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The Olive Tree

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The Olive Tree

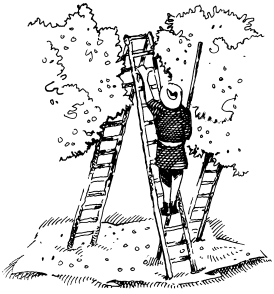
A Personal Journey Through Mediterranean Olive Groves

CAROL DRINKWATER



Phoenix

Strange Fruits



It was the season of nightingales, our May songstress, diva of the Cannes Film Festival. The olive groves were aflame with red poppies while on high, in the canopies, the trees were shedding their minuscule petals, floating earthwards they were, falling like grains of sand. The days had grown so hot, so rainless, that it might have been mid-summer. Our nights, stars bright and low in the heavens. Guests were with us: business colleagues who had flown in to attend the festival. I was lost in a world of my own, preoccupied, drifting through the greater part of the days in the shade at the table beneath the *Magnolia grandiflora*, downloading photo images from my laptop on to disks. I had only days earlier returned from strife-torn Israel and Palestine, the last ports of call on the first half of a solo, round-the-Mediterranean journey. War was looming once more in those Middle Eastern territories. I had sensed the itch of it during my travels, rubbed up against its steel edge. The news coming out of Lebanon seemed to confirm the world's worst fears.

I had made good friends over that way, found perhaps the oldest living trees on the planet there. I was fretting for their safety.

The last invader on my mind was the *Bactrocera (Dacus) Oleae*.

June: wrong time of year to travel; best to sit it out, take time, relax. Days among the trees, earth-digging in the greenhouse, cane-cutting for tomatoes. Yes, pass the summer on the farm, set off again when the leaves are golden, gathering the threads in the autumn. White, box-shaped monitoring traps were being unloaded. Michel had collected them from Nice. Now, they were being hung by Quashia on the outer branches, south side of the olive trees, in the lower groves. They exuded a scent, a pheromone, these inanimate boxes, masquerading as female olive flies, luring the unsuspecting male. It alerted the farmer to the insect's flight path. As soon as the first sighting was recorded, it was essential to bring out the spraying machines, go to work, zap. I stared down the terraces at the traps, motionless in the beating, windless heat. They might have been party lanterns, these traps for randy flies! I was bowing to the majority. My husband, Michel, and our loyal Algerian-Arab gardener of sixteen years, Mr Quashia, were urging me to accept the treatment of the trees.

'The olives must be protected, if we are not to lose everything again.'

Bactrocera (Dacus) Oleae, the dreaded *mouche d'olive*, the olive fruit fly (we had nicknamed it Dacus), remained an undefeated enemy. It has no natural predators in Europe.

'Feed them to the nightingales!' I joshed.

Almost invisible, these insects appeared with the first heat and laid their eggs within the soft, delicate flesh of the olive pit, the developing drupe. We had lost our entire crop two winters back due to my 'stubbornness', my refusal to kill them off with insecticides, the men reminded me. The previous season had yielded a feeble return so we had experimented with bottle traps, but these had proved unsuccessful.

It is frequently the case with olive trees that one year they

deliver bumper crops and the following lesser quantities. This autumn was promising a bumper return.

'It's foolishness, Carol, to risk it.'

Michel was in the kitchen preparing lunch. I was still buried in my own shaded world beneath the magnolia when Quashia came running to tell us 'the critters have arrived!' I protested one last time, arguing the case for an insecticide-free, organic harvest.

'The flies rot the fruits, Carol.'

Michel nodded, concurring.

'I don't understand why you can't support this,' I said to him in English.

'Because Quashia's right. If there was an alternative . . . but there isn't.'

Eventually, begrudgingly, I deferred to the power of two, to the others' point of view, and the men set to spraying the *oliviers*. It was the last week of June.

'Note it down, Carol! Mark it in your diary.'

The products remained effective for a mere twenty-one to twenty-eight days. The process had to be repeated at almost monthly intervals right through to October, till the summer heat had abated and the flies had given up their begetting. Habitually, this had amounted to three, even four sprays annually but recently, due to the lengthening summers and climatic changes, spraying was becoming a five-time requisite. I was praying this would not prove the pattern this year.

