

ETCETERA

TRAVEL

Life moves slowly in this special place

When the hoards of holidaymakers leave the Val d'Orcia in Southern Tuscany at the end of August and the patchwork of fields changes colour, the locals turn their attention to the harvests – of the grapes and the olives. Each producer is particular about timing, but during the first weeks of November, most are out among the olive trees.

At Chiarentana, the expansive home and Agriturismo of Donata Origo, guests can join the professional teams for the harvest and pressing, to discover more about the different oils produced from the acres of groves around the buildings where they are staying. While some producers in the area take their olives to a co-operative press in nearby Montepulciano, Origo has been pressing her own on site for 15 years. The harvest is an intense process with just six hours from tree to oil. When the time is declared perfect (the olive has to be opened to inspect the internal colour; the softness and the amount of liquid), special machines are brought in to shake the branches and dislodge the olives into huge nets; these are then carried over to the pressing room where the oil making begins. Shiny machines take care of creating pastes and decanting them into water, oil

CORIANDEr STUDDARD travelled to Tuscany this autumn to help out with the olive harvest at Agriturismo Donata Origo

and grit, all in the dark with as little air as possible. "We're constantly fighting oxidation to produce a good oil," Origo explains. There is then a filtering process before bottling and labelling. It is all monitored to exceptional standards. With fierce competition, and to have the chance of export, it is important to get the finest quality.

Origo is passionate about perfecting what she does and this year she's especially proud to have beaten the troublesome olive fly which lays its eggs inside the olives and has plagued many of the other producers. Some have abandoned their harvests or resigned themselves to poor quality oil. "You can even smell the difference when it's being pressed," she comments. In a disastrous harvest countrywide, Chiarentana has managed a superb year.

Chiarentana offers oil tastings year round, but for guests who stay at one



■ View of Chiarentana in autumn sunshine

of the rental properties around the courtyard or in a house further into the valley, there is the opportunity to participate in oil tasting dinners in the rustic dining room. Here, in front of the roaring fire, Origo explains how to taste the different oils lined up on the table, before enjoying a sumptuous feast of food carefully paired to each of the oils. Since times of tenant farming on the wider La Foce estate, there have been four types of olives at Chiarentana; Frantoiano, Moraiolo, Leccino and Pendolino, as well as a fifth, Maurino, which Origo introduced. Then there are two highly successful blends – the Tuscan Chiarentana and the Umbrian Confini which has consistently won national and international prizes. During the most recent oil pressing, a group of chefs and staff from Trullo

restaurant in Highbury and Padella in Borough Market joined Origo to discover more about the Chiarentana oil which they import – it's the kind of place where guests return and friendships are made over lingering dinners.

With local connections going back to the 1920s when her parents settled at La Foce and devoted their lives to helping cultivate the land, Origo knows exactly where to go for the best gastronomic sampling in the area. She can arrange truffle hunting down in the valley to see the Lagotto dogs sniff out the famous white truffles, or knows the best pecorino farms around Pienza. And not forgetting the vines that create the *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* or the *Brunello di Montalcino*, both within a short drive. Origo and her staff will point you to some of the lesser known producers for a tour and tasting. Around Chiarentana itself, guests can visit the beautiful gardens at the villa of La Foce, designed by Cecil Pinsent, and in summer months most spend a good proportion of the day enjoying the pool and lawns. For some it could feel a little isolated, but the trade off is wonderful walking in the nature reserves around woods which are packed with deer, wild boar and rare birds.

At the end of a day at Chiarentana, the best thing is to watch the sunset over Monte Amiata, spend an hour or

two reading Iris Origo's *War in the Val d'Orcia* which chronicles her fascinating war years at La Foce, before a dinner of the freshest local produce and olive oil. It's not a place where things move fast but rather where people have a love of the land, the wildlife and the history of this very special family home.

FACT BOX

Chiarentana is within 2 hours of Florence, Rome and Perugia airports.

You can make a booking to stay at Chiarentana or get further information from chiarentana.com/

To buy oil from Chiarentana, contact info@chiarentanaolio.com or telephone +39 0578 69101/69100

In 2016, Chiarentana has produced Frantoiano, Moraiolo Pendolino, Maurino, pure oil and Confini and Chiarentana blended oil.

Trullo restaurant in Highbury serves Chiarentana oil on the menu

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■ Olive and cypress trees pic: CORIANDEr STUDDARD



■ The oil is stored in tanks

Picture: CORIANDEr STUDDARD