



- [Home](#)
- [About us](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [Who we are](#)
 - [What we do](#)
 - [Contributors](#)
 - [Contact us](#)
- [Articles](#)
 - [View all](#)
 - [Food Systems](#)
 - [Food Policy](#)
 - [What to Eat](#)
 - [Food Ethics](#)
 - [Chemicals in Agriculture](#)
 - [Health](#)
 - [Farming](#)
 - [Food Movement](#)
 - [Business and Food](#)
 - [Food and Culture](#)
 - [Patrick's Blog](#)
 - [News and Reviews](#)
 - [Resource of the Week](#)
 - [Our Views](#)
 - [Videos](#)
- [Get involved](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [Jobs](#)
 - [Internships](#)
 - [Write for us](#)
 - [Subscribe to our newsletter](#)
- [Projects](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [True Cost](#)
 - [Antibiotics](#)
 - [Story Bank](#)
- [Donate](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [Fund a project](#)
 - [One-off donation](#)
 - [Monthly donation](#)
- [Partners](#)
- [Share this](#)
- [Main menu](#)

Close X < Back

- [Home](#)
- [About us](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [Who we are](#)
 - [What we do](#)
 - [Contributors](#)
 - [Contact us](#)
- [Articles](#)
 - [View all](#)
 - [Food Systems](#)
 - [Food Policy](#)
 - [What to Eat](#)
 - [Food Ethics](#)
 - [Chemicals in Agriculture](#)
 - [Health](#)
 - [Farming](#)
 - [Food Movement](#)
 - [Business and Food](#)
 - [Food and Culture](#)
 - [Patrick's Blog](#)
 - [News and Reviews](#)
 - [Resource of the Week](#)
 - [Our Views](#)
 - [Videos](#)
- [Get involved](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [Jobs](#)

- [Internships](#)
- [Write for us](#)
- [Subscribe to our newsletter](#)
- [Projects](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [True Cost](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [True Cost resources](#)
 - [Speakers films – London 2013](#)
 - [Antibiotics](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [Antibiotics resources](#)
 - [Story Bank](#)
- [Donate](#)
 - [Overview](#)
 - [Fund a project](#)
 - [One-off donation](#)
 - [Monthly donation](#)
- [Partners](#)



[by Cathi Pawson](#)

Ten year harvest: The Zaytoun story

21 November, 2014

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Zaytoun co-founders Cathi Pawson and Heather Masoud have been working to create a UK market for Palestinian products, establishing strong links between the country's farming families and British consumers, and aiming to rise above the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel. Here, Cathi Pawson tells the story of Zaytoun, the challenges they have faced, and how it all started with Palestinian olive oil.

As I landed in Tel Aviv on my first trip to Palestine, the man next to me looked out of the window and remarked "The Israelis really did make the desert bloom, didn't they?" It's a story that we've all heard – that with the foundation of Israel came a new beginning for neglected land. Yet what I found in Palestine told a very different tale.

In 2003, I was volunteering among rural communities in the West Bank, witnessing life under occupation and intervening non-violently when I saw human rights abuses. At checkpoints, long queues of people waited for hours to get to work, college or school. Some were turned away and most were very late for their day. Rural families told us of their increasing isolation – since the Israeli crackdown on the movement of people and goods, communities were cut off from each other. Unemployment was high and international borders had been closed since the beginning of the [Second Intifada](#) in 2000. For many who depended on income from olive oil sales to the Gulf, the border closure was a blow: the market in the Gulf was lost for good.

The bumper olive harvest in 2003 filled household oil containers to overflowing, but with no external market, prices were very low. That year, Israeli traders bought Palestinian oil at prices below the cost of production.



The West Bank is a fertile land, watered by springs and with plenty of sunshine. Access to resources at that time was increasingly restricted by the Israeli army, but the Palestinians' connection to their land remained a source of pride and sustenance to them. Their trees were family heirlooms, tended carefully using skills learned from their parents. Rain-fed, the olives produced an oil that was particularly peppery, and everywhere on the hills there were well-kept old stone terraces, preserving precious water and soil from running off down the slopes.

