

Working on an Olive Farm in Provence



“Strong for a purpose.” These were the stirring words of our host as we hoisted our “combs” over our shoulders to start the harvest for olives. I was in the beautiful mountains of Gapeau, half an hour remote from the nearest village of Le Casselet, which was itself about one hour away by bus from Toulon, on the coast of Cote D’ Azur, in France. It was October in 2023, and there was a surprising coolness in the air, even though we were at the southernmost point of France. We all wore jackets and long work pants, along with gloves and hats.

It being a mountainous area, most of the olive trees grew on slopes, sometimes even on an edge of a steppe, and we soon found that it led to some interesting harvesting processes.

There were eight of us and we split into two teams, working systematically. A team went ahead and laid the large heavy plastic sheets called bashes, spreading them out twenty by twenty feet under a tree, even if the tree was a small one, and pinning it carefully such that the top bash laid over the bottom bash, and that the edges were folded over at the bottom. The goal was to “comb” the olives down into the bashes so they could be neatly collected. Well, easier said than done! For one, the slope meant that most olives were rolling down and over the neat folds we had made at the bottom. And then they even plonked straight over the edge of the steppe, and so we had to put a third bash away further

down to catch them. But then the bash could easily lift off in a gust of wind, which tended to pick up in the afternoon, so meticulously we put rocks to weigh it down. Sometime we pinned a corner of the bash to another tree to build a barrier wall.

The combing team then came in, with electric combs, which are long (and heavy) vibratory rake-like things, which “comb” down the olives with a top-down movement, dislodging them with the vibration. Over and over again, going back to find the last one. Balancing the comb while ensuring that you did not slide down the slope or crush the olives at your feet was an interesting acrobatic exercise. Sometimes we would climb on the inside—the trees were pruned to create the



access—and push the comb from inside. The olives felt like popcorn in a microwave, popping

intensely at the beginning and then slowing down, signaling that the tree was done. Yet we went back, ensuring every olive was freed.

Gathering and emptying the olives from the very large bash was also an interesting process. Picking up the bash and hoisting it over the shoulder a few inches at a time to roll the olives in the center, reminded me of hoisting my mother’s sarees as I would wash them in a bucket. After the olives were all collected in the center, the leaves had to be cleaned out, and all the olives would have to be poured out into a box; it was so heavy



that it needed two people to lift.

It was a toss-up as to which operation was harder—the bashing took a toll on the lower back and the combing on the upper. Luckily, we switched up multiple times and there were plentiful breaks during the five-hour workday.

I was now fully like a hired hand, but I loved it. I did not feel anything at all related to my ego, in fact, I felt very good. It felt good to feel my muscles working for a purpose. It felt good to be part of camaraderie and music. It felt good to forage for rolled olives that had fallen outside the bashes. And sipping coffee and munching on biscuits while looking over the mountains felt like a profound blessing.

Sara and Max owned a hundred-acre labor of love here, built over the last twenty years, with over two thousand olive trees planted on the craggy hills. They had amazing reviews on the work exchange site, and no wonder. Their picturesque stone chateau had comfortable, gorgeous rooms that housed us when they were not hosting Airbnb guests looking for some mountain therapy. Sara made nutritious and delicious meals, fueled with the bounty from the garden, unique cheeses from the area, and of course, fresh baguette and eggs every day.

I planned to stay for eight weeks, the longest I had been at any one place, but this was to be the last leg of my EU year.

The chateau and its area were surrounded by tall mountain peaks, their rock faces looking bare and majestic. Their line was unbroken save for a cell phone tower, which we were grateful for its connectivity. In other feats of human engineering, we had electricity, water from a bore well on the grounds, television, and



quite a few functioning machineries, including a full-fledged olive mill, which we would later see. It was amazing for me to see this piece of civilized life deep in the mountains—theirs was the last property before the actual range, and the tracks to the house were completely unpaved. We bounced along rocky roads that in fact, caused a flat. The hills and the rocks always made jogging very hard work, but luckily there was also a pool and gym on site for us to work out otherwise.

The five girls stayed together in our own space above the main house. We had our own rooms, with a secondary kitchen and bathroom, while the boys stayed in another building further down. I loved the décor of our space—painted in cheery yellow, with wooden beams, deep windows with shutters, warm stone tiles for the kitchen, cozy fabric sofas, braided rugs, and baskets of fresh food spilling over.

My first day here was a Sunday, and it was a non-working day. I woke up early to the sound of the rooster and stepped outside in the hush. The mountains were awe inspiring in their quiet peace. I stared at them, feeling cocooned. It was yet quite dark, and there were several stars and planets in the sky, which I delighted in as if I was seeing my friends after a long time. Then I stepped back in, turned on the hot water kettle and made myself a cup of tea. With it, I walked outside, climbing down the stone steps with its wrought iron railing and bougainvillea, passing a small gurgling pond with lotus, and finally climbed up a path towards a stone area laid out with benches. Here I faced the sunrise, and as the weak light came filtering in through the mountains, I finished my cup, set it down, and spontaneously did a few Surya Namaskars on the cool stones.

Later that afternoon, we hiked around the rocky path, petted the sheep, the goat, checked out the gym, the swimming pool, the chicken coop, the vegetable garden and came back to make lunch.

I elected to make lunch and went to the garden to get inspired. There was so much! I decided to be random with what I picked—meditatively picking kale, beet, arugula, fennel, and placing them in my basket, and on an impulse, I even picked some marigolds (wasn't there a scene in *The Monsoon Wedding* with the guy munching on marigolds?). I gave it all to my roommate Jin, who cut the kale leaves fine and added olive oil and salt to soften, while I went downstairs and got a new slab of cheese from Sara. We already had fresh baguette. To the salad, I added cucumbers from the fridge and more



lettuce; the quantity was increasing. Ingrid went back to the garden and got fresh cherry tomatoes. There were so many, and looked so delicious, that I just put them in a bowl on the side. Then I set about making the dressing, but my usual staple for flavoring - garlic powder - was missing, so I added some salt and vinegar and looked around for inspiration. Then I saw honey! Usually, I do not like to add sweet to savory, but with salads I am a little more open since I have been adding apples to kale salads. Continuing with this sense of adventure, I poured a generous finger of honey.

