

Croatian Olive Culture, Organic By Nature. Present Situation And Perspectives

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The aim of this relation was to present the situation of the organic production of olives and olive oil in Croatia

Where is Croatia on the map of the organic olive production?

The true is that there is no organic production of olives and olive oil in Croatia. This was meant in terms of **certified** organic production.

The reason for that lies in the fact that until year 2000 there was no law that had regulated this field of food production.

Until that year, organic production of olives and olive oil was based on individual efforts and based of mutual trust, between producer and consumer. There was no official institution or private control and certification body to perform that activity. Some IFOAM accredited foreign certifiers, were present on the Croatian market but mostly they were engaged in the certification of medicinal herbs intended for export on EU market.

In the year of 2000, Croatian Parliament voted the Organic Agriculture Law. That was the general act that had only declarative force. It was necessary to regulate each branch of agriculture production with particular Regulation. The process of issuing the Regulations by Croatian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry had taken almost two years.

That fact explains the statement that, today, there is no certified organic production of olives and olive oil in Croatia.

Few producers that followed the principles of organic olive production were usually gathered around NGOs that promoted the principles of organic agriculture, preservation of biodiversity and sustainable development. That was the situation of organic agriculture until 2002.

Now days the situation is slightly changing. With new Regulations effective, legal frame was secured. The rest was up to market laws.

A couple of control and certification bodies have been founded in Croatia.

According the categorization of International Olive Oil Council, Croatia is among countries that have bigger consumption of table olives and olive oil than there is their production. Compared to the Mediterranean countries that are big producers of olive oil like Italy, Greece, Spain and Turkey, the quality of olive fruit in Croatia has lower quality due to weaker agro-technical measures implemented. The reason for that lies in smaller surfaces under the olive, culture, often divided and less developed irrigation systems.

Significant variations in annual production of olives are quite often, according to Croatian Economy Chamber, so it is nothing unusual to have market surpluses of olives and olive oil one year and intensive import on another.

Since the fact that Croatia has requested the full membership in European Union, as a country in a transition it has several years for adaptation to EU regulations before actual joining.

In the moment of joining to EU, at the moment of the “matrimony”, the situation in economy will be frozen. Number of apple trees, vine-stocks and of course, olive trees.

Official stand of Croatian government is restoration of agriculture mostly with autochthonous varieties and a traditional practice such is olive culture.

Plans are big. What is the real situation?

During the ex communist system, olive production had often been under evaluated because of its origin, mostly in small family business. Development of tourism under the communist regime was based on the building a large hotels and tourist settlements, mostly build on ex olive fruit yards.

During the war for independence (1991-1995), there were a lot of forest fires that contributed to the loss of total olive tree number.

25% of ex olive surface has been abandoned, 45% of the surface is on hard terrain and around 30% is placed on biologically and technologically more favorable terrains.

During the recent years, a tendency of rebuilding the old and non-functional olive fruit yards has been very present. It has been followed by construction of large number of olive fruit processing plants, mostly of Italian production.

It was followed by governmental contributions for renewing the olive fruit yards and processing the olives.

The progress has been made. Qualitative steps have been made in the production of olives and olive oil but not in olive market. A fund of 3 million olive trees is getting bigger each year, but it is not a shadow of 30 million trees a hundred year ago.

There are several projects of reintroducing the native autochthonous varieties back to the land where once they had grown but the true is that autochthonous varieties are pulling back in front of the most commonly used leccino variety especially in northern Croatian Adriatic coast regions.

The consciousness of nutritional value of olive oil is taking momentum; technology and knowledge of olive oil are getting bigger. The results of frequent olive contents and manifestations are proving that the increase in quality is eminent.

Earlier in the text, the question was made, where is Croatia on the map of the **organic** olive production? Better question would be where is Croatia on the map of the olive production?

This year (2002) estimates are made of 30 000 tons of processed olives with 30 million kuna (4 000 000 EURO) of contributions distributed to the producers. On the map of the European olive production it represents maybe 0.5 to 1%. Those are the official numbers made upon the contributions requested by the producers for the olive processing. Those figures are likely to be larger.

Extention service, free or seedleads on discount, govermental and local contributions, but the problem is that 30 to 50% of the produced olive oil is sold on black market.

Obviously, the olive production in Croatia is very lucrative hobby. According to some estimation, around 98% of total olive fund is in hands of private owners. With relatively small investment one liter of extra virgin olive oil is easily sold for 70 kuna (10 EURO).

In the light of above mentioned, what could be the interest for organic producers of olive oil in Croatia?

With higher contributions for organic production compared to conventional production, proposed by Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (but not yet approved by the Parliament) there is hope.

Although there are several producers that are producing olives on the principles of organic agriculture, they are not finding much interest in submitting themselves to the rigorous (and expensive) process of control and certification. It will be difficult until the product they are selling, is selling itself with ease and on very acceptable price.

But, who knows?