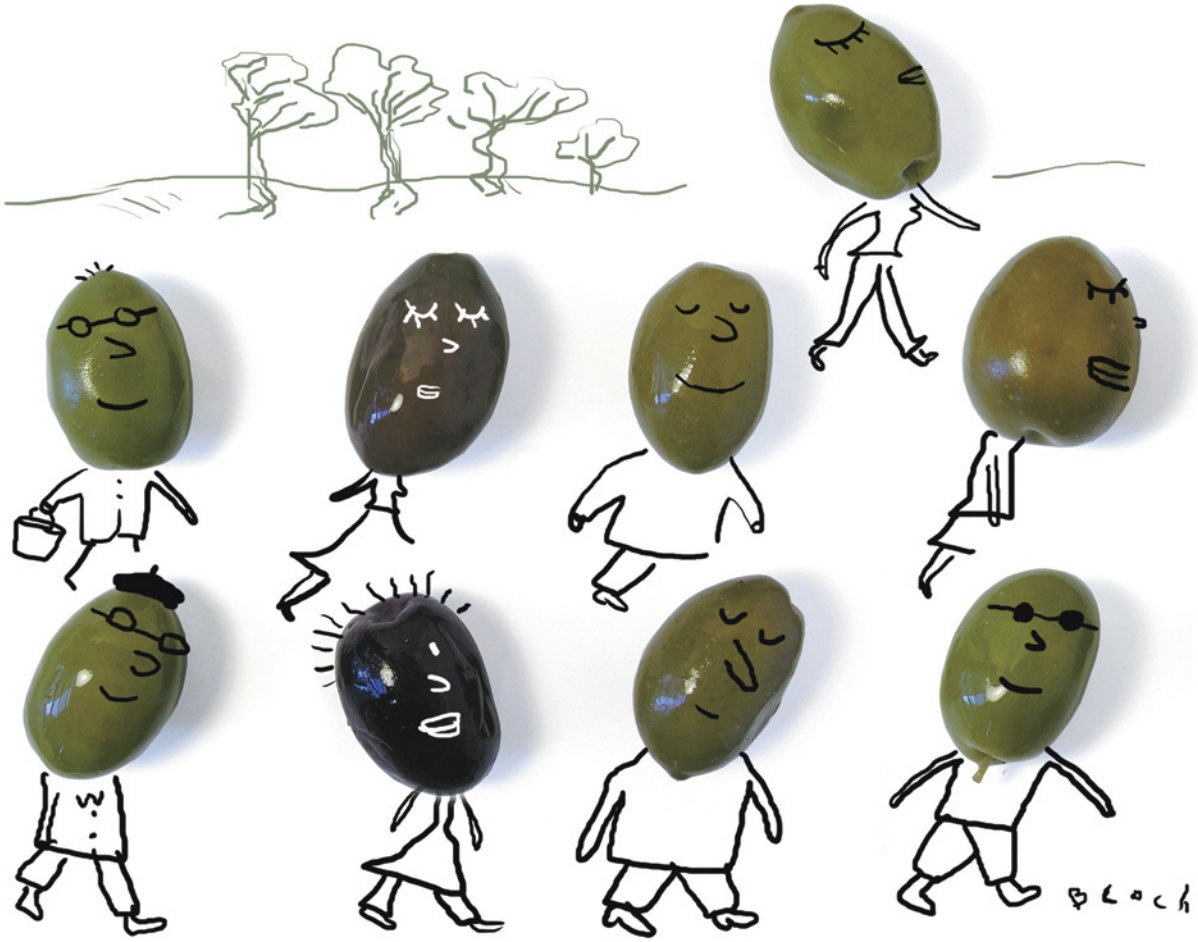

Up a Tree in Provence

How do you trick your friends into harvesting five acres of olives in the freezing cold? Hint: It helps if the setting is the south of France.

