

Crossing the runway to the waiting 727, I look skywards to the cockpit. Simultaneously, the pilot looks down, waves, gives me a thumbs-up. I am not in the habit of picking up Ryanair pilots, but this is my friend from Mayo, Michael Tom Durkan, who had been on stand-by, had suddenly been scheduled to work and managed to swap to my flight.

We arrive early in Pisa, after the smoothest journey ever — but, of course, I am biased. Three hours later, with the gloom gathering, I can just begin to decipher the surrounding hillscape as we arrive at Seggiano, a medieval village clinging to the sides of Monte Amiata, an extinct volcano. I am spending a couple of days with David Harrison and Peri Eagleton, who started their company, Peregrine Trading, six years ago, producing and selling their own and their neighbours' olive oil. More recently, they have added pecorinos, vegetables in oil, pâtés, *melata* (woodland honey-dew) and hand-made biscuits to their list, which I shall write about over the next couple of weeks.

Daylight reveals the silvery-leaved olive grove in which their farmhouse sits, vines below, chestnuts girdling the hills above, and a necklace of beeches and cypress trees at the summit. We set off early to a nearby farm to collect the new season's olive oil for bottling.

"*Contadini* are the bedrock of Italian society," says David. "They are not peasants, they are small farmers who live as self-sufficiently as possible off the family smallholding."

Firewood is stacked in an elegantly graded still life. There are netted runs for hens and rabbits, and rows of artichokes. We enter a cool, dark barn under the house where two men begin pouring the viscous green liquid into huge containers. On the shelves are a few remaining jars of bottled summer produce: tomato sauce, chopped peaches and capers.

"There's a renaissance of olive-producing here and I feel proud that we've been part of it," says David. "We're trying to get everyone to go organic."

"I knew nothing about olives when I first came here," says Peri. "But in 1992 there was a glut. Neighbours begged me to do something, to start selling in England, because the market was saturated here. It started as a hobby. I designed the labels, chose the bottles and in 1994, the first pallet of olive oil was ready."

"The *olivastra Seggianese* we grow locally is a female tree, which withstands the cold better than any other variety. We're at the highest altitude they can grow, 1,500 feet, and the olive fly can't survive the winter; it's too



A pressing engagement

A British couple is proud to be part of a renaissance in Tuscany's olive groves

cold. Lower down and all over Europe, they've got infestations. We don't need to treat our trees, so they are mostly organic, although many of our neighbours don't bother with certification."

Seggiano olive oil is quite unlike the classic Tuscan olive oils, with their pepperiness, bitter aftertaste and robust flavour. "The Seggiano oil has a creamy texture, a delicate flavour, no bitter finish," says Peri. "It has its own subtle identity, but it's too delicate to waste on strong flavours. You wouldn't want to roast with it, but it's great with vegetables, rice, fish, pasta."

Their first year of production coincided with David losing his job with the family firm in London. "We had two children, a mortgage and the olive oil," says Peri. "David started going round food shops near our London

house with a tasting bottle, extolling the virtues of this unknown, single-variety, extra-virgin olive oil."

David continues: "To our great relief, a lot of people could taste the difference, the subtlety. I didn't know what I was doing, but I seem to have inherited some business skills from my father and I'm a natural showman, just like he was."

"It went like an arrow: between September and Christmas I got the oil into 60 shops. It was what I had to do. Now it's what I want to do. But I'd love to spend more time looking after the olives, pruning and picking. I want to be respected as a producer. People have done this as long as man has been working the land in Europe, pretty much using the same implements."

In the autumn, David and Peri's olives are hand-picked,



Oil tycoons: David Harrison and Peri Eagleton in Seggiano

then taken to the local olive mill. Here, they are slow-crushed under a huge, granite wheel.

"Heat and air are critical; too much air at this stage causes oxidation," says Peri. "You get rancidity if you ill treat your oil. I

can tell customers which olive trees their oil has come from, who has looked after the olives what has been done to them, where they have been milled and stored.

"Just being organic means

nothing. Organic, industrially made products taste awful and have no virtues. If there isn't someone who really cares, who's really proud of their product, it's no good. We care passionately about what we are doing."

Reader offer

The Fine Cheese Co is offering Telegraph readers a special selection of Seggiano products at a 10 per cent discount. Each box contains: one 50cl bottle new season's extra-virgin olive oil; one 380g jar roasted artichoke hearts; one 180g jar olive pâté; one 500g jar woodland honey-dew; 250g pecorino nero. The cost is £28.50, plus £6.99 delivery and packing. UK mainland only. To order call 01225 448748 or visit the website www.finecheese.co.uk. For potential Seggiano stockists, more information or a full list of stockists, call 020 7272 5588.

Cook's tour

Gadgets that make a real difference in the kitchen. This week: spiral slicers

Japanese spiral slicers look more like a builder's clamp than something for the kitchen. In fact, they are one of the most impressive cutting devices around.

Take a potato, carrot or just about any firm fruit or vegetable, and press the centre firmly on to the metal spike. When you turn the handle, two perpendicular blades, one with fiercely sharp teeth, produce spaghetti-like strands. As in a conjuring trick, a walnut-sized spud is transformed into 8ft lengths of potato string.

An interchangeable blade makes broader "spaghetti". Remove the metal teeth altogether for long ribbons of cucumber, which fall in gorgeous ruffles. This is also the best way to make strands of onion, leek or pepper, or slivers of root vegetables to deep-fry into crispy mounds. In Japan, chefs use spiral slicers to make any number of delicate salads and garnishes.

Claudio Aprile, the chef at Bali Sugar, uses his Japanese slicer to make baskets of deep-fried potato strands, or salads such as the one below. With its punchy oriental dressing, this is worth making even without the scallops.



Charred scallops with cardamom spiced carrot salad and warm ginger dressing

12 medium scallops, drizzled with olive oil and seasoned with salt and pepper

For the salad:

2 medium carrots, peeled
½ small red onion, cut across the middle, not root to tip
½ tsp ground cardamom
3 tbsp roughly chopped coriander
½ tsp finely chopped green chilli

Using the fine or medium blade on the spiral slicer, cut the carrot into spaghetti strands. Remove the toothed blade altogether and slice the onion into long strips. Mix all the ingredients together.

For the dressing:

1 tsp light miso
1 tsp sesame oil
4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
Juice of 4 limes
4 tbsp light soy sauce
2 tbsp fresh ginger, minced
2 tbsp minced shallots

Whisk liquid ingredients together. Stir in the ginger and shallots.

To serve: