



SLICK OPERATION

Linda Carr meets the volunteers of Barwon Oil Barons,
a group of local residents benefitting from their garden's olive trees



What do you do with 120kg of olives picked from three backyard trees? Drawing on the Italian heritage of her Belmont house's former owners, Rosie Bright (pictured above, centre) turned her mind to olive oil.

But wait, let's step back a bit. That's a lot of olives. There were already three olive trees in the backyard when her family moved in, so why plant eight more?

"We just love gardening and being resourceful," explains Rosie. "It was very exciting to begin with but we had olives for years and it was just too much. I'm not somebody that wants to sell things and it was too much to share with friends and family."

Back to the pressing question of how to convert the home harvest into usable olive oil. It was disheartening as initial enquiries soon established that commercial processors require a minimum of one tonne of product. But driving passion takes on all obstacles.

"It was like, oh my goodness, this isn't quite what I thought it was gonna be," adds

Rosie. "And so, I made all these flyers and thought, well, there must be lots of other people in the same situation because I see olive trees everywhere. I went round to anywhere in Geelong where I saw olive trees and dropped a flyer. It sort of snowballed from there."

The good knight in this 2018-part of the story came in the form of Jacques at Manzanilla Grove who agreed to process the 'meagre' 650kg harvested that year by Rosie and like-minded householders, previously unaware of the bounty lurking in their garden.

Those tentative beginnings have now emerged as Barwon Oil Barons, a slick operation with a very strong ethos founded on volunteering and community cohesion. Steven Parker from Geelong Regional Olives now supports the group with guidance and facilitates olive processing. In 2026, 160 people harvested their olives all on the same day and delivered them to four locations around Geelong. A few weeks later they eagerly turned up at the drop-off points, clutching their containers to receive their





quota of local virgin olive oil. Their own oil – to be decanted at home.

'All sorts of community interaction happens. One girl I know rides her push bike around Geelong and knocks on people's doors, asking if she can pick their olives. She generally gives them a percentage of the oil,' chuckles Rosie at the thought.

'But we have to inspect the olives to make sure they're in good condition, on everybody's behalf. It sounds a bit pedantic but we want to have a good product for everyone. In the early days we once ended up losing 500kg of olives because the lot had been tainted from a contribution of 180kg of spoiled fruit.'

Today, a team of four women – the power-house committee behind all this organisation – are supported by about 30 volunteers, not all of whom even grow olives themselves.

"None of the oil is sold commercially," says Rosie. "We charge a small amount per litre and that money goes into paying for all of the processing and a little bit to help set us up for the following harvest. The oil – and any profit – all goes back to the people who bought the olives in. Our currency isn't money. Volunteers are our really big asset so we give them a little bit of olive oil for their very generous time in helping us out, being part of this."

Some of the volunteers gathered at a recent post-processing morning tea. One of them, Tony, explained his involvement while his young sons munched on some special treats.

"We moved down from Melbourne five years ago and wanted to meet some locals, get a bit more involved in the community. There's a big olive tree out the front of our place, that's how it started. We've met a



great bunch of people. I hope next year to get my young boys involved a little in the harvesting."

Pat, another volunteer from Drysdale, joins in.

"Yeah, we tried all sorts of things with the olives from our yard – still got jars from years back. So many olives are wasted, just falling on the nature strips and olive oil is so expensive too."

Some volunteers are also olive contributors such as Jess, who makes the harvesting process a family affair.

"It's a good family activity, even my great-

grandkids help out – like the Italians making passata – that way you know the process and what's going into the product. The oil from our olives is so crisp and clean, like nothing you buy in the shop."

Gerald, a new volunteer from Leopold laughs.

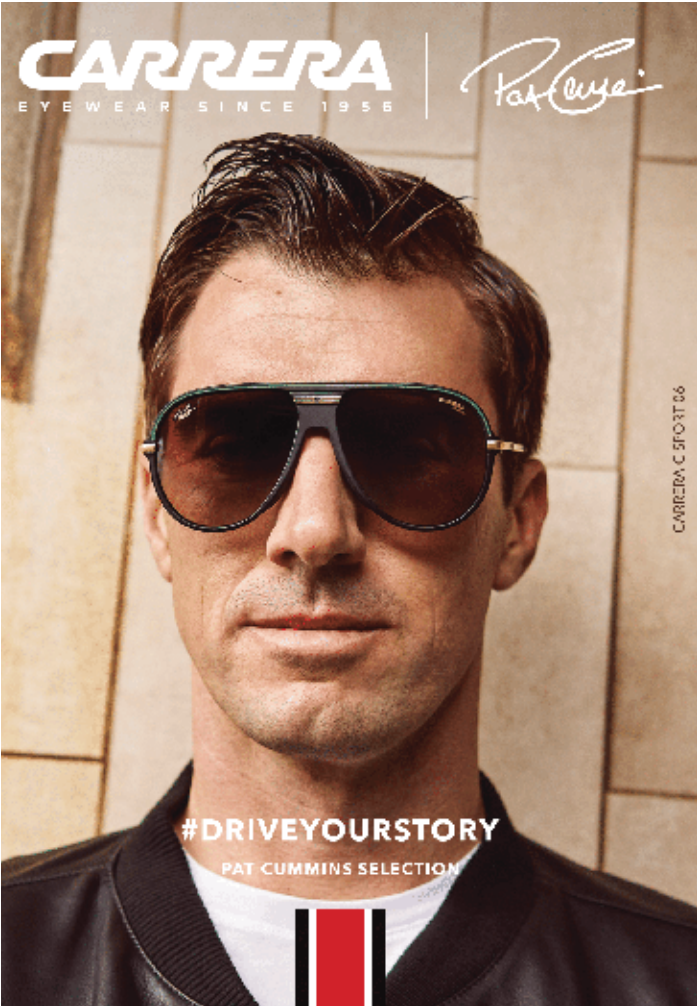
"Oh, I heard of one young child wanting to know which litre of oil his family's olives were in!!"

With the health benefits of olives and olive oil so well-established, this grass-roots operation pays additional, intangible dividends in many ways.



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