

RENAISSANCE PEARS

Saving the favorite fruits of the Medici.

BY JOHN SEABROOK

The Fiorentina is a squat and hippy pear, its dark-green skin blemished with black freckles. It is to supermarket fruit as real people are to supermodels. Until recently, the pear was thought to have disappeared from central Italy, where it once flourished. But Isabella Dalla Ragione, a forty-seven-year-old agronomist in Perugia, continued to look for it.

Dalla Ragione has straight brown hair and crooked teeth; she can look twenty years younger than her age or ten years older, depending on the angle of her head. She is a fast driver and an even faster talker, with a gift for making *archeologia arborea*, as she calls her vocation—the pursuit and recovery of old varieties of fruit—sound thrilling. She finds clues in many places: Renaissance paintings, obscure books, and the records that were kept by former estate owners in Umbria and Tuscany, where the climate is peculiarly advantageous for many kinds of fruit. Last year, while studying the catalogue of a large estate that once belonged to the Bufalini family, on the northern tip of Umbria, she came across a reference to the Fiorentina. The Bufalini maintained villas with extensive gardens and orchards, from the fifteenth century on up to the nineteen-eighties, when the final landlord left the property to the state.

Pear trees can live for more than two hundred and fifty years—among fruit trees, only olives live longer—and so Isabella thought a Fiorentina might remain on the former Bufalini lands. She knew what the pear looked like, thanks to a memoir left by an itinerant early-twentieth-century musician, Archimede Montanelli, whose travels had taken him all over Umbria. She also happened to have an uncle, Alvaro, who hunted in that part of Umbria and was acquainted with some of the farmers who lived there. Eventually, one of

them told Alvaro that a Fiorentina remained on his farm.

Earlier this summer, I accompanied Isabella on a trip to visit the old pear tree. We drove into a mountainous region above the town of Pietralunga, a land of thick woods with small farms in the valleys. Stone houses where the landowners had once lived, many of them now abandoned, sit on the tops of hills. The old orchards are gone, but the landscape is dotted with a few rugged arboreal survivors: almonds, olives, and pears.

The Fiorentina was growing in the Valdescura, the Valley of Darkness. When we arrived, relatives of several families, spanning four generations, were sitting under the big shade trees outside the farmhouse. The matriarch was an eighty-four-year-old woman named Sergia. She wore a ragged shift and filthy slippers, and carried a long walking stick. Hearing my accent, she recalled the Americans who had escaped from a nearby Fascist prison and turned up one night in 1943; she had given them shelter and something to eat.

There was a cherry tree beside the house, and Isabella walked with Sergia to gather some cherries. Or, rather, Isabella gathered them; Sergia ate them, the pits tumbling down her whiskery chin as more cherries went into her mouth.

Then the farmer, a nephew of Sergia's, led us through a potato field to the Fiorentina, which was growing next to a rutted old road. Its black bark had deep crevices, and the trunk and lower branches were covered with scabrous white lichen. Isabella fought through the high weeds around the tree and patted its trunk. "Sometimes when I find one of these old trees I feel like weeping," she said. "If only they could talk—what a story they could tell." Then she frowned, and said, "But

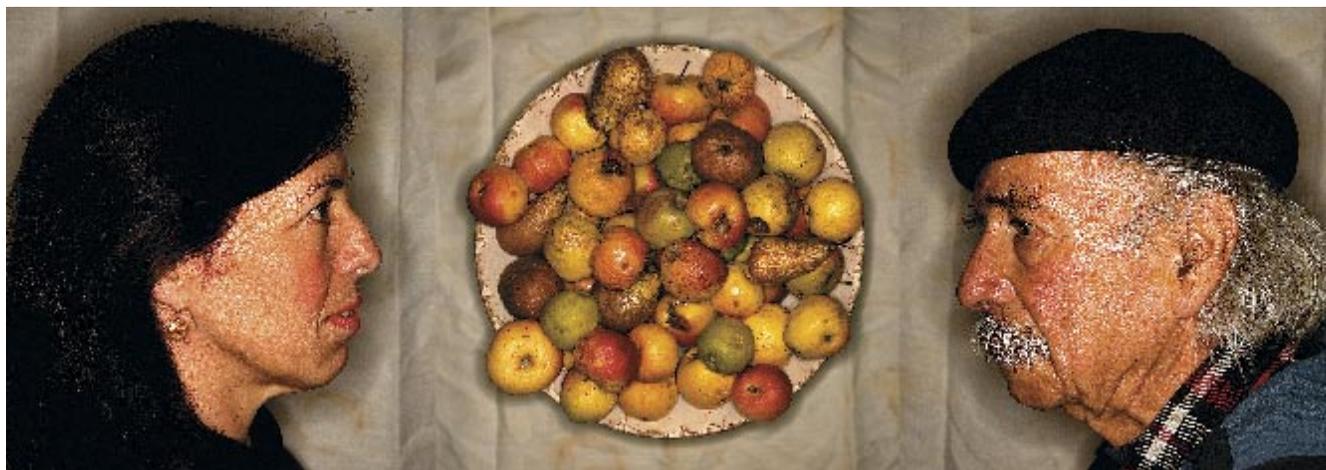
I think, Maybe it is better they cannot talk. They would probably curse us.”

