to market their products were in short supply. Many growers found themselves with no buyers. This made it easy for outside companies to negotiate down prices for olive oil, which laid more pressure on farmers already strapped for cash.

But instead of caving in, Dimitris forwards a big vision for the industry, and walks the walk. He has poured blood, sweat, tears, and all his savings into his brand, Klea, which encompasses his award-winning olive oil and table olives. In the region, he maintains friendly relations with industrial farmers, offers advice, shares techniques and listens to their problems, lending a hand where he can.

From his point of view, some responsibility also falls on the consumer. With a sheepish smile, he admits that even in Greece, people don't insist on excellent olive oil. Through the loose network of producers trying to promote a more sustainable olive industry, there are many opportunities across Greece for the general public to attend olive oil tastings. This offers them a chance to learn about the little fruit that holds such an important place in the country's history.

We just missed one he hosted with Irini in Thessaloniki. Guests meandered through olive oil tasting stations, sipping good, great, excellent, and not-so-great oils. The idea was to help the consumer recognize and appreciate quality olive oil. Behind that is the goal to be able to "sell the product for the price it deserves."

Dimitris is optimistic that if Greek consumers begin asking for high quality olive oil, grown from sustainable practices, the producers will have to respond. This idea may sound like a broken record for Western Europeans, but in Greece the concept is just finally gathering steam.



The opportunity to negotiate a fair price on the domestic market gives the growers who want to continue exporting their oil more bargaining power. And it may help pave the way for bottles of pure Greek extra virgin olive oil to line grocery aisles.

As if economics and moral after the crisis weren't enough, a new challenge looms for olive producers all over the southern Mediterranean: climate change. We spoke with another important voice in the industry, Chris Kavalieratos, the owner of Anopaea Organic Estate.

As water becomes scarce on the Peloponnese peninsula, and average summer temperatures climb year after year, olive trees are having trouble withstanding the difficult conditions. In 2008, Chris and his wife had the idea of planting a variety of olive tree typical to the Peloponnese region a few degrees north, on their land north of Athens. Within a few years, the grove was producing faithfully, with the trees offering up better yields than in their native terrain.

Chris believes that adapting to climate change is going to be a big obstacle for producers. By adapting early, he'll be able to ensure a quality olive harvest for his children and grandchildren.

Especially relevant to the current climate of the Greek olive industry is a quote by Nobel Prize winner Odysseus Elytis: "If you deconstruct Greece, you will see in the end an olive tree, a grapevine and a boat remain. That is, with as much, you reconstruct her."

With the passion of growers like those we met, the rich tradition of olives as a staple to Greek life will flourish in the coming decades. If they succeed, I am sure there will always be someone, somewhere, finding themselves transported to a quiet grove where the wind rustles through the silvery-green leaves, each time they open a bottle of olive oil. #

