

Green Gold
A Tuscan Diary
by Jörg Teuscher

Andrea Lehmann and Michael Hoffmann - the olive oil manufacturer from Tuscany and the star chef from Berlin. A chance meeting turned into a business relationship, initial scepticism into respect and acquaintance into friendship.

Andrea Lehmann, 47, was born and raised in Tuttlingen in Baden-Württemberg; 12 years ago she moved to Piano di Mommio, a tiny village in the Versilia, a region in Northern Tuscany, halfway between Pisa and Massa. Here she manages Il Casone, a centuries-old estate; typical for this region, the most important product is the olive and its oil. The Olio extra vergine di oliva of the Il Casone estate is said to be an extravagant representative of its kind; a Tuscan olive oil insider tip, in any case something special.

The 'countrywoman' - this is how Andrea Lehmann likes to describe herself – not only owns Il Casone but is also its farmer, manager and director – always en route between kitchen and office, vegetable garden and olive grove, Florence and Rome, often on the phone chatting in Swabian or ranting and raving in Italian – sometimes the other way round. Several times a year when the lush Tuscan nature takes a break Andrea Lehmann allows herself one too and indulges in her second passion, good food. For this she flies to Dubai, Barcelona, London or Madrid – and also to Berlin.

She had read about Michael Hoffmann and his trademark Cuisine Avantgarde Classique and had learned that Hoffmann's menus often featured vegetables with meat or fish in supporting roles, that the star chef had a weakness for good oil and subsequently she had bought his herb cookbook. What followed was a visit to the restaurant Margaux in Berlin, a fascination with its fine food, and after a long talk with the chef she invited him to visit Tuscany. Michael Hoffmann agreed to cook at the Il Casone autumn party – he probably was also curious to get to know this legendary olive oil since Hoffmann usually isn't one to party- or show-hop.

Jörg Teuscher, a writer for the food journal Garçon, accompanied Michael Hoffmann to Il Casone, to visit a region where nature composes a colourful mosaic – from the blue of the Tyrrhenian Sea, the yellow of the vast sandy beaches, the luscious green of the pine forest to the white of the marble mountains of the Apuan Alps.

Thursday, October 23 2008

Berlin-Schönefeld – Pisa, a economical connection thanks to Easyjet. Buon vole, have a nice flight, however, only from April to October. The company offers flights between Berlin and the famous city on the river Arno only in spring, summer and autumn.

Arrival at the aeroporto Galileo Galilei. A huge poster welcomes visitors with the typical Tuscan hilly landscape, a bottle of oil and the writing 'Welcome to Tuscany' – we are in the homeland of the green gold.

We continue our journey northward on the motorway A12. Signposts carry well-known names: Lucca, the native town of famous musicians Luigi Boccherini and Giacomo Puccini, the seaside resort Torre del Lago near Puccini's summer residence, close to Lago Massaciuccoli where the composer hunted birds of all kinds; Viareggio, where every February carnival is celebrated, one of Italy's most beautiful folk festivals; the chain of the seaside resorts Lido di Camaiore, Marina di Pietrasanta and Forte dei Marmi, separated only by town signs.

Half an hour later we reach Piano di Mommio, an unimposing place: a garage, a street café, a supermarket. Via delle Fonti leads steeply uphill, at its end there is Il Casone, a 300 years old, multi-level house with some adjoining premises completely built from massive stone. The pool in black marble was added more recently. Also included are a well-kept park, works of art among the cypress trees, a vegetable garden and a 4 hectares olive grove. Italians call this tenuta, a country estate.

12 years ago Markus and Andrea Lehmann and their son Alexander moved to Tuscany, bought Il Casone and renovated the whole complex. Since that time the couple has split up, Andrea lives in Italy and Markus in Liechtenstein. 16 year old Alexander attends high school in nearby Viareggio and if he doesn't become a manager he will probably take over Il Casone some time. His mother at least would like that, she has invested a lot of energy and money over the years in order to recultivate the olive grove which had lain idle for many decades. Now 1111 olive trees, over 500 years old, grow again on the restored traditional terraces, 240 young trees have been planted. It is an investment for the future because it will take around 15 years before they can be harvested.

We are greeted like old friends, everybody is greeted the same way, many are old friends. Il Casone is an open house. Host and guests around a table which seats 15: Andrea Lehmann and her son Alexander; her sister Angelika and her husband Cornelio Raffi, an Italian from Trentino; Hans Diener, retired master stucco plasterer and his partner Sigrid Bleier, a former radio presenter, both from Tuttlingen; Horst Guth and his family from Neustadt in Baden; author of cookbooks Justina Hoegerl from Munich and us from Berlin.