For thousands of years, peasants in Umbria and Tuscany cultivated fruit trees. Most tended small *pomari*, or family orchards, with no more than ten trees. A fruit tree provided food, shade in summer, fuel in winter, furniture, and children's shoes, which were made from the wood of fig trees. Fruit was also a staple of the cooking of the region, in dishes like salt cod with roasted pears, and pork with plums; whole cherries in *agrodolce*—pickled in vinegar and sugar—were served as a chutney with roasted meat. The farmers planted as many varieties as possible, because the different trees would bear

The varieties eaten in Umbria and Tuscany were replaced, first, by generic fruit grown in the Emilia-Romagna region, where much of Italy's agricultural industry is concentrated, and, more recently, by fruit from other countries—peaches and cherries from Spain, pears from Argentina, and apples from China. In most markets in Italy you can find only three kinds of apple (Golden Delicious, Stark Delicious, Rome Beauty), and lately the Fuji apple, from China, has begun to replace those. It's not hard to imagine a day when there will be only one kind of apple for sale in the whole industrial world.

The Dalla Ragiones' orchard is an open-air museum of Old World fruit. It was begun by Isabella's father, Livio,

in 1940, Livio, then nineteen, was conscripted. In old photographs, one can see a very tall, handsome young man in military uniform. But he soon became disillusioned with Fascism, and in the summer of 1943, not long before Italy signed an armistice with the Allies, he and a few friends were arrested for singing a song called “Death to the House of Savoy” during an inspection by King Vittorio Emanuele III. Livio escaped from a train taking him to prison, and made his way back to northwestern Umbria, where he joined the partisans. He was a lieutenant in the Gruppo San Faustino, one of several partisan bands that managed to keep the Germans from securing positions in central Italy until the



Isabella and Livio Dalla Ragione with fruits from their orchard of ancient trees, in San Lorenzo di Lerchi, Umbria.

fruit at different times over the growing season. The mountainous topography of Umbria, and its lack of roads, insured that varieties common to one valley were unknown in the next. When a woman married, she often carried seeds from her family's farm with her, in order to prepare her mother's recipes, which were based on the particular varieties of fruit in her home valley.

This feudal way of life endured, more or less unbroken, for two thousand years, until it abruptly ended in the two decades following the Second World War. Nine million Italians, about a sixth of the population at that time, left their rural homes and went to the cities. They acquired Fiats, Vespas, televisions, and fashionable clothes—all the trappings of modern Italian identity. The old fruit trees were among the things they left behind.

forty years ago, on his land in northwestern Umbria, and is now maintained by Isabella. The trees grow on a hilltop in San Lorenzo di Lerchi, a hamlet about seventy miles southeast of Florence and thirty miles northwest of Perugia; Livio lives in a stone farmhouse that overlooks the orchard. There are about four hundred trees in the collection: pears, apples, plums, cherries, peaches, quinces, and medlars. Most were common in Umbria as recently as sixty years ago; now they have all but disappeared. Some of the Dalla Ragiones' specimens are believed to be the last examples of that variety.

Livio Dalla Ragione was born in Pieve Santo Stefano, about twenty miles north of San Lorenzo; his father was a railroad worker. When Italy entered the war, on the German side,

Allies arrived in Rome, in June, 1944.

