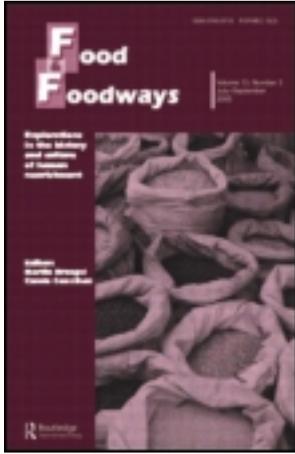


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Discourses of Distinction in Contemporary Palestinian Extra-Virgin Olive Oil Production

Anne Meneley^a

^a Department of Anthropology, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

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Discourses of Distinction in Contemporary Palestinian Extra-Virgin Olive Oil Production

ANNE MENELEY

Department of Anthropology, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

This article shows how Palestinian producers, faced with an “existential threat” to their own physical locality, seek to re-qualify their goods such as olive oil not only as elite goods based on the discourse of distinction of taste, but also in politically-inflected global discourses of distinction that attend to how the product is sourced, produced, and exchanged. Palestinian entrepreneurs and NGO-sponsored agricultural professionals are making olive oil “distinctive,” thereby seeking to locate these Palestinian products as elite goods within a global space of circulation and distinction. To produce this kind of extra-virgin olive oil, production practices must change and new skills must be inculcated, like organoleptic “tasting practices.” Ethical consumerism is promoted through fair trade strategies which seek to connect producer with consumer, embedding Palestinian olive oil with a “taste of solidarity.” “Quality” is perceived as a tool to gain international recognition of its olive oil and, by proxy, of Palestine itself.

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Address correspondence to Anne Meneley, Department of Anthropology, Trent University, 2140 East Bank Drive, DNA Building, C 208, Peterborough, ON, Canada K9J 7B8. E-mail: ameneley@gmail.com

DISCOURSES OF DISTINCTION IN CONTEMPORARY PALESTINIAN
EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL

For the Palestinians, olive oil is the reward of the autumn, the boast of the storeroom, the wealth of the family across centuries.

Mourid Barghouti

It might seem odd to have political causes like the freedom and survival of Palestine linked to elite food discourses, yet that is exactly what is happening in the transformation of Palestinian olive oil, as Palestinian olive oil producers try to reach external markets in Europe, North America, and Australia and New Zealand. I examine some examples of Palestinian entrepreneurs, NGO-sponsored agricultural professionals, and local activists who are making olive oil that can participate fully in what Bourdieu (1984) famously called “discourses of distinction” that valorize certain qualities of products with respect to elite consumer markets, seeking to locate these Palestinian products as elite goods with a global space of circulation. These discourses of distinction primarily circulate in well-educated, well-heeled circles primarily in North America (with profound inspiration from Europe), where food connoisseurship has become fashionable as individuals, who proudly define themselves as “foodies” and are attended by all kinds of media (cookbooks, cooking magazines, websites, television cooking shows, food websites and blogs), have proliferated. This article seeks to show how Palestinian producers, faced with an “existential threat” (to use a well-worn phrase) to their own physical locality, seek to re-qualify their goods not only as elite goods (by converting their olive oil from a local good suited for local tastes into a globally recognized discourse of distinction that prefers extra virgin olive oil, for example) but also in politically-inflected global discourses of distinction that attend to how the product is sourced, produced, and exchanged. These discourses of distinction are not enough: Palestinian extra virgin oil is fair trade wherein knowledge of the local conditions is important for its ability to circulate globally.

The article will discuss the new Palestinian olive oil producers who seek to relocate a Palestinian good within this politicized space of distinction. I examine here how this discourse of North Atlantic origin is drawn upon in the marketing of fair trade olive oil. The valorization of late of “craft” as opposed to “industrial” production in North America is also notable in these global discourses (see Weiss, “Making Pigs”; Paxson, “Locating Value”, *The Life of Cheese*). Of late, there has been widespread concern in the North Atlantic that in the face of the globalization of food, the “local” and the “traditional” are in danger of being erased through industrial food and the homogenization of “taste,” a theme championed by the Slow Food movement. However, in Palestine, the “local” itself is disappearing because of what