The meal was light and delicious. Tear a fresh chunk of bread, add a layer of soft cheese, and crunch into the greens and

tomatoes. The salad was a hit. The conversations were warm and cheery. I could not be more at peace.

That first week, the olives were not ready for harvesting. So we harvested walnuts instead. The walnuts became our leisurely post dinner snack for many a night afterwards, shared over many lovely stories from places ranging from Taiwan to Bolivia to Canada.

Trips into Provence Towns...and an encounter with *Pastis*

This region of Cote D'zur-Provence is a tourist paradise—replete with beaches, mountains, monasteries and farms. One can track elaborate tourism pathways based on one's interests—nature, food, art or history.

The coastline is dotted with beaches all along, the most famous beach cities being Marseille and Nice, both of which I visited during my stay. Then there are the famous lavender fields, the region's answer to the cherry blossom mania of Japan: purple, fragrant fields blanketing all the plateau area above the capital city Aix-en-Provence. I had missed the season, which usually goes from June to August, but was greeted by plentiful lavender in stores everywhere I went.

The region also celebrates the presence of Vincent Van Gogh, who lived here for more than a year, in Arles, painting over 400 paintings, the most famous being *Starry Night* and the series on Sunflowers. In Saint-Remy-en-Provence, one can yet visit the monastery where he spent his last days, troubled yet painting profusely, including his most intense series, the one on Irises.

Then, of course, the wine of the region—Rose is among the oldest wines of the world and Provence is the number one producer in France. The light-colored wine is made in six beautiful colors: Peach, Melon, Mango, Pomelo, Mandarin and Redcurrant. I did not visit any wineries here though, as I had covered them in Bourdeaux.

For me, the best charm of Provence was in its small villages perched on top of the hills, with fantastic views of the Luberon valleys, and the sea. Picturesque stone homes with plants spilling out of the window boxes, an imposing chateau or two, an ancient church, a bustling village café which could also serve as a bar, and loads of meandering cobble stone lanes, all interspersed with vineyards, fields or groves - exactly like what one might find on a postcard.

There is something called the Provençal way of life. It evokes a mindful, slow way of living, appreciating nature and food. It evokes vibrant colors of ochres and blues and whites, simple meals made with fresh fish, cheese, vibrant vegetables. The meal structure at the farm initially took me and the others by surprise, but later we realized that it is very much the local Provençal way of living. The lunches are very heavy, like what we might have for dinner in the States, and the dinners are light, mainly soup and bread and cheese.

One weekend I went by myself to Toulon. Toulon is a pretty beach town, not the size of Marseille or Nice, but quite big as well, with a lovely meandering old town, nicely laid out between the water and the mountains; if you stand with your back to the water, the town is seen gorgeously framed by tall mountains, the straight roads emanating at your feet and seeming to disappear into the distant hills.

Toulon is also a prestigious naval base, and many historical naval ships were docked at the wide marina by the old city, alongside elegant yachts and colorful fishing boats. The marina was dotted

with a number of shops, restaurants and a huge number of benches with people just sitting and absorbing the sun, sipping *Pastis*.

I too sat for a bit, reading a book, absorbing the slow pace around me, listening to the murmur of the quiet conversations. Rows of knick-knack stores were selling some really nice wares at surprisingly cheap prices, pretty pottery, scrumptious olive-based foods, fragrant soaps, crisp cotton sheets. I bought several lavender-based products, making do for missing the beautiful lavender blooming season of Provence.

I had a mission for my lunch. I was on the hunt for *escargot* (snails)—a must-have when in France—and I perused all of the menus as I walked by the pretty restaurants lining the marina. Alas, none of them served escargots, and even the ones that supposedly had them per Google, also politely told me “*Non.*” I was disappointed but decided to make do with *Moulle* (mussels) which were plentifully



offered, with many a tasty sauce. For about \$12E, one can get a huge bucketful of these, with some crunchy bread on the side.

I also ordered something else that I wanted to try in Provence—a *Pastis*. Now the thing about *Pastis* is that it is served a quarter of a glass, a thick milky liquid, with just a chunk of an ice cube, and you are supposed to add water to it before drinking as the alcohol level is a cool fifty percent. I didn't know any of this and when I took a small sip, my taste buds jolting

up in joy at the amazing anise flavor, I continued sipping until I almost reached the end while reading all about how one is supposed to have the drink! Needless to say, I had quite a delicious buzz while enjoying my *Moule* on that hot afternoon.

Pastis joins my list of absolute favorite French foods. Some others that I moon over in the grocery

aisles: yogurts and mousse. There is something about the way the French make milk-based products that is exactly right for me, especially the lightness of the desserts. Mousse is, after all, their invention, and nothing can beat even a grocery branded one from a French store.

After a day of swimming in the craggy waters of Plage de la Mitre, for my dinner in Toulon, I picked up a fish and basmati rice meal for three euros at an Aldi, a chocolate croissant for the next day, and of course, some wine and mousse and brought it back to my room. My Airbnb was on the fifth floor, giving me a beautiful view of the water, a cute dining table placed right by the window, where I ate my simple meal. I ate lovingly, savoring every bite, grateful for this lovely experience, grateful for the courage I took to step out into a weird, wacky lifestyle which let me experience such moments. I would've never known if I had not stepped out.