BY MORT ROSENBLUM

EACH DECEMBER, WHEN OLIVE WOOD burns to fine white ash in the fireplace and the season's first truffles infuse musty perfume up to the kitchen beams, we haul out trappings for an annual holiday that, to us, is worth a month of Christmases: the annual Tom Sawyer Olive Pick.

The venue is Wild Olives, our five acres of steeply terraced land down a teeth-loosening dirt road in the back folds of Provence, somewhere between Saint-Tropez and the grandish canyon of Verdon. The event draws a few die-hard devotees, along with fresh volunteers who have yet to read Mark Twain on the fun of painting a white fence.

The idea, essentially, is for us to find suckers to help pick our olives and schlep them to the mill. When freezing snow turns even gloved hands into Eskimo Pies, people tend to catch on fast. It is hard labor, with fair odds of back pain and frostbite.

But some years we pick in shirtsleeves. And there are those mealtimes of rare Sisteron lamb or fresh Mediterranean *daurade* grilled over that olive wood. Slave labor or not, the volunteer list grows every year.

Even after two decades, the event is not likely to nudge the Tour de France off anyone's list of highlights. Still, the TSOP is fast wrapping itself in rich lore.

In a recent December, Nancy Harmon Jenkins, a noted food person, showed up from lower Tuscany, having just ➤

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picked her own olives. Robert Hopkins, a Hollywood writer of wit and stamina, arrived with his baggage: a small backpack and a large corkscrew. California friends Gene Finley and Deborah Manetta drove from Paris with a secret weapon, Deborah's grandson, Thor.

As usually happens, the 300-year-old stone homestead produced a surprise. This time, it was the cistern pump. It mysteriously stopped. Six farm laborers would shower from a fast-dwindling stock of Evian bottles while tactfully keeping a decent distance from one another.

But it was a great year. Our 200 trees, most of them named as members of the family, had produced their gnarled hearts out. Emiliano, by the terrace, took the crew two days to finish. Julio, Ernesto, the Geminis, and Rock were stars. But the four-century-old trees require more than the customary milking or whacking of a normal harvest. Rather than spreading nets and allowing the trees to rain down fruit, we strip off the olives a handful at a time.

Thor, a gangling if solidly built teenager of many moods, found his bliss in the treetops. Soon he was High Flier. Picking sparsely olived trees, he inched out to branch tips at the risk of life (his) and limb (the trees').

Hopkins was Tree Dog, sniffing the edges of the property for overlooked bounty. He grumbled companionably but noted later in the guest log: "So I've got picker's neck, all these sore muscles everywhere; you call this work? If these people aren't careful, I'll be back."

Nancy plowed through the grove like an old pro. "I love picking olives," she said, "because there are all the country social things you do together, but you can also go off on your own. In the trees, you can be meditative and contemplative. You are always in the moment, working away with your mind clear."

Each day, we waited for Nancy to cease outdoor labor and shift to her role as kitchen Nazi. Convincingly, if lovably, she barked orders. We complied enthusiastically. Water or not, we fed on lamb with herbs picked outside the door, chicken barbecued in garlic and lemon, and risottos to make a Milanese grandma weep.

The lamb, studded with garlic, was roasted slowly with rosemary, thyme, and bay leaves. It was also steeped in red wine and Armagnac. Or was that us?

That year, Jeannette Hermann, Wild Olives' resident ambience director, was somewhere else. The next December, she was back. The annual pick was more like the Golden Horde than like Tom Sawyer. Hazel Young, a barge captain and Le Cordon Bleu chef, brought her crew: four young women who attacked the trees like Genghis Khan's army at Samarkand. At 11:00 a.m., feasting started early. Some olives got left behind.

Then a second shift swept in from the Paris steppes. Jim Bittermann sneaked away from CNN with his wife, Pat Thompson, and an old family friend; Jillie Faraday, an English filmmaker, brought a pal.

Usually, the roles are reversed: We help the Bittermanns pick apples in Normandy. Olives, they soon learned, are neither large nor harvest-friendly, and you can't scoop them off the ground. Nonetheless, the horde laid siege, and we spent no time on nicknames.

