



Extra Virgin

By Annie Hawes
ISBN: 9780060958114

Introduction Following in the footsteps of Bill Bryson and Peter Mayle, author Annie Hawes finds herself welcomed into a foreign community whose peculiar traditions she relates in *Extra Virgin*, her account of becoming a homeowner in a remote village in the Italian Riviera. Hawes and her sister Lucy flee their native England in 1983 for the allure of the sun-drenched olive groves of Diano San Pietro, a small town in Liguria, Italy. After signing up to graft roses for a season -- part of an enterprising villager's cottage industry -- the sisters envision themselves falling for local Romeos. Instead, they fall head over heels for an isolated rustico, an abandoned farmhouse set in the hills above the village, which they buy and rebuild. Hawes sets her engaging narrative of purchasing and fixing up their house against a colorful backdrop of eccentric neighbors. She describes the locals' unaccountable distaste for the flowers she and her sister go to lengths to nurture, the San Pietran compulsion for neatness, and their inexplicable reliance on the powdery substance of lime as a catch-all for any and all household problems. She observes with amusement (and exhaustion) the Christmas tradition of exchanging panettone with every single neighbor visited during the holiday, and she skewers local wisdom about what it is acceptable to eat and drink at any given time of the day. Hawes delves into

the inexplicable, long-standing antipathy between Diano San Pietro and nearby Diano Marina, a more prosperous and tourist-friendly town. A feud between two neighbors and the childish forms of revenge they exact on each other flavor both local gossip and Hawes's account. Hawes affectionately details the flamboyant characters who come to her aid. She reveals the bottomless reservoirs of kindness she and her sister encounter as foreign females in southern Italy. Hawes offers an insightful look into agricultural customs that have gone largely unrecorded in popular literature even covering the arduous process of gathering olives and processing their oil. She bears witness to a shift in local attitudes about the cultivation of olive trees. Her English perspective on the culture of rural Italy offers a wry and intimate look at a part of the world unknown to even the most widely traveled. **Discussion Questions**

1. How would you characterize the author's Italian adventure? Were you surprised by her integration into the tight-knit community of Diano San Pietro? Did you find her approach to living in a remote, rural region unusually adaptive, foolhardy, or brave?
2. Are there any traditions in this region of rural Italy that you found especially memorable as you were reading? Did you find the author's anecdotal narration of her experiences to be effective?
3. Were there individuals in this story whose personalities you found amusing or bewildering? Who were they? What behaviors or attitudes did they exhibit?
4. How would you describe the relationship between the neighboring communities of Diano San Pietro and Diano Marina? If you were visiting the region, would you prefer to stay in one village over another? Why?
5. Were there aspects of everyday life in Diano San Pietro that reminded you of some of the traditions in your community?
6. Were there other facts about the author's experience that you wanted to know? Did you feel the book did a good job conveying the author's personal experience of life in a rural village?
7. Have you ever traveled beyond your immediate community to a place where you have had to "do as the Romans do" in order to coexist peaceably? How do you think the author's behavior was perceived by her neighbors?
8. Does the account of life in a village in *Extra Virgin* remind you of other books you have read by travel writers? Which ones?

About the Author: Annie Hawes has worked for the past 15 years as a freelance film editor. She has lived in France and Africa as well as her native England. She now lives most contentedly in Liguria, Italy.