

Join us on a journey through the hidden beauty of central Le Marche, discovering the secrets of local olive oil traditions



# AN OLIVE SCENTED WEEKEND

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WHEN MY EYES first glance at this burnt-golden autumn landscape, it is a chilly mid-November morning. The hills around me gently rise up towards the sky and quietly slope down again, creating a colourful puzzle of trees and bushes. At the side of the road, a white minibus is already waiting for me; on board, a small group of people has gathered, eager to discover the treasures of this land. By the time the minibus starts its route along the stony road, the plan for the coming weekend has already been made: a journey to enjoy the beauty of this region, the flavour of its food and, above all, to discover the old traditions of olive oil, from the harvest to the press. Le Marche – more precisely, the region’s central part, between the provinces of Ascoli Piceno, Ancona and Macerata – has a long history of olive oil production, today producing some of the finest in Italy.

Our trip is the ‘Olive Discovery Weekend’, a perfect introduction to the essence of Le Marche: not only is autumn the time of the olive harvest, but it also offers the most spectacular colours and the mildest temperatures of the year.

Bob and Ian, our *ciceroni* for this trip, have planned this journey to give guests an insight into local olive oil traditions and also into the region’s culture. Four

years ago, they moved here from frenetic London and built a wonderful *casale* – farm house- Casal dei Fichi, where their guests stay in luxurious apartments overlooking a tranquil valley.

## MARCHIGIANO OIL

Our first approach to olive oil takes place during a cosy dinner in the Hostaria Madre Tierra in Francavilla d’Ete; a family-run business that Ian likes to define as ‘our local’. Here we taste four different oils including the local oil produced by Bob and Ian, a classic Tuscan, and one from Lidl supermarket. Here we begin to learn how to classify oil according to its colour, smell, taste and texture.

After tasting, there is no better way to discover the secrets of oil than watching the whole production process and, ideally, taking part in it. Bob and Ian explain that mid-November is the right time to start harvesting the olives here in Le Marche. It is a little later than in other regions and the results are evident in the taste of the oil itself: softer and more delicate, fruity at times but with a final hint of bitterness.

It all starts with a good harvest on the olive trees around the *casale*; we opt for the traditional way of harvesting, by hand, needing only the help of a comb to help the olives fall to the ground where they are





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gathered into a net. 'Once harvested, it is important to put the olives into open baskets and take them to the press as soon as possible to avoid decay,' Bob explains to us, while moving them carefully into a green container. Now we are all ready to visit the press in the nearby town of Mogliano, where we are welcomed by the delicious smell of olives and by the smiling faces of locals. Hundreds of colourful crates packed with black and green olives create the perfect backdrop to our visit. Our olives now follow the usual pressing process, which consists of their being crushed between two huge millstones to form a thick paste. After a process of kneading and finally extraction, we all watch, spellbound, as the golden, green oil is extracted. At the press, everybody does their best to keep the standards high to guarantee the production of a top quality oil: the true *olio Marchigiano*.

#### DELICIOUS FOOD AND WINE

As promised, Bob and Ian want to give us all an authentic taste of the regional food: from fish to meat, and pastas to desserts. On our journey, we enjoy some of the many delicious recipes prepared by the local restaurants and *osterie*. And it goes without saying that all dishes are garnished with a drizzling of tasty extra virgin olive oil. ➤



Gian Paolo, the chef of the Taverna Loro in Loro Piceno, tells me that all the ingredients for his menu are homemade and seasonal; meat is the main speciality here, and a wonderful roasted guinea fowl with chestnuts and chicory was excellent proof of this.

However, we don't just find time to eat: there is also a chance to get cooking. Our food discovery tour takes us to Il Maniero in Loro Piceno for a glorious homemade Sunday lunch in typical Italian style. When we arrive, our chef-guide Guida welcomes us and takes us to the kitchen for our cooking class. She patiently shows us how to prepare a perfect menu of gnocchi with porcini mushrooms and walnuts, lamb with orange zest and cabbage, and a spectacular chestnut cream for dessert. Everybody takes part in this special meal and our morning passes quickly, each of us cutting meat and vegetables and mashing the potatoes for our gnocchi. After a little while, the delicious smell of roasted lamb fills the room and we all start looking forward to enjoying the fruits of our labours.