Hanafi calls the Israeli occupation's policies of "spaciocide," which involve the encroachment on Palestinian land and therefore the livelihood of Palestinian farmers. As well as extra-virginity, this article will discuss new forms of distinctions: organoleptic tasting practices, organic certifications, Denomination of Protected Origin (DOP), and ethical consumerism through fair trade strategies that seek to connect producer and consumer. Throughout, we see how "quality" is described as a "tool" for gaining external recognition of the excellence of their oil as a token of the recognition of Palestine. All of the practices described here are aimed toward an international audience and consumers, who are encouraged to engage in the "taste of solidarity" with the Palestinian farmers. Although there are many initiatives to transform the olive oil industry, I focus on two initiatives: that of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee (PARC) and that of Canaan Fair Trade LLC.¹

"TRADITIONAL" PALESTINIAN OIL: ZAYT AZ-ZATOUN

Before 1990, there had been a considerable market for Palestinian olive oil: working in the Gulf, a market which evaporated after Yasser Arafat's support of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, after which most Palestinians were expelled. The ex-pat Palestinian community valued what Trubek calls "the taste of place," especially as many of them had been forcibly displaced and valued the scents and tastes of Palestine as a form of remembering their homeland (Ben Ze'ev).² The thick, dark green oil which Palestinians favor evokes what David Sutton called "xenetia" for Greek exiles, the taste of the homeland. Traditionally, Palestinian olive oil was referred to as "zayt-az-zatoun" which literally means "oil from olives." The transformation of zayt-az-zatoun from a peasant staple to an elite luxury good, Palestinian extra virgin olive oil, involves changes in production emphasizing quality over quantity, as well as the introduction of an entirely new system of qualification for these oils. The term "extra-virgin" did not represent an "experience-near" concept at all, indeed was unknown, although there were traditionally distinctions between olive oil fit for human consumption and that fit for lamps. By contrast, the globally recognized and regulated appellation "extra-virgin" is of primary concern to olive oil professionals and those farmers who are trying to export their oil abroad. As a result, contemporary Palestinian olive oil is now divided between oils for the Palestinian palate and "Palestinian" oils for export.³ Most Palestinian farmers prefer the oil from their own farms or trees, which they keep for their daily use. Left-wing Israeli activists too find the "extra-virgin" Palestinian olive oil, while up to international standards of quality, oddly tasteless and unrelated to their memories of buying the thick, green oil while engaged in political activism in the West Bank. The consumption of this type of Palestinian olive oil becomes a gustatory emblem of their political stance.

EXTRA-VIRGINITY

As noted in Oxfam's EU funded report on olive oil in the West Bank, Palestinian olive oil is relatively expensive to produce in contrast to olive oils produced in other Mediterranean countries like Syria and Turkey. Palestinians cannot really compete for the low cost market; however, they can "develop high quality, specialized products which are attractive on the European market" (El-Jazeiri 2010; 27). This need to export to new markets has required dramatic changes in Palestinian production practices in order to meet internationally recognized standards of olive oil quality. This high quality is necessary for Palestinian oil to compete with olive oils from other countries. The Palestinian farmers, cooperative representatives, and olive oil professionals with whom I worked are trying to establish themselves as internationally recognized marketers and purveyors of the highest quality of olive oil. In doing so, Palestinian olive oil professionals, in consultation with European experts/advisors, are inculcated into elite discourses of distinction and the attendant practices of said experts/advisors.

Global bodies like the International Olive Council exert a powerful hegemony in taste-making and marketing of extra virgin olive oil. There are two kinds of rubrics that determine olive oil's extra-virginity and therefore saleability abroad. One is a variety of chemical tests, the most important of which is to determine acidity level, which must be 0.8%.⁴ The other, the organoleptic test (which I discuss below), is a little more complicated. As we will see, this can involve imprinting a kind of hegemonic sensorium onto the Palestinian palate.

PRODUCTION: A RETURN TO CRAFT?

In a piece-meal fashion, various training programs and technological assistance were given throughout the West Bank. This training involved reinventing the "craft" of olive oil production quite dramatically. Bracketing the fact that there was never a timeless "craft" of olive oil production (Avit-sur and colleagues, whatever their ideological flaws, show the regional and temporal differences in olive presses in Palestine), to a certain extent, the requirement of extra-virgin olive oil has meant a kind of "re-crafting" of production.

