

Is this olive oil the most political food in the world?

Manal Ramadan is the managing director of Zaytoun, a company founded after seeing the problems Palestinian farmers faced in getting a fair price for their olive oil



Olive oil was Zaytoun's first product - 10 years later it has won several awards and remains its flagship. Photograph: Claudia Janke/Guardian

Interview by Sue Quinn

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It's been said that olive oil from the West Bank is the most political food in the world, and I think I'd agree. Zaytoun started in 2004 as a volunteer-led initiative by a group of friends inspired by a trip to Palestine. We had spent time with olive farmers, enjoying their wonderful hospitality and tasting some of the most delicious olive oil we'd ever had. But their livelihoods were being threatened because they had to sell below the cost of production due to restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation. Zaytoun was an opportunity to help.

One of the biggest challenges is the restriction on the movement of people and goods. Olive, almond, herb and grain producers are located around Nablus, Jenin and Salfit, and the medjool date producers around Jericho. Most goods are shipped from the port of Haifa, about an hour's drive away from most of the producers, but in reality it takes several hours, sometimes days, to get there because vehicles are forced to make big detours to go through the checkpoints, and pallets have to be stacked far lower than capacity to allow sniffer dogs to jump over them. For the farmers, it would probably be faster to travel to London than to Haifa.

Farming is difficult everywhere, but few places have the additional challenges of land seizures, illegal settlements, difficulty of movement and farmers losing land or being unable to access land due to the separation barrier. The devastation in Gaza last year also resulted in curfews, house searches, raids and arrests in the West Bank.



Manal Ramadan: 'For thousands of farming families in Palestine, fair trade has given them the security of knowing they can sell their crops for a price guaranteed to be above the cost of production.' Photograph: Claudia Janke/Guardian

But for thousands of farming families in Palestine, fair trade has given them the security of knowing they can sell their crops for a price guaranteed to be above the cost of production. Farmer co-ops receive a premium that funds community projects, and increased demand for products traditionally produced by women's co-ops has given them scope to develop business skills and work strategically.

Olive oil was Zaytoun's first product and 10 years later it has won several awards and remains our flagship. In a world of mass industrial production, slave labour and reports of olive oil fraud and adulteration, Palestinian olive oil is an authentic and truly artisan product. It's something positive to come out of Palestine, something to celebrate.

We've now expanded our range to include za'atar, maftoul, freekeh, medjool dates and almonds. We also invite farmers to visit the UK. For many, this is their first and only chance to travel outside Palestine. One farmer was invited to give a talk at Planet Organic a couple of years ago. Seeing the emotion on his face as he approached a shelf and picked up a bottle of olive oil he had pressed himself from olives his family had picked by hand from a tree that his great grandfather had planted - was priceless.