



Old-country Organic: Alberto Cecconi

Alberto Cecconi is a typical Italian organic farmer. Trained as a gardener like his father, Alberto later decided became an organic farmer.

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Photos by Rick Gush

As a certified organic grower, Alberto buys all his seeds and plants from a certified organic nursery several hours away, near Torino. La Dolce Vita

Rick Gush's whimsical tales of farming Italian-style on his blog. Alberto Cecconi is a typical Italian organic farmer. Although his father was an avid gardener, Alberto became an organic farmer on his own incentive.

Trained at the local agricultural school as a gardener, Alberto decided after a few years that he really didn't like gardening for people.

"I didn't like the clients so much, and I didn't feel as if I was really contributing to the good of society in a meaningful way," he explains.

His sister was doing a good business selling some organic food at a small stall in the local market, and Alberto and his brother Guido figured they could sell organic vegetables if they could find a place to raise them. When they heard about a plot in Pian di Liggi (literally meaning the Liggi's family's wide place) with nice, wide terraces high above one of the interior valleys, they jumped at the chance and leased the property.

The first two years were difficult, and they spent them installing a water system that would use water from a spring on the property, repairing the old rock walls, pruning the overgrown olive trees on the upper section, and incorporating huge quantities of manure and leaves into the rocky soil of the lower terraces where they would start the vegetable plots.

Today, eight years later, they're organic certified and produce olives, a respectable quantity of vegetables, and a few tree fruits like plums and peaches. Guido now works mostly in his sister's prosperous organic food store, along with Alberto's wife, and Alberto runs the daily business of the farm by himself.

"Guido comes and helps when we have a project and when we're building something new, and the whole family helps sometimes, and a lot during the olive harvest," says Alberto.

They have now leased a few adjacent parcels and have about 10 acres in all, 5 of those being planted to olives, many of which are several-hundred years old.

"The geologists tell me that a big landslide on the mountain above us created the wide flat areas where we now have our terraces," says Alberto. "The rock walls here were constructed mainly in the 17th century by small farmers who grew olives and traded their products in Chiavari, about 5 miles away on the coast."

Alberto Cecconi comes from a family of gardeners and farmers; his farm is now organic certified and produces olives, vegetables and fruits. Today, Alberto himself is a small farmer who grows olives and trades his products on the coast in Chiavari. Italian agriculture is like that; the same rhythms and activities have been going on in the same way for many centuries.

Hundreds of thousands of small Italian farmers repair their rock walls, cultivate olives and trade their products in the coastal towns.

Because Alberto is a certified organic grower, an inspector visits a few times a year, and Alberto buys all his seeds and



plants from a certified organic nursery several hours away, near Torino. He has tried belonging to several different cooperatives, but his sister's organic food store has now grown large enough to take his entire harvest.

"Having just one customer is much more convenient, especially with the vegetables," says Alberto. "We can harvest just what we need to keep Federica's shelves full."

Alberto grows numerous heirloom vegetable varieties, including tomatoes, brassicas and beans that are documented as having been grown in this area more than 500 years ago. He thinks these ancient local varieties have fewer pest problems than other varieties he's tried.

Alberto doesn't use pesticides other than Bordeaux mix and applies bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) only when he notes a particularly heavy cabbage butterfly presence in the fall. His most troublesome pests are actually the wild boars that roam these mountains, and he uses transistor radios located at various points in the fields to keep the pigs at large.

This strategy doesn't always work, and the wild pigs sometimes dig so vigorously in their search for underground roots and bulbs that they leave his terraces looking like they've been freshly rototilled. Alberto uses the Bordeaux copper as a preventive soil treatment for the fungi that can hit tomatoes, but he uses very light applications on the plants, and only before fruit formation.

"I have one section down below that was previously owned by a farmer who sprayed copper frequently on his grape vines," says Alberto, "This was a common practice in the old days, but that plot of land will now need a few more years to recover from all those heavy copper poison applications. We're not growing anything there at the moment, just letting the weeds grow and mulching them back into the soil every once in a while."