This traditional taste is, in part, a product of Palestinian traditions or "technes" of production, all of which must be changed to produce extra-virgin olive oils.⁵ Thus, EU advisors intervene in the *techne* of Palestinian farmers: The craft of traditional olive oil production was designed to produce the most olive oil, and this means producing a high acidity oil, which by definition excludes it from being classified as "extra virgin," which must have an acidity level of 0.8 or lower. Practices like the beating of the branches

with sticks to make the olives fall to the ground are replaced with hand picking, which reduces the bruising of the olives. It was common in the recent past to use inexpensive plastic bags to store the olives until it was time to take them to press, but European advisors recommend jute bags or plastic boxes with slats that allow air to circulate. Traditional Palestinian practices include one farmer (or extended family) keeping all of their olives in bags until all their olive trees could be harvested and then taking the lot to the mill. However, this means that the first-picked olives begin to ferment, sometimes so much that the bags themselves heat up and oil begins oozing out of them. This process of fermentation and the bruising of olives lead to a high acidity oil and a higher quantity of oil. But it certainly does not result in extra-virgin olive oil. The “new” co-operatives of farmers who produce extra virgin olive oil for export mandate that farmers in the cooperative must press their olives jointly every day to ensure high quality oil. The correct storing of oil is also important. Since the mid 20th century, it has been common for Palestinian farmers to store their olive oil in large plastic containers called *tanaka*, which hold 16 liters of olive oil, in the family home. In contrast, those who produce extra-virgin olive oil keep their oil in collective storage tanks on site at the NGO until it is bottled in dark green glass bottles which prevent the olive oil deteriorating because of exposure to light.

TASTING AND TALKING ABOUT TASTE: THE ORGANALEPTIC EVALUATION

Palestinian olive professionals are being inculcated with new kinds of tasting practices, developing what Mauss calls “techniques of the body” and also “tastes of excellence,” which conform to international standards of what high quality olive oil should taste like. On my first visit to Palestine in 2006, I heard from some of the olive oil professionals in Qira, with whom I had lunch, about the first olive oil tasting training session in Palestine, to be held in a few weeks after my departure. Of course, Palestinians are not the only ones who need to learn these new tasting “techniques of the body;” I had experienced informal olive oil tastings in Tuscany and Umbria but just for the pleasure of tasting the distinctive “terroir” of each of the DOP oils rather than as a professional tasting.

In 2007, I decided it would be useful to learn, as the Palestinian tasters did, how one might go about tasting professionally. I enrolled in an olive oil tasting course at the notable agricultural school, University of California at Davis. I, along with 60 or so others, was inculcated into the techne/science of olive oil tasting during the two-day seminar entitled “Sensory Evaluation of Olive Oil.” The course itself was a step in becoming a certified olive oil taster, and most of my classmates had some kind of involvement in the olive oil industry, primarily in the burgeoning California olive oil industry,

which had recently moved from producing the large black olives of the ilk that appear on takeout pizza to high-end, extra-virgin olive oil. As in Tuscany, California high-end wine producers are also producing their own estate brands of extra-virgin olive oil.

The UC Davis seminar was geared toward guiding the participants to identify and appreciate extra-virgin olive oil's qualities—its distinctive tastes—a practice which is modeled on wine tasting, nicely described by Michael Silverstein. While the organizers insisted that we were being inculcated into the *science* of sensory perception, there is undoubtedly a subjective element in the evaluation of olive oil, which we were taught to curtail in various ways. We tasted the oil in dark blue glasses to obscure our ability to evaluate the oil visually, focusing our attention on aroma and taste. We were being taught the aesthetics of sensory evaluation, so along with the blue glasses to mute our sense of sight, we were warned not to hinder our senses of taste and smell: "PARTICIPANTS MUST NOT WEAR ANY STRONGLY SCENTED PERFUMES, DEODORANTS OR HAND CREAMS AND REFRAIN FROM SMOKING DURING THE TESTING PROCESS." The ideal taster, then, appears in as unadulterated a form as possible in order to enable the senses to be able to appreciate the oils.

We were also taught to describe our aesthetic evaluations of smell and taste with particular linguistic phrases which are much more specific than "delicious" or "yucky." So we learned to use less self-evident descriptors to identify our "Perception of Positive Attributes" in our booklet "UC Sensory Course Olive Oil Profile Sheet." We may identify an oil as evoking flavors of "artichoke," "nettle," or "eucalyptus" or as having the qualities of "nuttness" or being "herbaceous" or "buttery." The UC Davis seminar did not spare us from the bad olive oil, which frequently masquerades as extra-virgin olive oil in supermarkets; as Tom Mueller noted, the trade in adulterated olive oil has been going on for centuries. I soon became cautious about taking a hearty swig from each glass, because some of the oils, like Safeway's Best Organic, were described in my Perception of Defects section as "fusty," "winey-vinegary," and "rancid," while my additional comments noted "aroma terrible, worse than taste." The label read, we were told, "Packaged in Italy," which is a sure flag for oil that is not actually from Italy or may not even be olive oil. In our tasting, other oils fared even worse than the Safeway brand, being described evoking a smell of "vomit" or "diapers" or "stale deep-fried foods" or even "crayons."

