

The Nature of Things

He wanted his own private olive grove, and it wasn't in Fernando Peire's nature to give up – not even on Mother Nature

REMEMBER that what first drew me to the little town in the deep south-west of Andalucia was simply its name; just two words sitting side by side on a map of the province of Cadiz: Medina Sidonia. These words instantly evoked images of medieval El Andalus. I had to visit.

What I discovered was a hilltop town that thought it was still living in the Fifties. White-walled houses connected by steep and narrow cobbled streets and alleyways, a central square and lively market, old men in hats huddled on every corner in their shirtsleeves, hunchbacked old women lugging bags home from the market, young children playing unsupervised, not a single traffic light nor parking restriction... This was the Old Spain. And from the ruined castle at the town's highest point you got to see the most incredible panorama: the grey-green outline of the mountains of Sierra Morena to the east; the meandering, orderly crisscross of olive groves planted much closer to home; the bull-breeding farms dotted with livestock predestined to afternoon death; lonely, ruined Moorish castles atop tiny hills; the Atlantic sunset beaches close to the Cape of Trafalgar, where 200 years ago Nelson led the English to victory over the Duke of Medina Sidonia and his Armada. The view must surely have thrilled the first Phoenician to climb the hill of Medina some 2,000 years before me.

I set my heart on buying a property on the outskirts of this town and bought four acres of land with water but no electricity, some stables and sheds but no house. The place had not been cultivated for decades. I had months of arduous clearing to do before I could even begin terracing the hillside that sloped steeply away from the outbuildings

that would eventually form the basis of my new Spanish home.

Upon removing a pigsty the size of a small air-raid shelter I accidentally uncovered five beautiful 19th-century Muscat grapevines. These survivors of a long-abandoned vineyard now provide enough intensely sweet, perfectly round green grapes for me, my neighbours and regular summer guests.

Another success story was my decision to invite a grizzly old fruit farmer to follow me and a local farmhand around my land with a chainsaw and a container of petrol. The old man would sit on his improvised shooting stick and tell us which branches to cut and which to leave. We spent an afternoon in this fashion, pruning all the fruit trees we could find: plum, pear, quince, lemon, pomegranate, almond, apricot, orange and fig. The old man spoke loudly: "The tree must be hungry to give you fruit; your trees are spoilt, young man – they do what they want to do, like lazy teenagers. You need to educate them and knock them into shape!" Like many of the rural locals, he only seemed to



Peel the apples. Cut each in half and dig out the core. Leave the apple shape as intact as possible. Smear the bottom of the pan with 100g of the soft butter. Sprinkle over 75g of sugar. Arrange the apple halves on top of this so that they are sitting on their ends upright, the rounded side

or vanilla ice cream.
*Maya Even is FQR's
gastronome*

I was not entirely convinced by the gypsy's thoughts on the subject of irrigation but the fact that his trousers were held up with a long piece of string convinced me even more that I was getting a good price, which in retrospect I did.

I planted the trees with the help of two friends and a rented excavator on a bright, sunny day in January 2008. Everything seemed to go to plan. When it started to rain next day and didn't stop for a week I felt that the God of Olives must have been mightily pleased by our Herculean efforts. I told practically everyone I saw in London about what a great job I had done planting my own olive groves in neatly laid-out lines just like I had seen on the hillsides of the

Alpujarra. I felt more Spanish than ever. The rest of spring was rainy and sunny in equal measure and all augured well for my new project.

But the long, dry summer started very early that year. The last raindrop fell on my land in April and it would not rain again on the famously arid Guadalquivir basin until late

September. I was busy working in London and did not have time to notice how much time was going by... weeks and weeks with no chance to get back to the land. By the time I returned it was almost too late to do anything. In a panic, I started having the trees watered by hand, two or three times a week. I would telephone anxiously from London: "How are they doing? Have you scraped the bark lower down? Is it green or brown? Are there really no new shoots anywhere?" I was only able to save about 10 trees. I had got it all horribly wrong.

I remember that miserable, grey afternoon I walked up and down my fields and caught sight of the pitiful lines of snail-encrusted skeletal olive trees dotting my land like the dying remnants of a crushed army. I had finally understood the nature of man and the power of nature and would have to learn from this; I was the one who needed to grow.

Fernando Peire is director of The Ivy Restaurant and The Club at The Ivy

speaking in metaphor.

So knock them into shape we did. One old pear tree ended up looking like a scarecrow struck by a massive thunderbolt; all that was left was the main trunk and a couple of stumpy branches. But this tree now produces an unbelievable number of sweet miniature pears every July. And the huge limonero lunar, which never bore a fruit in more than two years, now produces fist-sized lemons all year round following a lunar cycle.

On a driving trip to Granada one day I stopped to admire the patchwork of olive trees that laboriously followed every contour of almost every hill for miles around and I became convinced that I needed to overlook my own private olive grove in Medina Sidonia. I looked around garden centres at the sort of olive trees I fancied owning: huge fat trunks, a plethora of healthy branches and olives galore. "How much for that tree?" I would enquire: "€450, plus delivery – and you'll need a crane to plant it." At these prices, my instant olive grove was going to cost the price of a small house. I had time to wait for trees to grow.

A year or two later and totally by chance, I stumbled upon a kind of wholesale garden centre run by gypsies on the scruffy outskirts south of Seville. As far as I could tell, it sold trees that had been removed from their original location due to redevelopment. After some negotiation, I decided to buy 40 trees, about 12 years old, five feet high with a diameter of maybe 10in. It seemed a fair price. My only question now concerned water. How much would they need? "Water?" The older man looked surprised. "Olive trees don't need water, my friend – anyone can tell you that. Naturally, if you give them water, they give you better olives but they don't need watering, if that's what you mean..."

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