Livio played a leading role in several celebrated *partigiani* actions, including an ambush on an armored German column near the ancient walls of Città di Castello, an attack on a German arms depot at Gubbio, and the defense of the town of Pianello against a force of some five hundred S.S. troops, in which the Germans lost more than a hundred men and the *partigiani* lost only three. The rugged terrain was ideal for guerrilla warfare. The partisans could carry out operations east toward Gubbio or northwest toward Florence, then disappear into the remote high valleys and the barns and farmhouses of the local farmers, who sometimes lost their farms, and their lives, in German reprisals. Livio was eventually awarded one of Italy's highest citations for valor, the Silver Medal, for his actions during

these years. His exploits are recounted in "Guerrilla in Striped Pants," a memoir by Walter W. Orebaugh, an American diplomat who fought alongside him.

After the war, Livio moved to Rome. In the nineteen-fifties, he was part of an important Roman abstract-art scene, centered on the Via Margutta, which included the sculptor Ettore Colla. Livio worked in a style called *informale*, which emphasized the use of collage and found objects; his paintings often included pieces of wood or metal from old tools that were used by the peasants he had come to know during the war. Other paintings featured the colorful droppings of an owl called an *allocco*. Livio participated in a number of exhibitions in Rome, and in the early sixties he received an offer to be part of a show in Chicago, but he turned it down, and after that his career as a painter began to decline.

Around this time, Livio began collecting the *cultura materiale* of the Umbrian peasantry. He picked up tools in abandoned farmhouses—knives for harvesting olives, pitchforks made out of forked branches—and rescued larger mechanical pieces as well, such as presses for olive oil and looms for weaving linen (for the landowners) and hemp (for the peasants). Just as the farmers had scored him and his partisan comrades, so Livio intended to save the farmers from the American-style consumer culture that Italy embraced after the war, or at least to preserve the memory of their way of life. He took over the house at San Lorenzo, which had been empty for years and was falling into ruin, and gradually restored it, filling it with his found farm objects. Eventually, he accumulated so many things that he moved most of them into a former farm building just outside Città di Castello. This collection is now a museum, the Folk Traditions Center, run by the city. Arboreal archeology was one aspect of Livio's larger obsession with Italy's pre-war past. "I had these tools, all these things," he told me, "but I also wanted to save the smells and tastes of those times. So I began trying to save the trees."

Isabella was born in 1957, the second of Livio's two daughters; her older sister, Laura, is a psychiatrist specializing in children's eating disorders. When

the girls were small, they and their mother, Rosa, spent the summers in a cabin in the woods, without electricity or running water. Isabella remembers making a *favola*—a fairy house—inside the hollow trunk of a chestnut tree. "My idea of the world as green comes from seeing the sun come through the thin bark of my chestnut tree," she told me.

At the time, Livio's celebration of the culture of the peasants stopped short of wanting to live like one. In the late fifties and early sixties, he rarely stayed with his family in the country; he preferred Rome. When Isabella was still young, she became aware that her father was living, as she called it, "a double life." By the time she was eighteen, and studying for a degree in agronomy at the University of Perugia, she had become interested in theatre, and joined an experimental acting troupe that embraced the improvisational principles of the Polish playwright and director Jerzy Grotowski. "I think I just wanted to get as far away from my father's world as I could," Isabella told me. "It was not easy to have that kind of man as a father—a great man, a strong, important man. It is hard to find your own way."

After ten years of acting and sporadic studies, Isabella finished her master's degree. She found a job with the city of Perugia, working on its trees. She married Leonardo Tei, a master builder, and they have two daughters, Costanza, who is eleven, and Matilde, who is nine. Livio, in the meantime, had been teaching drawing and painting at two small art schools near Perugia and planting the orchard at San Lorenzo. "It was natural," Isabella says, "with my degree and knowledge, that I started to go with my father, to find fruits and plants." She was skilled at grafting—a technique that involves taking a living piece of the plant one wants to reproduce (known as the "scion"), inserting it into a cleft in the stalk of an already established plant (the "rootstock"), and tying the two plants together. Grafting was practiced by peasants for centuries, and it is the reason that so many old varieties could be preserved for so long. It is a quicker and more reliable way of reproducing trees than growing them

from seed, because the rootstock is already established and is known to be compatible with the soil. Because grafting is an asexual form of reproduction, the new tree is not a cross between the rootstock and the scion but a copy of the scion.