Interspersed with our tastings were lectures where our palates were allowed to "rest" and recuperate. One of the lectures astounded me with its excoriation of Middle Eastern olive oils, particularly those from Palestine, which appeared in the lecturer's description to be worse than the Safeway brand. The "primitive" forms that Middle Easterners used to process the olives were captured in slides, one from 1890 (described, erroneously and anachronistically, as being from Israel, which did not exist until 1948)

which depicted Palestinian women pressing olive oil by hand with a stone mortar. Palestinian oil was criticized by our lecturer as rancid and very high in acidity; he made unadorned reference to the ignorance of the natives of Palestine and their lack of “taste.” Until recently, Palestinian olive oil was between 2.5–3% acidity, and to the UC Davis instructor, morally reprehensible, as far as I could tell from his indignation, however much this high acidity oil is valued by the locals. The seminar proceeded without the instructor displaying any awareness or concern for the contemporary political situation in Palestine, where the West Bank is under the Israeli occupation, illegal Israeli settlements encroach on Palestinian farmland, or the settlers themselves who routinely cut down, burn, or poison Palestinian olive trees, prevent Palestinians from accessing their lands, which affects the quality of the oil that can be produced.⁶

EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL—ORGANOLEPTIC TESTING

The Palestinians, however, cannot ignore the current circumstances of their conditions of production under occupation. As Palestinians moved to export their olive oil to Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, the need for internal and international evaluation of their olive oil by professional tasters involved a great deal of pedagogy surrounding the practice of organoleptic evaluation based on taste, aroma, and color of the olive oil. While more diplomatic and certainly more sympathetic, I am sure, than my instructor at UC Davis, European experts, funded with NGO money, assured Palestinian producers that they would not have any luck exporting their olive oil if it did not conform to the International Olive Council’s standards for extra-virgin olive oil. These foreign interventions not only involve an extensive reorganization of production as described above but also professional certification. In order to certify an oil as extra virgin, one needs an organoleptic taste test, done by official tasters, trained in professional courses like the one described above. In the early 2000s, the first “new” olive oil cooperative was established in Qira (Salfit district), which followed the European production practices. In 2005, a prestigious French professional olive oil taster, Jean Marie Baldessari gave Qira, this cooperative’s olive oil, a very high grade on the organoleptic test. This positive review of the aesthetic quality of the Qira olive oil was instrumental to the collective’s distribution center in Ramallah, Az-Zaytoona getting a lucrative Swiss grant. This grant allowed Jean Marie Baldessari to hold a training session in 2006 for a group of 15 olive oil cooperative representatives from across Palestine in order to teach them how to taste and grade extra-virgin olive oil according to internationally recognized organoleptic standards. This process, as noted above, involves both shaping one’s palate, and learning to describe one’s tastes with reference to other tastes. In this respect, the olive oil tasters in

Palestine (and the farmers of the co-operatives, to a certain extent) need to shift their sensorial perceptions to international standards rather than a “taste of place” orientation.

The goal of the training workshop was to establish a Palestine-wide tasting board. In an interview in 2008 with one of the employees from PARC who had received a certificate to be an official olive oil taster, I asked how the Israeli occupation had affected what was supposed to be a Palestine-wide olive oil tasting board. He said that they had ended up having three tasting boards, one for the north, around Jenin, one for the central area, around Ramallah, and one for the south, the Bethlehem, Bayt Jala region, because of the difficulties of travel caused by Israeli military restrictions. The fragmentation of the elite olive oil tasting process mirrors the fragmentation of occupied Palestine itself; it is hard for the olive oil tasters to meet because of delays caused by checkpoints. Palestinian olive professionals also note the lack of coordination in donor money: There is no national plan for olive oil production as there is in Israel or Jordan, understandable as what is left of the West Bank is under Israeli occupation.