I had moved indoors, out of the heat, spending my days in my den. Or I kept in the shade, watching the slick of mercury rising. Clipped up outside the greenhouse, the thermometer was registering high nineties. July. Wide-sky blueness, not a cloud in sight. Rainless, rainless days. The droning, lusty whistle of the cicadas on heat. The drone of helicopters scouting for fires. Irrigation was our all-consuming occupation.

Mr Quashia donned the Panama I had given him and took control. Michel and I assumed all other farm responsibilities. The flies had punctured few fruits and the olives were fattening up splendidly.

Lebanon and Israel were at war.

Michel was called back to Paris.

Quashia and I were closing holes in the fences to keep the dogs from escaping and harassing the postgirl, jittery at the best of times but impossible in this insufferable heat. We were refilling the water basin every two days. Watering, watering. A call from Paris took me north where I joined my husband. I needed information, documentation regarding an Algerian visa for my upcoming travels. Quashia enjoyed holding the fort. He was reconstructing walls, digging paths, relentlessly energetic. Uphill tracts were required for a tractor – who was to drive it? – to access the apex of the land where several young olive groves planted a few years earlier were rising vigorously. Our new plumber had been called in to lay down coils of black piping; yard after yard snaked beside the trunk bases along baked-brittle terraces at the summit of the land. We were installing a drip-feed system for the younger groves, more difficult to access. Our water consumption had quadrupled. The *goutte-à-goutte*, drop-by-drop feeding, was healthier for the trees and consumed less water.

I spoke to Quashia on the telephone on a daily basis, listening while he bitched about the insufferable heat, *'la canicule'*. To make matters worse, Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, had fallen; the poor man was suffering for his faith. Our friend was working in temperatures of close to a hundred, quenching the thirst of the plants without the liberty of slaking his own.

In Paris, my Algerian visa was proving problematic. I had applied for it twice, and did not want to leave the city again without it. On both occasions it had been thrown back at me, for infuriatingly insignificant reasons. I furnished what had

been requested for a third time, delivering the forms personally, and was warned by the young Algerian that I could be looking at a forty-five-day delay. A postponement of my departure seemed the only avenue open to me if I was not to risk being refused entry at the Algerian border. It was inconvenient. I had been planning to travel during the winter months when the roads and hotels were less tourist-loaded and I wanted to be back in France by late May.

September was in full-throttle, but the heat showed no signs of abating. I decided to sit out the wait at the farm assisting Quashia, releasing him to sleep during the noonday, the most taxing for his fast. It was mid-afternoon when I arrived. No sign of life besides the four dogs who thundered down the drive, leaping, slobbering over me, walking on my feet as I pulled the gates to. Quashia was occupied elsewhere, preparing his post-sundown meal, perhaps. As I followed the winding drive towards the villa, I paused to admire our crop's growth, but the trees were a sorry sight, in dire need of water, even the old fellows who always fended for themselves, but it was not their water-stressed, shrivelled condition that was shocking to me. It was the shade of the fruits: the olives were black. It was not a play of light; the olives were black.

'But it cannot be!' I cried to no one.

If the dreaded female fly manages to perforate the base of the drupe and lay her eggs, the larvae remain there, feeding off the fruit's juice and flesh. Eventually, sucked dry of oil and nutrients, the drupe turns black and drops to the ground.

This can't be happening, I moaned half audibly.

In spite of all the toxins we had rained down upon the trees, and no matter what anyone from the Chambre d'Agriculture or the garden centre had assured us, these products *were* toxic; how had the flies still prospered and penetrated the fruits?

I took a closer look, cradling several of the small olives between my fingers and I was amazed, heartened to observe that the fruits were perfectly healthy. When the fly slips her

ovipositor, her tubular egg-laying organ, into the fruit, puncturing the outer layer of skin as she does so, an infinitesimal circular black bruise appears on the olive. It is frequently the first clue we farmers have of the fly's presence in the groves. I could find none. I moved between trees, up and down terraces, scrupulously examining the crops. I found no signs of infestation.

So, why were so many of the olives black? Had another rot taken hold? The explanation proved quite simple, but equally troubling.