Besides the food, there is also another product which is the pride of Le Marche: the wine. Luckily for us, the weekend includes an afternoon visit to the famous Umani Ronchi winery in Osimo, a little town in the province of Ancona. At the winery, Antonella, our host, reveals all the secrets of the locally produced wines such as Verdicchio and Rosso Conero. As soon as we arrive, she welcomes us into a beautiful cellar with its own tasting room, all set out with a range of wine to accompany our buffet lunch. The wine tasting starts with a couple of whites – like the Pecorino or 'grape of the sheep', and proceeds with some reds, giving us a good idea of the quality of the local products. As for the reds, we are lucky enough to taste some of the best in the whole winery, like Cúmaro and Pelago, the latter of which was awarded 'Best



Working at the olive press

*details*

**Casal Dei Fichi, Contrada Pieve Vecchia, Francavilla d'Ete (AP).** Six luxurious one and two-bedroom, fully equipped apartments.  
Tel: (+39) 0734959018 / 3472647680  
Web: [www.casaldefichi.com](http://www.casaldefichi.com)  
Email: [info@casaldefichi.com](mailto:info@casaldefichi.com)

**THE OLIVE WEEKEND**

A four-day gourmet break is inclusive of transfers from Ancona airport, all meals and wine with lunch and dinner, plus a cookery class at Il Maniero Restaurant and Art Club. It also includes visits to the local winery Umani Ronchi, the olive press in Mogliano, and to Civitanova market and other ancient towns.

**GETTING THERE**

*Detailed directions:*

[www.casaldefichi.com/area\\_directions.php](http://www.casaldefichi.com/area_directions.php)

BY AIR: The nearest airport is Ancona [www.ancona-airport.com](http://www.ancona-airport.com) with a daily Ryanair flight. Alternatively try Pescara [www.abruzzo-airport.it](http://www.abruzzo-airport.it) or Rimini [www.riminiairport.com](http://www.riminiairport.com) airports, both with Ryanair. Bologna and Rome are both within three hours.

**VENUES**

**Umani Ronchi Winery,** Osimo, (AN).

The best place to enjoy local wines.

Tel: (+39) 0717108019

Web: [www.umanironchi.it](http://www.umanironchi.it)

**Hostaria Madre Tierra,** Via Papa Giovanni XXIII, Francavilla d'Ete (AP). A tasty local meal in a cosy atmosphere. Tel: (+39) 0734959016.

**La Torre,** Via La Torre, Numana, (AN). A striking view of the Conero is the perfect scenery for a seafood meal. Tel: (+39) 0719330747 Web: [www.latorrenumana.it](http://www.latorrenumana.it)

**Taverna Loro,** Largo Crescimbeni, Loro Piceno, (MC). A cosy restaurant with delicious meat recipes.

Tel: (+39) 0733519043

**Il Maniero Restaurant and Art Club,** Contrada Appezzana, 24, Loro Piceno (MC). The perfect place to eat and learn to cook.

Tel: (+39) 0733509258

Web: [www.italianartandfood.it](http://www.italianartandfood.it)

**Locanda Le Logge,** Corso Giannelli, Urbisaglia, (MC). An elegant place to enjoy regional food. Tel: (+39) 0733506788

Web: [www.locandalelogge.it](http://www.locandalelogge.it).

Overall Red' at the International Wine Challenge of London in 1997.

**ANCIENT BORGHI**

While touring and stopping off for breaks here and there, we also find time to visit a few little *borghi marchigiani*. Loreto is a cosy village, famous for its Shrine of the Holy House. According to religious belief, this is the same room in which the Virgin Mary grew up and received the Annunciation. The central square with its imposing Basilica is the heart of the town, where people still wander about slowly, stopping to have a chat or to drink a coffee in the local bars. Many villages here in Le Marche are set on top of the hills and can be reached only after a steep walk up the old steps and narrow streets. Loro Piceno is a perfect example; as soon as we leave our minibus, we walk up a steep paved road that takes us to a tiny town centre.

The region's blessings do not stop with the hills and the villages: the coastline hosts a handful of pretty Riviera towns. We visit Civitanova Marche, which has a lively Saturday market, where the people from nearby towns gather to enjoy the delicious local produce sold at the colourful stalls all around the city centre.

By the time we get back to the *casale*, everybody is chatting animatedly of the weekend's various activities and discoveries. And as a special memento, Bob and Ian give us a bottle of their tasty home-made olive oil to take home with us, which, I am sure, will not last too long on my kitchen shelf! **Italy**

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