The French expert Baldessari was very enthusiastic about the possibility of establishing a DOP in the Qira region. This I found fascinating in a number of ways: It is primarily a European strategy for a “branding” of a particular region of land, varietal (type of grape or olive, for instance), and production process. Amy Trubek calls this the “taste of place” or *terroir*. In the case of Palestinian olive oil, the DOP suggestion is an ingenious idea to employ European discourses of distinction to, in effect, stake a claim to land. Heather Paxson’s work on American craft cheese producers talks about how the *terroir* concept becomes transformed as it moves from Europe to America and is instructive as it shows how the concept is affected by political, economic, and national circumstances (“Locating Value”). Despite the fact that it is *already* their land, Palestinians have seen so much of their land disappear, of late, behind the Separation Wall, which is widely acknowledged to be a blatant land grab, or to Israeli settlements, ever expanding into the West Bank. This goal of establishing a DOP for Palestinian olive oil should be understood as an attempt to claim the land and the olive trees as distinctively Palestinian and their oil as evidence of their fruitful tending of the land for centuries. This goal is similar in some senses to the attempts by Palestinians to get UNESCO heritage recognition for villages such as Battir, whose distinctive ancient terraces are under threat of destruction by the Separation Wall that has been responsible for the confiscation of much Palestinian land (Institute for Middle East Understanding [IMEU]). Although the DOP initiative went nowhere, the efforts to secure international recognition are notable.

Although there are many initiatives to transform Palestinian olive oil production, I will focus here on two: that of Palestine’s biggest agricultural NGO, PARC, based in Ramallah, founded in 1983; and that of Canaan, based in Jenin, founded in 2004. Both of these institutions have invested in getting

fair-trade certifications from international accreditation bodies like Fairtrade Labelling Organization (FLO) and local ones like the Palestinian Fair Trade Association (PFTA). Palestinian olive oil cannot “flow” easily into foreign markets without fair trade accreditation, which is in itself not enough as the olive oil for export must, as noted above, also meet the international chemical and organoleptic tests.

The rise of “ethical consumerism” in the form of “boycotts” designed to support farmers to earn a sustainable living is a prominent global food movement (Fridell, *Fair Trade Coffee*, “Fair Trade Coffee and Commodity”). The export of Palestinian olive oil cannot depend on quality alone but needs to have the consumer abroad made aware of the harsh conditions of production that Palestinian farmers face and the extent to which fair trade is helping their livelihood (Meneley 2011). For instance the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee (PARC), which has a Fair Trade Department (FTD) designed to help “farmers and women obtain fair prices for the products; the prices which ensure a decent life for them” (2007) is a member of IFAT (The International Fair Trade Association) and has partnerships with fair trade organizations and solidarity movements in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Japan.

EXTERNAL RECOGNITION OF QUALITY

The charismatic head of the olive oil division of PARC, Saleem Abu Ghazaleh, is well traveled, always looking for markets for Palestinian olive oil, even as far away as Japan. In an interview with me in 2009, Saleem articulated the notion that quality is a “tool” for Palestinian extra-virgin olive oil producers to get the international sales that will allow them to pay the farmers a higher price for their higher quality oil and encourage farmers to stay on their land and work it productively. The quality of the product is not an end in itself but a means to making a living. While seemingly addressed to an apolitical, internationally standardized “taste,” external recognition of the organoleptic quality of Palestinian olive oil holds a special political valence for Palestinians, a place that is continuously in danger of being denied or completely erased. Saleem told me that they had prepared a gift for US President Barack Obama, to be presented at his brief 2009 visit to the Palestinian Authority. Along with PARC’s highest quality extra-virgin olive oil and olive soap, it included a framed photograph of an ancient olive tree in the Palestinian village of Al-Walaja, dated to between 4000–5000 years old. The tree, named Al Badawi, is in danger of being damaged by the Separation Wall, which is designed to cut off Bethlehem from Jerusalem. Saleem’s point (and that of the Palestinian Authority, who had asked him to prepare the gift) was to remind the president about the ancientness of Palestinian inhabitation of their

land, to index the danger that the Separation Wall was doing to Palestinian patrimony, and to highlight the importance of olive oil to the Palestinian economy.