Our olives, or more than 50 per cent in this expanse of garden where the most mature groves on the estate dominated, were ripe. It was mid-September. The ripening process of an olive is quite splendid as it passes through its spectrum of ravishing colours. It begins as a hard, pale green bead. Then, during the months of summer, it slowly develops a piebald, green-violet hue. Finally, after metamorphosing into a rich shade of prune, it turns black. This final stage rarely, if ever, takes place before Christmas, and we do not wait for that transformation. The harvest kick-off, *la cueillette*, is traditionally the third week of November. We prefer to gather the fruits at the outset when the olives are *tournant*, 'turning', between green and prune. Looking about the groves, I calculated that our crop was two months ahead of schedule.

This was a state of affairs I had not encountered before.

I deposited my luggage and hurried to telephone the mill.

'The miller's away until next week.'

When I explained the crisis to his assistant, anxious to know whether others had phoned in with the same dilemma, the gloomy girl said no one else had complained.

'Sounds as if flies've got 'em. They'll fall. You'll be losing the lot.'

Even if we dropped everything and picked the black fruits immediately, it was highly unlikely that any mill would be open. No one starts pressing in September, not even as far

south as Malta. But even if one mill made the entrepreneurial decision to open their doors two months early, there was precious little to press. The fruits were ripe on the surface, but they were still too small, barely more than skin and stone. At this stage, the oil quantity within them would be minimal.

I am not an olive farmer by profession. It is my passion, but, had it also been our livelihood, this unheard-of turn of events would have been sufficient to cause financial disruption, if not ruin. As it was, we would be losing all this year's investment. We were always struggling; we ran the farm on a shoestring. Still, its viability was not my first concern. I wanted to know what was going on.

The previous autumn, during late October, early November, a spell of unseasonably hot weather had hit our coast. It had taken many farmers by surprise. The olive fly is known to breed whenever temperatures are suitably ambient. Last year, the little pest had a bonus outing. After the final spray of the year had been completed and the fruits were oleaginous and plump, Indian summer temperatures hit the coast and out came the fly, tunnelling its deadly reproductive organ into the fat offerings and, at the last moment, contaminated all unprotected crops.

The previous winter at Appassionata, our olive farm in the south of France, another incident, equally disturbing, had occurred. The orange trees, whose customary sweet-scented flowers open from bud in early spring, blossomed in November. I remembered circling the trees on several occasions and asking Michel, 'What will this mean for their cycle?'

The flowers died off before Christmas and as the new year unfolded green nubs began to appear. The trees were fruiting three months ahead of schedule. When March came round, I was away on my travels; the natural cycle of the citruses kicked in and they flowered again, and throughout this summer the orange groves have been nurturing two generations of baby fruits: one crop larger and more advanced

than the other, growing simultaneously on the branches. What will this mean, I asked myself. If a woman conceived and carried a foetus for four months and then conceived again, would this be science fiction? These unnatural occurrences were the direct result of soaring temperatures; unprecedented heat waves; interminable dry spells; plant cycles out of sync: climate change, earth mismanagement.

I stood alone in the house, ranting. We had taken the advice, heeded the recommendations of experts and had invested money that I would have preferred not to spend on expensive products. Chemicals, which, in my opinion, were not fit to be sprayed on a weed-infested parking lot let alone on our delectable olives. When I failed to reach Gérard, our experienced and always helpful miller, I picked up the phone to our man at the Chambre d'Agriculture.

'Yes, the groves are ahead of schedule by one month,' he confessed.

'Here it is closer to two,' I said, determined to register accurate facts.

He was perplexed, but was unable to offer any solutions except to warn me, 'You must spray the trees again at once.'

'I don't want to do that. We have sprayed three times already this summer, and—'

'The heat is showing no signs of abating. It is imperative you spray or you will lose everything. You are legally entitled to spray five times. This will only be your fourth outing.'

I argued the point no further.

Quashia and I set to work laying nets. There was no need to cut back the grass beneath the trees because the ground was a dustbowl. There had been no rain since April. We harvested the small ripe fruits and I pickled them. No longer oil material, these early samples were destined to be winter table olives. So, they had not gone to waste. Still, the crisis had been laid at our farm door.

