

Harvest Time For The Olive-Oil Baron

He replaced the roar of London traffic with the gentle slopes of Tuscany's landscape. Tending an olive grove in the Italian province and selling the oil in upmarket Dublin delis such as Cavistons and Butler's Pantry is the new life chosen by businessman Fergus MacCabe, writes Shauna O'Halloran.



MacCabe has help from Bernardo, an elderly peasant-farmer who acts as his mentor and adviser

Red-haired, London-born Fergus MacCabe couldn't look or sound any more out of place on a farm in Tuscany but that is where he has made a life - and a business - for himself.

MacCabe moved to Tuscany in 2001, having convinced his Belfast fiancé, Stephanie Martin, to give up their London life for one of farming in Italy.

"My grandparents bought the farm 30 years ago as a retirement home," says MacCabe, whose family is from Cavan. "When my grandfather died four years ago, this farm was just sitting here. And I had grown sick of living in Islington and not being able to afford a house."

When he left London, MacCabe left behind his job as a project manager at furniture giant Parker Knowll. The plan was to move out to Italy, set up a small business buying and selling local produce and be up-and-running within about three months. But it wasn't so in practice.

"If I had known the level of bureaucracy involved, I probably would never have moved out here," says MacCabe, who found the business world in Italy quite different to the UK. To set up a limited company in England costs around €60, according to MacCabe. In Italy, it is €15,000. It took the young aspiring farmer over 18 months to get his business, Casa Nova Da Barontoli, off the ground.

The company buys and sells food from Tuscan farms, and MacCabe has set up a co-operative with most farmers in his region. He also sells produce from his own farm, Casa Nuova, which turns over around €35,000 annually. Primarily, Casa Nuova relies on its olive grove as its main income. With the lowest acidity in all of Tuscany, MacCabe's olives produce fine oil, even outdoing the locals in terms of



quality. But it wasn't easy getting there.

"It's a good thing I didn't know what was involved," said MacCabe, admitting that it has, nevertheless, all been worthwhile. The road to success was a long one, however. MacCabe had to complete a health and safety examination, which took about three months. He also had to study agriculture in Italy, which took over a year. "In the meantime, I was a farmer. I had become a farmer straight away. It was enough to live on, considering we didn't have any rent or mortgage to pay."

MacCabe also has help in the form of Bernardo, an elderly peasant-farmer from the region who acts as his mentor and adviser. "He comes and helps whenever I'm stuck," says MacCabe, who believes that Bernardo's generation will take Tuscany's farming secrets and knowledge with it when it goes. "The young don't work the land anymore. They'd rather work in call centres - I don't understand it. Hundreds of years of information just aren't getting passed on."

Now a fully-fledged farmer, MacCabe spends about 30% of his time working the land himself. The

remainder of his time is split between the office and travelling between Ireland, Italy and the UK marketing his goods.

"It wouldn't have been possible without Ryanair!" laughs MacCabe, who spends three months of the year outside Italy.

Casa Nuova's olive grove is central to MacCabe's success. The olives are raked from the trees and taken to the local olive press where all the olive oil in the region is created. The olives are crushed and then spun to separate the water from the oil. The oil is then gathered and bottled, ready to sit on a shelf in Cavistons' where it sells for around €15.

Olive harvest comes in November, lasting the month. "I normally have it all done within two weeks," says MacCabe, who never has a shortage of willing white-collar harvesters. Come November, MacCabe flies out friends from the UK and Ireland for the two weeks, giving them free board, free wine, free food and beautiful weather in return for two weeks of olive-picking.

Disaster struck in paradise for the first time this year, with MacCabe's

first bad crop. The rain didn't come all year - and then it poured during the month of harvest.

"You can only pick when it's dry and sunny," explains MacCabe. "The olives get damaged if you touch them while they are wet." The whole experience has been a lesson for the entrepreneur - he has decided he should turn his talents to something a little more reliable.

While he will still provide Dublin's delis with Tuscany's finest olive oil, MacCabe is moving his efforts into home furnishings.

"I suppose that would be the best way to describe it," he says. "It's still of the same high-quality as the food. There are no big businesses allowed in this part of Italy, in what's called Slow City Movement. This leaves all the small businesses intact, making very high-quality products."

MacCabe talks of Tuscan terracotta tiles and olive wood products, which he hopes to sell in Ireland. This is far from being the riskiest of ventures - MacCabe has only set aside €2,500 for his new business.

"I know all the logistics now," he says, "I've made all the mistakes. It took me years to get the business running smoothly, but now it shouldn't be so hard to set up the new one."

MacCabe also hopes to introduce the olive tree to Ireland. "It's a myth that olive trees can't grow in the Dublin climate. They are really beautiful to look at and their history goes right back to the Bible. They can withstand temperatures of minus-seven degrees centigrade and are very resilient."

MacCabe seems comfortably settled into his new role working the land.

"I'd never move back to London now," he says as he discloses his true dream:

"I suppose what I really want is to become Ireland's man in Tuscany." ■

**TOP 1000
COMPANIES IN
IRELAND 2004**

**ON SALE
30TH
MARCH**

Business & Finance
TOP 1000 COMPANIES IN IRELAND 2004



TAKING STOCK OF THE ISEO
INDUCEMENTS STILL LURE BIG BANKS
WHY INVEST IN IRAD?