



Under a Tuscan sun

An unspoilt habitat for porcupine and wild boar is an unlikely setting for a food empire that supplies Fortnum & Mason and Selfridges. Simon Beckett meets the British entrepreneurs behind the operation

Spring is a busy time at Seggiano. As the Tuscan countryside bursts into life around the village, there's the olive trees to be pruned, the oil from the previous year's harvest to be bottled, and the new season's vegetables to be picked. "Really it's no busier than any other time of year," says David Harrison, during a break from gathering pruned olive branches into piles for burning. "By the time you've finished bottling the oil from one harvest it's time for the next, and the whole thing starts all over again."

It's been 11 years since he and his partner, Peri Eagleton, first realised that the olive oil from their farm in Tuscany might have a wider market than the friends who had tried it till then. Now Seggiano's extra virgin olive oil and range of traditional Italian foods are sold in such gourmet emporiums as Fortnum & Mason and Selfridges, and have become essential items for the shelves of foodies across the UK. "It started as a hobby," Eagleton adds. "We didn't come out here to start a business."

She and Harrison now split their time between their office and warehouse in north London and Tuscany. They met at Rome airport in 1987, two years after she had bought Podere le Vignone (*podere* means farm) with her



father and sister. A professional artist, Eagleton was on her way back to the UK with a broken arm, which had made spending winter in the isolated farmhouse quite impractical. Harrison was returning to London after the death of his father, resigned to taking over the family business after living eight years in Italy. Eventually, when that turned sour and left him unemployed, he and Peri – by now with two children – returned to Tuscany to try to make a go of the farm.

Set on the tree-covered slopes of Monte Amiata, an extinct volcano that provides the unspoilt area with exceptionally pure water and numerous hot springs, Podere le Vignone is in as idyllic a setting as anyone could ask for: an unspoilt habitat for wild boar, porcupine and deer. But when Eagleton and Harrison took it over, both the farmhouse and its 10 acres of ancient olive trees were in a neglected state. "It was a complete wreck. Restoring it all was a long, slow progress," says Harrison.



Office with a view, clockwise from main picture: the olive groves in front of Seggiano; a local cheese supplier; 'spaghetti alla chitarra' pasta; David and Peri; some locally produced biscuits; and a selection of the honey

characteristic that sets the Olivastra apart from other Tuscan varieties is its taste. "It's a beautiful tree. Its oil has got this incredibly low acidity, so it doesn't have that classic Tuscan peppery bitterness," Harrison says. "That's fine if you like it, but it can be overpowering. Olivastra oil is more delicate and creamy, which is perfect for the English palate."

Until Seggiano came along, however, neither the English, nor any other palate, had had the chance to taste it. Olivastra olive oil was so underrated that it was used only to "cut" more aggressive Tuscan oils into low-grade blends. Convinced of its quality after selling it to friends and their local delicatessen in London, Harrison and Eagleton formed a company, Peregrine Trading, and named their oil after the village. Then they tried selling it in the UK.

Their initial sales campaign was relatively simple: Harrison would take a carton of bottles into a shop and persuade the owner to accept a few on a sale-or-return basis. In the space of four months, the stone-milled, cold-pressed and unfiltered olive oil was being stocked by 60 high-class delis across London. The demand was such that when their neighbouring smallholders, or *contadinos*, asked them if they would take their Olivastra oil as well, Harrison and Eagleton readily agreed. "They were fed up of selling for peanuts to the merchants," recalls Harrison, who now buys oil from around a dozen regular *contadinos*, plus as many others

as manage to persuade him. "We find it hard to say no. But the oil has to be good."

Encouraged by the oil's success, Harrison and Eagleton began looking at sourcing other local produce for the Seggiano brand. Cheese was next, a range of subtle, less salty than usual pecorino from a family-run cheesemakers in the village. That was followed by *sott'olios* – roast or grilled vegetables in extra virgin olive oil – also produced by a local family firm. Cooked over volcanic rock, which unlike charcoal doesn't produce gas or ash, the artichoke hearts, peppers, tomatoes and onions are hand-trimmed and bottled.

Harrison, who admits being price-sensitive, initially had doubts about the artichokes. And they aren't exactly cheap at about £6 a bottle. But, roasted immediately after harvest and put straight into oil, they don't have the sharp acidity or pallid colour most others have.

The Seggiano range now includes items such as pasta, vegetable patés and hand-made cantuccini. One of its most popular lines is the unfiltered honey produced by a beekeeper who is based on the shores of Lake Bolsena in Lazio. As well as being a schoolteacher, Mauro Pagliaccia keeps 500 hives spread over a 50-mile radius of his home, chosen so the bees can feed on eucalyptus, acacia or whatever other flowers he wants to characterise his honeys. Eagleton was so impressed after tasting one she'd found in a local shop she drove out to see him there →



A traditional 'rinfresco' (refreshment), above, made from local produce

and then. "We have people writing to us about Mauro's honey all the time. It's wonderful."

Honey isn't the only product they now source from beyond Seggiano. Their balsamic vinegar is from Modena, for instance, while the organic grappolato tomatoes in oil come from Puglia. But all are still from small producers, which is in keeping with the Seggiano credo of natural food and traditional methods. "We go with the best products," Eagleton explains. "We wouldn't use anyone who used preservatives or fiddled with the food in any way. And it's people as well as produce. We're not interested in dealing with anyone who's difficult."

Certainly around Seggiano, that isn't a problem. With long-abandoned olive groves now being tended to again as a result of the Olivastra renaissance she and Harrison have sparked, the pair are clearly held in affection by locals. After driving to pick up a couple of barrels of oil from one old *contadino*, Harrison is invited into the kitchen to settle up. Augustino and his diminutive wife, Rita, watch eagerly as a cheque is written out. That done, it's round to a neighbour's cellar for the inevitable glass of home-made wine. Then, just when it seems the last of the "Ciaos", are over, Rita emerges with a bag of eggs as a gift. "Laid yesterday and this morning," Harrison says, approvingly.

Back at Podere le Vignone, the green oil is poured into vats kept in the basement. As Harrison operates the bottling machine (which fills a grand total of six bottles at a time), Bepe, one of his regular helpers, slaps corks into the full bottles before passing them to some women sitting at a small table. Wives of some of the *contadinos* who produce the oil, they chatter as they stick on the Seggiano labels. It's as unindustrial a set-up as it's possible to imagine; everyone is expected to muck in, and cheerfully does. Not even visiting writers are excluded, finding themselves press-ganged into an afternoon of branch-clearing in the olive grove.

But that's part of the appeal. The attraction of what might be described as traditional Italian peasant food isn't just taste; it's the sense, however vicarious, that you're also experiencing something of the lifestyle behind it. That's something Harrison and Eagleton are obviously aware of, and a niche Seggiano is happy to fit. "We're producers, not wholesalers," says Harrison. "Anyone can come over to Italy and just buy olive oil or whatever, and then sell it. But we're producers. That's what makes us different." ■

For details of Seggiano stockists and information on holidays at Podere le Vignone, call 020 7272 5588 or visit www.seggiano.co.uk