As the collection grew, Isabella's relationship with her father improved. The trees helped. She has written several books about her work, including an illustrated catalogue of the collection. As Livio has grown older and more infirm, Isabella has taken on more of the daily maintenance of the orchard: pruning, fertilizing, and grafting. The hardest work comes in the late winter and early spring, when the grass is cut, the soil prepared, paths cleared, and the trees treated with copper, to inhibit the growth of fungi. Isabella and Livio get occasional help from volunteers, but they can't afford to hire a full-time assistant, and they have distanced themselves from the Slow Food movement, an Italian association that promotes and preserves the artisanal production of food, because Isabella dislikes its politics. ("They really only exist to promote themselves," she told me.) The Dalla Ragiones don't sell fruit, but they do sell saplings grafted from trees in the collection. Isabella charges thirteen to fifteen euros for each sapling, and last year she sold about two hundred. Three years ago, they received a grant of fifteen thousand euros for *archeologia arborea* from the Umbrian regional government, and Isabella and Livio were able to print two thousand brochures, create labels for the trees, and launch a Web site. But that money ran out in May, and there will be no more, Isabella said, because "biodiversity is not a political priority in Italy." From now on, the Dalla Ragiones' only source of funding will be from tourists, who may visit the orchard by appointment and are encouraged to contribute to the cost of maintaining it by adopting a tree.

The idea of using still-life paintings as forensic tools occurred to Isabella in the early nineteen-nineties. Italian Renaissance and Baroque *natura morta* painting is distinguished from much of the Northern European tradi-

tion of still-life by its naturalism. Generally, the fruit in Italian paintings is not treated symbolically or didactically, as it is in Flemish and Dutch painting. "The natural fecundity of the fruit itself was symbolism enough in Italian still-lives," Larry Feinberg, the Ryan Curator in the Department of European Painting at the Art Institute of Chicago, says. "If the fruit was a symbol of anything, it was of abundance, richness, good fortune." In Caravaggio's work, the fruit often has wormholes and looks a little too soft, Feinberg added. It has become a symbol of "*vanitas*—of overripeness, or sensuality."

Three of the most useful artists for identifying old varieties of fruit are Jacopo Ligozzi (1547-1627), Giovanna Garzoni (1600-70), and Bartolomeo Bimbi (1648-1729), all of whom worked for Medici Grand Dukes—Francesco I, Ferdinand II, and Cosimo III, respectively—recording the flowers and fruits that grew in their gardens. Ligozzi was the most botanically correct of the artists, as interested in root systems as in surface texture. Garzoni was a miniaturist who painted with gouache on vellum; her masterly series of fruits and flowers that grew in the Medici gardens now hangs in the Galleria Palatina in Florence's Pitti Palace, where Isabella has consulted it many times. Bimbi, who came a generation later, was a very different kind of painter: a creator of epic, almost bombastic still-lives, done in oil on huge canvases.

The Medici gardens were begun by Lorenzo, and maintained, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by his successors, most avidly by Cosimo I, an ardent naturalist who established the first botanical garden in Europe, in Pisa. Keeping a large orchard was a way of showing one's allegiance to "scientific humanism," a core principle of the Renaissance. In an orchard, the most sensuous pleasures of the natural world are carefully constrained by planning, pruning, and cultivating—resulting in a synthesis of nature and science. The orchard's civilizing effect seems to have diminished over time. The virtues of the humanistic gardens had little influence, for example, over the notoriously depraved Gian Gastone, the last of the Medici. After one banquet, having eaten and drunk to gross excess, as



*"If our records are correct, you died, quite suddenly,
on the Long Island Expressway."*

Christopher Hibbert relates in "The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall," Gian Gastone vomited into his napkin and then wiped his mouth with his wig.

Bimbi's fruit paintings hang in the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano, about fifteen miles west of Florence, a property that now belongs to the state. I asked Isabella to come with me to see them. We met at her house, in the oldest part of Perugia; the stones in the foundations are Etruscan. The autostrada was crowded, and Isabella drove aggressively, cursing the slower drivers in colorful Italian. After exiting, we drove through an ugly industrial area, where most of the roadside signs were in Chinese, because so many of the workers were from China. When we finally got to the villa, the custodian said that the Bimbi rooms were closed. However, since there were few other visitors, he shrugged and said that he supposed he could open them for us.