We picked a record crop. Although not exactly well positioned to be a neutral observer, I'd say they made the best oil—sharp yet round and mellow—I've ever tasted.

Oh, right. Dinner was a Jeannette creation: herb-dusted pork loin with pan-roasted dates and apples [see recipe].

The food and friends are fun, but it is always about the olives. They ripen in early winter, turning from green to a purplish black. If you wait, they get blacker, with the sweeter yellow oil some people prefer. Then again, wind gusts or a hailstorm could ruin your year.

Once the harvest starts, you have to move fast. If olives are delayed getting to the mill, they start to oxidize and ferment. We take them to Aups, once a Roman freeway stop, ➤

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to a press that dates back to the Sun King. The original wood and stones are still there, near a newer, old-style olive press. But we sneak our crop into the back room, where the miller's son has installed an amazing Italian low-temperature centrifugal mill.

When olives ripen on our mountainside, everyone helps. It is how life is down here. One morning, Jeannette and I bounced up the road and happened upon our neighbors in full harvest. Without a word, we pulled over and joined in.

They are serious about it. Nets go on the ground. Flying fingers strip whole branches in a flash. Roger Martin, in his 70s, scampers to top branches like a young goat. There is plenty of joking and storytelling, but no one's eyes waver from the task at hand.

Then, of course, there is the lunch break. That day, on battered mesh over two rocks, Roger grilled pork chops from a *sanglier,* a wild boar that had taken the wrong path.

It is different each time, but there is always something mystical. Jean Giono, the late chronicler of all things Provence, was a little loony on the subject. Though hardly a greedy man, he wrote in *Noé* that no one got to share the pleasure of picking his olives:

"I could be rent by the cold and yet not come down from my trees; I would not stop picking. My hands stick like glue to my olives…and the worst of it. If you say to me, 'Give me a sack of olives,' I would give two sacks. But if you say, 'Let me climb the tree, let me pick the fruit, let me take it in my hands in your place,' I would resist to the last Judgment. I would resist God himself."

Er, um, sure, Jean Giono is right. It is so much fun to freeze our tails and strain our necks picking olives in a blizzard that we can't possibly bring ourselves to let others join in. Well, okay. What have you got to offer? ■

Mort Rosenblum's latest book is Escaping Plato's Cave.

Pork Tenderloins with Apples, Dates, and Baby Potatoes

4 SERVINGS

Jeannette Hermann's sumptuous recipe is a staple at Wild Olives.

- **2 1-pound pork tenderloins**
- **10 applewood-smoked bacon slices**
- **1 tablespoon olive oil**
- **2 small onions, peeled, quartered**
- **2 Golden Delicious apples, peeled, cored, quartered**
- **12 baby Dutch potatoes or baby white-skinned potatoes (about 12 ounces), unpeeled**
- **12 Medjool dates, pitted**
- **4 garlic cloves, minced**
- **1 teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- **1 teaspoon ground cumin**
- **¾ cup apple juice**
- **¼ cup water**

Sprinkle tenderloins with salt and pepper. Wrap 5 bacon slices around each tenderloin, securing bacon with toothpicks. Tie kitchen string around bacon-wrapped tenderloins to secure. Remove toothpicks.

Preheat oven to 350°F. Heat oil in large ovenproof pot over medium heat. Add pork; cook until browned on all sides, turning often, about 12 minutes. Transfer to platter. Add onions and apples to pot; sauté until golden, about 5 minutes. Add potatoes, dates, garlic, cinnamon, and cumin; stir 1 minute. Return pork to center of pot. Add apple juice and ¼ cup water; bring to boil, scraping up any browned bits. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cover and roast until pork is cooked through and potatoes are tender, about 30 minutes.

Remove string from pork. Slice pork crosswise. Divide pork, onions, apples, potatoes, dates, and pan juices among plates.

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY KANA OKADA; ILLUSTRATION BY SERGE BLOCH