'I am not doing it,' I said to Michel once he had returned from Paris. 'No more spraying.'

He begged me to be less inflexible. 'We have chosen to use pesticides this year. It does not make sense to sabotage the process midway and lose the crop at this stage.'

He and Quashia went to work and I kept out of the way, ruminating, frustrated, angry.

Michel arrived back at lunchtime, covered in sweat and leaves and debris, looking very much the worse for wear. 'It's pretty foul, that stuff, *un vrai saloperie*; you're right.'

'Exactly. There has to be something less noxious.'

'If there was, don't you think we'd know about it?'

My Algerian visa arrived, but, in the light of what had come to pass, I postponed my travel plans and stayed home to help with the harvest. I found a mill high in the hills, operating the ancient granite-stone system. It had begun pressing. I booked us an appointment. All hands to the land, to gather for this first oil of the season.

The following day I received a letter from the AOC office. '*Chers adhérents*', it began before issuing an official warning to all AOC-registered farms. NO FRUIT was to be picked or harvested during the twenty-one days that followed a spraying. It was an illegal act to do so (due to toxin residue left in the fruits, which they omitted to mention). I totted up the dates, realised that we would be within the infringement period and called to cancel the recently booked mill rendezvous. I was seething. Fruits were falling, fruits were rotting.

Gérard eventually switched on the *centrifuge* machines two weeks ahead of schedule. Now came the next challenge: *les étourneaux*, the starlings. The hungry creatures were congregating, Hitchcockian swarms blackening the skies, plunging down upon the branches and picking them clean within a matter of hours.

'Next year, the chemical companies will be marketing a

vastly expensive spray aimed at the destruction of the starlings!' I bellowed to anyone within the farm's parameters who was still willing to listen to me.

With a trio of friends who descended from various points north, we swooped upon the trees ourselves, gathering the fruits at top speed and I hastened them to the mill. The ratio of oil to fruit was 7 per cent down on our previous year. We were not alone. Every farmer I spoke to told the same sorry tale, but few acknowledged that what we were looking at was a climate shift, a problem partially caused by ourselves, by the tons of pesticides and products rained down upon our agricultural lands.

I bumped into René, our silver-haired friend and erstwhile olive guru, at the weighing machines. He was in the company of the local water sorcerer. René was running Raymond's farm. Seven hundred trees, a little more than double our count and producing a ten times greater yield. They were pressing their first harvest of one and a half ton of fruits.

'It's just a freak season,' was René's explanation. 'You'll be fine next year. You should water the trees more frequently. You'll get more oil.'

'We've got four wells now and the pump is turning day and night. The fields are always irrigated. We're expecting twelve tons of fruit this year,' glowed the sorcerer.

Christmas came. We bottled our new oil and celebrated its arrival with friends, as was our tradition, though I genuinely believed its quality and taste had been compromised. Still, it was fine, I had to admit it.

It was January, unseasonably warm. From the farm's upper terraces looking west, a dense custard-yellow cloud had broken across the Fréjus promontory and Esterel. The mimosa trees were bursting into blossom, flecking and fleshing out the lower slopelands. They were three weeks ahead of season. I was finally ready to hit the road. Fortuitously,

Michel was due to attend a documentary film festival in Barcelona. I set my disembarkation date to coincide with his stay there. Circumnavigating the western Mediterranean in an anti-clockwise direction, I intended to slip south from upper Spain, cross to North Africa, traverse the sea again to Sicily and, skirting the western coast of Italy via dreamed-of destinations, meander back home, returning to Appassionata.

My quest for ancient stories of the olive tree, of those who transported it to remote, watery inlets within the Mediterranean, still held true. I hoped to discover a gnarled, buckled old oleaster or two, a western Mediterranean long-termer, and some fascinating folklore, but to that had now been added another dimension: the twenty-first-century olive. I was still eager to track the myths and legends of peoples residing around this sea, whose ancestors grew up with the medicinal powers and mysteries of the olive, but I was concerned now for its future. I wanted to grasp the newer picture. I wanted to comprehend the scenario unfolding before us, and how we, on our little farm, might fight the dreaded pests without chemicals, without distressing our small patch of earth and its ecosystem.