Saleem could hardly contain his delight when telling me that one of their organic olive oils had won the prestigious Puglian BIOL prize for organic oils. Saleem proudly told me about the Palestinian participation in the National Association for Specialty Food Trade Summer Fancy Food Show in New York in 2008. This organization holds both summer and winter Fancy Food Shows, which provide opportunities for the producers of specialty food to showcase their wares to restaurateurs, retailers, and media such as food network channels and food columnists. It is a key venue for promoting one's company products and one's region or nation. For instance, the Italian Pavilion, advertised in a pop-up on the website, highlights relatively high quality products like Di Cecco pasta and also well-known DOP specialty cheese like Grana Padano and Parmigiano Reggiano. The latter two are sponsored by *Legends From Europe*, a campaign financed with the contribution of the European Union and Italy as flagship products not only for Italy but for Europe ("Specialty Food" <<http://www.specialtyfood.com/fancy-food-show/>>).

The glossy Palestinian brochure showcases four Palestinian companies, all exhibiting extra-virgin olive oil (National Association of Specialty Food Trade). The exhibition was organized by PALTRADE, the Palestinian Trade Center, and funded by the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank. Included in the exhibition were: The Al-Reef Company, which is the marketing, promotional, and bottling company for PARC, responsible for negotiating the difficult task of exporting Palestinian olive oil through Israeli ports to several international destinations; Al-Zaytoon Agricultural Industrial Co., which is based in Salfit, the place where the first "modern" olive oil cooperative (i.e. one using European harvesting and pressing techniques) was established in a region which, as mentioned above, a Jean-Marie Baldessari suggested should become a DOP; The Mount of Green Olives Company, based in Ramallah, which is affiliated with the Union of Agricultural Workers Committee; and lastly, the Taybeh Olive Oil Company, which has a slightly different trajectory as its olive oil exports are imaginatively linked to its famous beer, Taybeh, the only beer produced in Palestine, and the only microbrew in the Middle East. Unlike the large Italian wine exporters, whose infrastructure allows them to export their estate olive oils with ease, Taybeh's olive oil is exported via PARC's Al-Reef Company. Nadim Khoury, Taybeh's founder, notes that during the closures during the second Intifada in 2000, the villagers could not pay school fees for their children, so they paid the priest in 16-liter *tanakas* of olive oil ("Taybeh Brewing: Olive Oil as School Tuition"). The priest turned to Khoury for help in marketing the oil. Italian olive oil experts advised him on the state-of-the-art pressing techniques as well as education in harvesting for the villagers of Taybeh.

Like Khoury, Nasser Abufarha is a notable marketer of Palestinian products. Both were educated in the United States. A former anthropologist and restaurateur, Abufarha is described by The Institute for Middle East Understanding as a “social entrepreneur.” He started Canaan Fair Trade in 2004 in the northern Jenin district. Nasser Abufarha opines that fair-trade, organic products are the best hope for Palestinian exports: “The future is in added-value, through environmental and social accountability” (cited in Hadid 2). It is a testimony to his status as a “social entrepreneur” that Abufarha uses the phrase “added-value” to “environmental and social accountability.” By 2008, Canaan had established a bottling and underground storage facility in Burqin whose capacity far exceeds that of PARC. With foreign aid and loans, including one from a UK-based ethical investment group, Shared Interest Society, Canaan has invested in state-of-the-art Italian olive milling technology from Alfa Laval in Florence and Albrigris from Verona for stainless steel storage tanks to prevent the olive oil from oxidizing (Canaan Fair Trade). Canaan’s promotional materials refer to their olive oil producing farmers as “artisans” at the same time as it emphasizes cutting-edge, European techno-scientific knowledge and equipment.

European influences abound. In a similar fashion to contemporary food festivals in Italy that celebrate a particular local food, since 2006, Canaan has hosted an Olive Festival in Jenin on the first Friday in November (see Leitch; Cavanagh). In 2008, I attended the Jenin Olive Festival with American friends who I had met olive picking with the Joint Advocacy Initiative in southern Palestine. One was importing fair-trade olive oil for his Presbyterian Church to sell as a means for showing support for the Palestinians under occupation. It was a hair-raising journey from Bethlehem to Jenin, as we had to take multiple forms of transport and were stopped at endless checkpoints where I was the designated “liar” as we had already learned that mentioning anything about olives to cranky young soldiers was bound to lead to delays. We joined a tour that Nasser Abufarha was giving of Canaan’s office and new storage and bottling facilities. This tour was primarily for solidarity groups who were interested, like my friend Peter, in importing olive oil and other Palestinian foodstuffs. Nasser gave a convincing presentation of the goals of Canaan to help the farmers and communities retain their land and make a viable living off of it.