The paintings occupied two rooms. There were twelve big canvases of fruit grouped by type—citrus, cherries, plums, apples—all captured in the fleeting moment of perfect ripeness, fresh forever. The largest and most astonishingly detailed of the works was "Pears," which depicts a hundred and

fifteen different varieties, collected in six baskets labelled by the month in which they ripen, June through December. In the background, there are classical columns and a stormy twilight sky. The artist, denied all but the visual sense to convey the essence of the fruit, concentrated on the texture and color of the skin. The result is not so much a still-life as a psychological portrait of fruit. These are the pears in the Wallace Stevens poem "Study of Two Pears":

The pears are not viols,
Nudes or bottles.
They resemble nothing else.

Bimbi thoughtfully numbered the pears, and provided a key at the bottom of the canvas, so that they can be identified by name. As we were standing in front of the painting, Isabella pointed out that he must have worked on the painting periodically over the growing season, as the different varieties ripened; otherwise the early-summer pears would have rotted by the time the winter pears were ripe.

Afterward, we walked around the galleries, looking at the other paintings.

"Wait," she said, noticing that one of the fruits in "Lemons" was actually a *mela rosa*—a rose apple. Was this a hidden symbol or a mistake? "I think he must have put it there for a rea-

son," Isabella said. It was another mystery for an arboreal archeologist.

San Lorenzo is in the part of northern Umbria known as the Alta Valle del Tevere—the Upper Tiber Valley. The source of Rome's river is nearby. The Dalla Ragiones' trees grow on the southern slopes of the hill. The ground drops steeply away. The sound of rushing water comes up from below, but the valley is so deep that the stream can't be seen.

In past centuries, there were orchards on the hill, but the fruit trees had nearly all died by the time Livio started planting, in the early nineteen-sixties. Now the only old trees in the orchard are some olives and almonds. His house is larger than it looks, with additions built over the centuries; the original part is a thousand years old. A church near the house, where the bones of some eighteenth-century nobles are buried under the floor, now serves as a fruit warehouse. Old tools and weapons and farm implements hang everywhere, rusty and vaguely menacing, suggestive of hard work and poverty and struggle.

Livio lives alone, although his lady friend, Miriam Fiorellino, comes up from Rome for the weekend. (His wife, Rosa, died three years ago.) Laura, Isabella's sister, visits infrequently, but Isabella makes the forty-five-minute drive from Perugia two or three times a week. She checks on her grafts, and then walks around the hillside with a straightened-out paper clip, killing caterpillars that have bored into the tree trunks. The orchard is watched over by Livio's colorful scarecrows, one of which is decked out in a flashy car-racing suit and helmet (in the winter, skis are added), but they seem intended as much to keep away people as birds. Anyway, the birds somehow know exactly when the cherries will turn from white to red, and they often devour them before Isabella can gather the crop.

Meals at San Lorenzo are usually simple, cooked by Miriam and Isabella, who employ as many homegrown ingredients as possible. They use fruit in much of their cooking. Their wine, made by stomping red and white grapes together in the big wooden vats downstairs in the cantina, is a light, fruity rosé; Livio drinks it cold, diluting it

with water. (Isabella doesn't drink.) A typical meal begins with a soup made from local wild mushrooms, served with bread baked with chestnut flour in a corner of the huge fireplace in the kitchen and followed by a casserole of artichoke, potato, and prosciutto, with chestnut and rosemary cookies or a fruit tart for dessert. The Dalla Ragiones keep many of the traditional Umbrian festivals, and at the end of the year they burn La Vecchia, the effigy of an old woman made of rags and straw, and Livio curses—"Vaffanculo, anno vecchio!" ("Up your ass, old year!")—and spits into the fire.

When I visited San Lorenzo in January, we ate the last of the winter pears. They had a sharp, challenging flavor, and were firm and crisp and cold. (The fireplace and a wood-burning stove provide the only heat in the house, and last winter there was three feet of snow on the ground.) The taste was so clean—not buttery, which is the standard by which the commercial pear is bred—that it was almost metallic. "I am convinced that people's taste has changed as a result of the industrialization of fruit production," Isabella said. "The *mela rustica*, for example, which is described in old travellers' accounts as tasting like vinegar, now tastes rather sweet."