We eat typical Tuscan food, which means first of all meat, prepared in many different ways but, above, all lots of it. We are served bistecca alla fiorentina, a monster steak from the chianina cattle inclusive of bones and fillet which Master Hans grilled over the fireplace. It is served with lots of olive oil from in-house production, lemon juice and pepper. With it a hearty loaf of bread and tomatoes, firm and sweet, which we would like to take along to give German greengrocers a taste of them. Natural products with natural taste, that is the motto of Tuscan cooking, which is rich in aroma and full of wit, ideally suited for intelligent, bright people, somebody cites the writer Giuseppe Prezzolini. A good Brunello di Montalcino wine accompanies the bistecca. You can find peace of mind at Il Casone's kitchen table....

Seasonal harvest workers have to get up early and should own sturdy shoes, at least if it rains continuously, as it does on this October day. Cornelio Raffi is the man in charge of the grove. Around seven-thirty we stomp off to find the objects of our desire – in itself already a sweaty affair. The terraces, about 1,20 meter apart from each other, top it off. A bizarre diversity of age-old trunks. Cornelio cites a traditional saying: The more twisted and knotty the olive tree the higher its crop.

Furthermore we learn that in the Tuscan hilly regions the average yearly amount harvested per olive tree lies around six to seven kilograms. With a conversion ratio of about 15%, this corresponds to one litre olive oil. One tree, one litre oil. If you are aware of this ratio, you can't seriously believe that a supermarket can offer a good olive oil for a price of Euro 2,50 to 3,50. You can't say it often enough: cheap olive oil is no good.

Andrea Lehmann reckons: At Il Casone the production of 1 litre oil costs about 40 Euro: starting end of February with the time-consuming tree-cut, followed by biological fertilization with a complex mixture of minerals, trace elements, micro-organisms, plant extracts and essential oils; the steep grove has to be groomed the following months till in October/November the olives are harvested and pressed and the oil is filled into dark glass bottles which repel ultraviolet light. Furthermore this year, with the help of kaolin dust, Andrea was able to defy the olive fly for the first time, which destroyed part of the harvest in 2007. The pulverised porcelain clay is sprayed onto the trees and the sudden white in place of the familiar green frightens off the flies. The camouflage of the trees with emerging fruits has to be renewed after every rainfall. Obviously this is a lot more expensive than the customary chemical hammer used in some places.

No wonder that investment exceeds the return on oil sales, the more so since Andrea Lehmann – albeit Swabian - is possessed by an almost Prussian urge for perfection matched by an addiction to work as close to nature and as ecological as possible.

The harvest team is divided into shakers and gatherers. Horst Guth, AOK-employee from Neustadt on Titisee and friend of many years works as shaker. The tool he lifts up high weighs approximately 2 kilo and is as long as a pole for pole vaulting. At its end two comb-like plastic parts are located which gently shake the branches and two air supplying devices which help to blow even the most stubborn olives off their stems.

The seasonal workers are called maniglia which means little hand. This diminutive seems a little unrealistic in light of the effort it takes to dispatch the olives into the close meshed nets fixed under the trees without damaging them. "Using the air device the pole vibrates, it feels like 1000 ants climbing down your arms", says Horst Guth. But it's worth the effort, you can't harvest more gently.

The gatherer collects the fruit, about 400 kilo daily. The windfall under the nets stays put. The youngest gatherers are Alexander and Sophia, both 16, the oldest is Giorgio, 75, an olive farmer who grew up in the neighbourhood. Andrea Lehmann values his experience as much as the advice from professors of organic farming. Giorgio has also told her of the classification they used in ancient times:

Oleum ex albis ulvis was the name for the most prized oil made of still green olives

Oleum viride denotes oil made of already ripened, violet olives

Oleum maturum the Romans called the oil made of fully matured, virtually black olives.

Oleum caducum was the oil pressed from the olives already fallen from the tree.

Oleum cibarium finally was the oil made of damaged or even rotten fruit, it was given to the

slaves.

“If you have a look at what is taken to the olive mills these days I think we should reintroduce this classification instead of permanently abusing the term extra vergine”, says Andrea Lehmann.