Soon after I returned to England, I bumped into Heather Masoud, whom I had previously met on a permaculture course, and who had also spent time volunteering in Palestine that year. We realised that we shared a plan: to sell olive oil to friends and family, creating both an income for the farmers and a connection between them and the outside world. Our initial emails to friends resulted in a huge order. The first shipment arrived in spring 2004 and sold out immediately.



However, establishing the ongoing sale of this oil as a high quality, organic, Fairtrade product was far from straightforward. Most Palestinian oil is virgin quality. For the oil to be marketed successfully in the United Kingdom it had to be extra virgin. The stringent EU food quality tests felt alien to Palestinian farmers, who had grown up on olive oil and simply knew by taste how good it was. Organic and Fairtrade certification was a further paperwork burden for them. I sympathised with their reluctance, as they were rightly proud of their age-old product.

We also had logistical challenges. One cold, grey day in December, the whole Zaytoun team turned up at a London warehouse to unload newly arrived stock. It was the last possible day for us to load our vans and run a hectic nationwide delivery to shops before Christmas.

Imagine our horror when we broke the seal on the container to find the stock not in bottles. It was in huge cans covered in Italian writing. Our stock had been mixed up with the order destined for Italy. A few calls confirmed that an Italian solidarity group did indeed have our oil!

We could not deliver in time for Christmas, but our loyal customer base bought the stock when it arrived in January – even though their orders had been intended as seasonal gifts. We could not be sure of malicious intent in this mix-up, but we did know from the farmers how difficult it was to get oil out of Palestine. Repeated security checks at Israeli commercial crossings out of the West Bank meant that bottles of oil were unloaded and reloaded. Breakages were as common as mix-ups. The system also increased costs, as Israeli rules about the pallet-stacking of Palestinian goods meant container space was lost.

To find our place on UK shop shelves, we knew we had to make the most of the best assets of Palestinian olive oil.



Olives are traditionally produced without the use of pesticides or chemicals – these are banned from entry to Palestine anyway, and are also too expensive to buy – so organic certification was a possibility. We wanted to build a case for Fairtrade certification, and knew the unique flavour of the oil was attractive to the gourmet market. We just had to convince the farmers it was worth the paperwork.

Through frequent visits we built up trust. We introduced customers to the farmers on annual trips, and brought farmers to the United Kingdom as well. Seeing their oil on shop shelves, they began to understand the competition and why the oil needed to look good to stand out.

We worked with [Canaan Fair Trade](#), a company buying from thousands of farmers who belong to the [Palestine Fair Trade Association](#) (PFTA). PFTA supports farmers in attaining certification and ensuring quality that is consistently good enough for the demanding export market. Teamwork bore fruit and in 2009 we were able to sell the world's first organic, Fairtrade olive oil made by Palestinian farmers for the United Kingdom.

The UK market for Palestinian produce is now well established. Some customers buy it to make a connection with farmers in Palestine. Others buy it for the quality alone – testament to the rich inheritance of an indigenous people and their farming techniques. Its quality is further affirmed by the growing number of well-known chefs now using Zaytoun products.

On our 10th anniversary, we want to thank everyone who has supported Zaytoun along the way. We have so many more plans, but we are delighted we have achieved what we set out to do: there is now a market in the United Kingdom for the delicious oil, dates, grains and nuts from Palestine. Equally important is that Palestinian farmers know that British customers appreciate their skills and the quality of their produce, cultivated in the same soil that they have farmed for generations.

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Site Map

- [About](#)
- [Our Team](#)
- [Articles](#)
- [Partners](#)
- [Contributors](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Terms & Conditions](#)

Categories

- [Business and food](#)
- [Chemicals in agriculture](#)
- [Farming](#)
- [Food and culture](#)
- [Food ethics](#)

- [Food policy](#)
- [Food systems](#)
- [Health](#)
- [News and reviews](#)

- [Food movement](#)
- [Our views](#)
- [Patrick's blog](#)
- [Resource of the week](#)
- [Videos](#)
- [What to eat](#)

[Back to top](#)