The website of PARC contains annual reports which clearly are aimed to provide accountability to their donors. Canaan’s website (Canaan Fair Trade), on the other hand, is aimed toward the consumer and to the fair-trade goal of bringing the consumer and the producer together. They have sections like “Meet our Farmers,” “Meet our Women Producers,” and “Meet our Producer Communities.” These include photos and small biographies of the farmers, including testimonials of what participation in Canaan has meant to them. Some mention the scholarship initiative where Canaan provides four years of tuition at Al Najah University in Nablus

for worthy candidates from Canaan's farming families whose parents had not had the opportunity for higher education. Almost all express their appreciation to Canaan for improving their material and emotional well-being and their renewed interest in their land by providing a source of secure income, which allows them to invest in their land and their children's education. Many mention the opportunity to meet foreigners who are interested in olive oil and organic farming: Canaan sponsors an olive picking program during the fall olive harvest season, and participants stay with various farming families.⁷ Again, the importance of international recognition is present. For instance, farmer Abu Saleh Husan Elwakid, Alaraqa Village is quoted:

Before we started selling our olive oil I felt that the outside world used to think Palestine is a land without a people but now when they eat my oil they know that we are here. (Canaan Fair Trade)

The purchasing part of the Canaan Fair Trade website, where customers can place their orders online, indicates an attention to elite food discourses like *terroir* and sophisticated packaging. They even have an "estate" olive oil reminiscent of the estate olive oils of the elite Laudemio group in Italy (see Meneley, "Extra Virgin Olive Oil" for a description). A quote from their website indicates attention to organoleptic elements and the estate oil is described as "most fruity, balanced with a well-rounded taste" (Canaan Fair Trade). The "taste of place" that the *terroir* concept invokes is evident in the following quote: "Harvested from the remarkable olives of Canaan's own groves and neighboring farmers on 'Bayaada,' a hill touched by gentle breezes from the Mediterranean. . ." (Canaan Fair Trade). It further notes the quality of the soil which affects the flavor: "'Bayaada' olive trees, some as old as two-thousand years, grow in a limestone and red soil mix that produces a unique flavor, and the rearing and harvesting practices. . . Bayaada olives are grown with great care, and processed in small batches on the same day as they are picked." The oil not marketed as "estate oil" is identified by cultivar (which is again very common in expensive extra virgin olive oil produced in Europe): the Nabali cultivar, which is described as Palestine's native olive tree, and the Rumi cultivar, which is described as being cultivated in Palestine since the days of the Romans. Canaan's Rumi Olive Oil won a recognition award at the BioFach 2012 in Nuremburg, Germany and another for their Nabali oil at the same festival in 2013.⁸ Both are available in stylish dark glass bottles or metal containers. Many of the oils are described as "certified organic," and farmers who produce organic olive oil are paid a premium on top of the guaranteed fair-trade price. The organic label also helps the olive oil's circulation abroad. Some joke that Palestinian agricultural products are "naturally organic" because farmers could not even afford expensive foreign fertilizers, but others believe organic Palestinian agricultural products as health ensuring, but also

should be a political commitment, as is evident in the following quote on Canaan's website:

The only woman farmer in her coop, Um Hamza leads the other farmers in her village with vision and commitment to organic agriculture. When she thinks of people using pesticides or herbicide she feels outrage because she says *'we endure occupation and political hardship, the only friend to us is the land so how can we poison it with chemicals?'* (Canaan Fair Trade).

Environmentally friendly initiatives, like the Green Track Palestine, propose that Palestinian tractors be converted to operate on used falafel frying oil, while their newly initiated Organic Research Center encourages tax deductible donations.

A "Map in Farmer Terms" appears on the Canaan website, showing the local of all Canaan's contributing farmers; it is said to provide a contrast to political maps. However, the map depicts the areas where Palestinian farmers cannot access the lands on which they have farms, the lands on which they have only partial access, and the lands on which they have full access. A more "political" presentation would point out more explicitly that the lands to which Palestinian farmers had no or partial access to had been taken over by illegal Israeli settlements or army outposts. Yet, in the short autobiographies, one can hardly escape the presence of the Israeli occupation: Some men mention how much more rewarding it is to work their own land rather than be subject to harsh and humiliating work conditions in Israeli factories or in the Israeli controlled "industrial seam zones," which Sam Bahour has described as "economic prison zones." Others note the tender care taken of saplings planted by a young son now in Israeli prison.