Il Casone olive oil is extracted from the typical Tuscan varieties Frantoio (80%) and Leccino (10%). The varieties Maurino (5%) and Quercetano (5%) are added.

Pressing happens on the day of harvesting. Together with Andrea Lehmann and her brother-in-law Cornelio Raffi we drive to Piano del Quercione, a few kilometres away. Outside of the village, within an industrial estate, the milling plant Frantoio di Massarosa is located, an enterprise as modern as unromantic.

The olives are washed, separated from leaves and twigs and crushed to a pulp in hermetically sealed equipment. In a similarly airtight centrifuge the pulp is then divided into its constituents – oil, water and pomace. After this the oil is filtered in order to remove the small pulp bits. Marco Lederone, owner of the oil mill explains: “The general rule is that the sooner it is pressed after harvest, the better the oil tastes. “

The procedure takes 40 minutes, the temperature must not exceed 27 degrees Celsius at any time, EU-guidelines demand this for 'olive oil extra vergine'. Andrea Lehmann asks for the equipment to be cleaned before Il Casone olives are pressed – nothing should interfere with the quality of her oil.

Some farmers smirk at such diligence. They probably wouldn't do this if the boss at Il Casone was a man. Olive oil is a man's business in Italy. In the mill the machos are among themselves. Every now and then a stolen glance at the fruit of their neighbour and a misty-eyed glance when the oil flows into tanks and cans brought along. However, even oil which amounts to an offence to the palate is declared to be the best of Tuscany.

In the evening, in the oil cellar of Il Casone, we try the olive oil of 2008. It smells of freshly mowed grass, on the tongue it appears smooth with a hint of herbs. It carries a distant acrid note and for a moment develops this sharpness in the throat which is typical for Tuscan oil. My God, oil can taste so wonderful.

Star chef Michael Hoffmann later writes this praise:

“This olive oil - pressed while I was watching – is the most wonderful oil experience one can have. The oil is unbelievably deep, smooth as cashmere, warm as a heart with an incredibly long finish. For me, it is the major revelation of the last years, and I am delighted to be able to use this oil in my kitchen.”

Saturday, October 25 2008

A sunny autumn day. Tuscany straight out of a picture-book. A party is held at Il Casone. And there are good reasons to celebrate. The olive harvest 2008 promises an excellent result, the new oil is inspiring. Reason enough for Andrea Lehmann to invite guests, not only lovers of olive oil but also of art, because Il Casone has always been a home for art too.

Anna Engert from the Allgaeu, Ebi de Boer from East Friesland and Tony Munzlinger from Wittlich all moved to Tuscany decades ago. Their paintings and sculptures are as much influenced by the regional spirit as are the works of the Italian Antonio Caldarera. Fascination through colour and material. Enchanting, sublime, touching.

While looking across Mark Brandenburg Theodor Fontane once wrote: Every countryside, even if barren, still has its seven beauties. You only have to know how to find them. In Tuscany this is no problem at all. This is the good life.

'Wunderkammer', this is the motto Andrea Lehmann has chosen for the party. It also applies to the culinary delights.

Next to Italian chef Andrea Mattei of the Ristorante Magnolia in the Hotel Byron in Forte dei Marmi and Cristiano Tomei of the Ristorante L'Imbuto in Viareggio - a beacon of hope for modern Tuscan cooking - you could also find star chef Michael Hoffmann from Berlin at the range. Ravioli made from olive water with olive oil and goat's cheese, calamaretti and fennel steamed in olive oil, dust of candied olives and emulsion of parsley - monkfish poached in olive oil, sauté of carabinieri in Grenoble butter, white bean sauce with candied lemons and sage - both dishes are a reference to Il Casone's olive oil.

Monday, October 27 2008

Farewell to Tuscany. A glass of wine on the way, Alla tua salute, Andrea, to your health. Grazie mille for your hospitality, arrividerci Il Casone. We leave autumnal Piano di Mommio, a last glance at the green of the pine forests and the white of the Apuan marble hills. Picturesque scenarios of a fascinating cultural landscape whose culinary delights leave you longing for more:

Fish, that you can't find anywhere else, prawns and crabs, beef and goat meat, 'lardo', Tizzone, a soft salami matured in ashes, fagiolo schiacciato, a variety of beans with a particular earthy aroma which are grown only on a few hectares these days. Kaiserling, a mushroom delicacy served with parmesan cheese and, of course, the green gold of Tuscany - olio extra vergine di oliva.