Livio is still the genius loci, as Isabella calls him, of the orchard, but, at eighty-four, he is much diminished from his prime. "He is like the Babbo Natale and I am like the elf who makes the toys," Isabella said. Livio has a long white fringe of hair around his bald, speckled, Shakespearean dome,

and he has the hopeful expression that very old men get in their eyes. He is gruff and blustery, and Isabella treats him as she does the fruit trees—tenderly but firmly. She worries about his health. "The time is coming," Isabella said, "when we must think about the end—and what this project of ours will be without my father." She was feeling overwhelmed, she added, by caring for the four hundred trees, with little help, knowing that a lost tree might mean the end of that variety forever. "Lately, I have come to feel that the life I have chosen is not my own," she said.

None of Livio's paintings are on view in the house, and when I asked him where they were he told me he had burned them all years ago, adding that the only remaining painting was in the collection of the wife of Jean Arp, the French Dadaist. (Actually, Isabella told me that he had a couple of paintings squirreled away inside the house, although I saw only photographs of them.) One day, when we were having lunch under the big olive trees, I asked Livio why he had burned his paintings, and he barked, "*Perché tutto quello era finito*" ("Because all that was finished") and did not elaborate. He had not only stopped painting; he had turned against the whole practice of making art and become what he calls *un'artista del pensiero*—an artist of thought. The orchard is his *natura morta*.

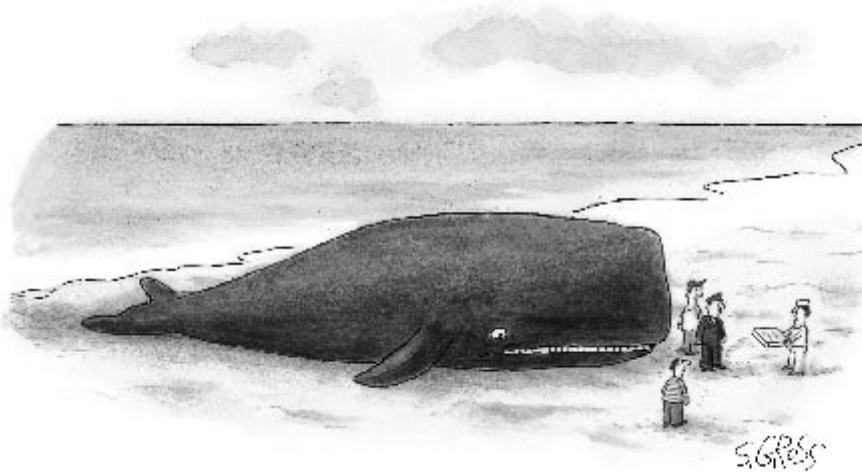
Last September, Isabella staged a *Mostra pomologica*—a fruit show—in the center of Perugia, in an old palazzo that now belongs to the Bank of

Umbria. It featured fruit from the collection—plums, quinces, medlars, apples, and pears—arranged in palm-frond baskets, in the casually sensuous style of Garzoni. Each basket was illuminated by an overhead light. Most of the visitors assumed that the fruit was made of marble or wax—the flyers that Isabella had put up around town had been intentionally ambiguous about whether this was to be a produce fair or an art exhibit.

Many of the younger people laughed when they discovered that the fruit was real. Perhaps the musky, slightly too fecund scent of ripe fruit made them giddy, or maybe the fruit was just funny-looking. The seeds rattled inside some of the apples, like natural castanets. Isabella, however, was more interested in the reactions of the elderly visitors, who are the last living link to the old trees. She was hoping that they would provide some clues to fruit she still hasn't found—perhaps the variety of fig called Fico Rondinino San Sepolcro, which she has been seeking for years.

The elderly people were mostly former sharecroppers, who had dressed formally for their trip to the city. At first, they were inclined to be circumspect and seemed reluctant to answer Isabella's questions. "In many of their memories, the fruit is connected to hunger and hardship," Isabella said. "They aren't good memories." However, the smell and the texture of the fruit soon dissolved their inhibitions. One old woman, from Gualdo Tadino, near Gubbio, remembered how she and her husband used to keep fruit under their bed, where it was cool; the thought made her blush. A farmer remembered how the landowner he worked for had told him he didn't want a particular kind of pear tree growing on his land, and the man had said he would get rid of it. But that night he went to the tree and whispered, "Don't worry, I didn't mean it."

The most exciting piece of arboreal information came from a former nun, who told Isabella she remembered a Fico Rondinino San Sepolcro growing in the convent in Bevagna, near Assisi. Isabella visited the convent as soon as she could, but she was too late. The sisters had cut the old figs down and replaced them with a healthy young kiwi tree. ♦



"Who ordered the krill pizza?"