In marketing Palestinian olive oil, consumers are encouraged to engage in a "taste of solidarity." Canaan supplies 95% of the olive oil used by Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap, the largest natural soap producer in the United States, and Abufarha claims that "Palestine may not be in the atlas, but we have put it on the shelves" (cited in IMEU, "Nasser Abufarha"). Indeed, Canaan's "organic, ethically produced" olive oil has had dramatic success selling to the high-end grocers in North America and Britain, such as Whole Foods and Sainsbury's, under the Alter Eco Fair Trade label; in FoodBizDaily, it was described as "The New Middle Eastern Oil—Good Taste, Good Karma" ("New Product"). Canaan's olive oil marketing, however sophisticated, can still come under attack because of its origin in Palestine. Debbie Schlus-sel, a right-wing blogger, called for a boycott of Whole Foods for carrying Canaan's olive oil which she describes as "terrorist" oil, and indeed objects to the word "Palestine" (Schlussel). Palestinian olive oil may reach international markets, but the political conditions where it is created follow it. In the most vitriolic fashion, the less-than-savory Israel supporters actively try to prevent

the circulation of Palestinian food products as well as de-humanizing the Palestinians and denying the existence of Palestine.

CONCLUSION

Palestinian food politics have been heavily inflected by discourses of distinction from abroad, which include strategies for rating “quality” of food products that determine or delimit food’s “exportability.” I have argued that the concept of the “local” is altered when the locality itself is under threat of disappearing through ongoing colonial encroachment. In addition, Palestinian products cannot travel internationally on discourses of distinction alone, but rather, their conditions of production (the Israeli occupation and its attendant constraints on the population) are embedded in their circulation. Most of the food products that circulate abroad do so under auspices of fair trade.

While some Palestinian extra-virgin oil travels as generic “Palestinian” oil, Canaan stresses the local in the ancient and distinctive cultivars of Palestine. Canaan also uses a common strategy of fair-trade marketing: to overcome the distance between the consumer and the producers, introducing them both virtually in the short autobiographies on their web page and through olive picking programs where potential importers stay with olive-producing families. By drawing on international discourses and catering to export markets of “quality” goods, Palestinian food producers aim to expand the spacio-politics of “Palestinian food.” In so doing, by requalifying their goods, they are also altering the material qualities of food made by, if not for, Palestinians. This re-qualification has meant changing production practices and introducing new forms of embodied practices, like tasting. While there are many valid criticisms of fair-trade initiatives, and neither Canaan nor PARC can ameliorate the economic condition of all Palestinian farmers under Israeli occupation, one must also remember that the question of visibility and international recognition is so important in a place where both people and place are constantly denied. Hence the idea of quality as a “tool” to gain international recognition of their quality produce, and by extension, of Palestine itself.

NOTES

1. This article is based on data from a preliminary field trip to Palestine in April 2006; this short trip with a group affiliated with the British branch of Jews for Justice who imported Palestinian olive oil was enormously important in formulating my project, which was subsequently funded by Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I conducted participant observation with Palestinian families and international volunteers in the fall of 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011. I made additional fieldtrips in spring of 2007, 2008, and 2009 to interview olive oil producers and professionals (those involved in running co-ops, NGOs, testers, tasters, and marketers) when the hectic olive pressing season was over. For the past five years, I have conducted participant observation with volunteers who

participate in distributing Palestinian olive oil in Toronto, Washington, and London. I have also conducted ongoing archival research, as much of the activism surrounding the distribution of Palestinian olive oil is web based. This kind of “multi-sited” (Marcus) field research is necessary for this project that considers how the production, consumption, and circulation of food commodities are fundamentally connected.

2. Palestinians in the United States told me of how they welcomed gifts of olive oil from relatives and friends in Palestine.

3. Walker and Manning note a similar distinction in the production of Georgian wine.

4. Both PARC and Canaan have in-house chemical testers, although external testers are used for organic certifications and exports to the EU. Other smaller co-operatives send their oil to the Chemistry Department at Bir Zeit University, at least in the Ramallah district.

5. Please see Heath and Meneley (2007) for a discussion of *techne* and technoscience in contemporary food production, and Anne Meneley (2007) for a discussion of the transformation of olive oil production in Tuscany.

6. Please see Meneley (2008) for the hindrances on producing extra-virgin olive oil as a result of the Israeli occupation.

7. Both the olive-picking tours and the Olive Festival are not only announced on Canaan’s website but also on their Facebook page.

8. These awards were announced on specialtyfoods.com.

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