



Old-country Organic: Piera Olmo

Piera Olmo is another Ligurian small farmer, being the latest in a long line of family farmers living in the area. She grows vegetables and fruits with her husband and brother on a flat, 2-acre parcel of land very close to the coast.

Photos by Rick Gush

Aside from Bordeaux mix, Piera has never used a pesticide, choosing to pick off pests when she sees them and resigning herself to the occasional year when bugs get into one crop or another. ("Old-world Organic: Italian Farmers" by Rick Gush continued, Page 3 of 3)

Piera Olmo is another Ligurian small farmer, being the latest in a long line of family farmers living in the area.

With cheerful assistance from her husband and brother, Piera grows vegetables and fruits on a flat, 2-acre parcel of land very close to the coast, beside one of the creeks that runs down from the coastal mountains.

Her farming operation is unusual in that she has neither terraces nor olives.

"Nobody plants olives on flat land," she explains.

Her husband's grandparents were the first of the family to move down from the hills, and it was they who first cleared and cultivated the alluvial soil alongside the creek.

For most of its long history, the residents of Liguria have lived up in the hills as a defensive strategy. Pirate raids were common in this area up until the 16th century, and Saracen pirates would prowl up and down the coasts, landing only to raid settlements and carry off women and horses.

Piera also grows a number of the old Genovese vegetable varieties: Fava, peas, beet greens, salad greens, tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, trumpet squash and perhaps a dozen different brassicas follow each other in annual cycles of cultivation.

Piera's husband's grandparents first cleared and cultivated the alluvial soil alongside the creek. Now Piera harvests crops there almost year-round. Winter is the lowest production time, but even then she might have a dozen different crops such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, cabbage greens, beet greens and lettuces that can be harvested during any given week.

In spring and summer, her small plot produces an abundance of fruits and vegetables that staggers the small three-wheeled scooter/truck that she uses to take her products to market.

Piera harvests one of her most popular crops, Preboggin (wild greens), from the uncultivated areas that are covered by local weeds. It's essentially the Italian version of dandelion greens, and it's served in the most chic, local-cuisine restaurants along the coast.

"Preboggin is a great crop for me," says Piera, "because I can harvest wild greens from the fall through the spring, and I always sell everything I can pick."

For fertilizer, the farmers on this plot have always used cow manure, and a strip along one corner is used for aging the fresh manure.

Until World War II, a lot of people in this area kept one or two animals for their own needs, but these days, almost no one has cows. Piera gets her manure from a cousin who works at a dairy near Torino; he drives a big truck full of manure down to her whenever she needs more.



Aside from Bordeaux mix, Piera has never used a pesticide, choosing to pick off pests when she sees them and resigning herself to the occasional year when bugs get into one crop or another.

“I think it is most important to grow a healthy plant, because they seem to avoid most pests,” explains Piera.

Although she’s not certified as an organic grower, she has a personal relationship with most of her customers, and they buy from her because they trust her and enjoy knowing exactly where their food is coming from.

An Italian government ordinance stipulates that all produce in the markets must include a label stating the cultivation location of the fruit or vegetables.

There is an exception that says foodstuffs grown and sold in the local community need not display provenance labels. Of the dozen stands in the local daily open-air vegetable market in Rapallo where Piera sells her produce, half of the stands display no provenance signs at all, meaning that the products were all produced within the city limits.

Genovese Organic

The ethnic history of both Alberto and Piera’s families is Genovese, because the important city of Genova is just a half-hour drive up the coast.

Even today, Piera’s family and Alberto’s parents commonly speak Genovese at home instead of Italian.

The Genovese people are often portrayed as slightly grumpy and excessively thrifty, although both Alberto and Piera are obviously exceptions, both being as warm and friendly as anyone could possibly be.

But the Genovese reputation for thrift is certainly true.

These rocky hills support cultivation grudgingly and the tradition of not wasting anything is still highly evident among the anything-but-flamboyant Ligurian people.

A local joke goes that all agriculture in Liguria is organic, because the Genovese farmers are too cheap to ever buy commercial fertilizers or pesticides.

About the Author: Rick Gush is a freelance writer and hobby farmer based in Italy.