



Time in a Bottle

The Uneasy Circulation of Palestinian Olive Oil

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Olive farmer argues with Israeli soldier at Salim, near Nablus.

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Olive oil has been a central element of Palestinian agriculture for centuries. It is a relatively durable food commodity, unlike fresh produce such as strawberries or tomatoes, which rot quickly in the sun. Unlike wine, however, olive oil does not improve with age, and is best consumed within a year or two of its production. It is extremely sensitive to exposure to heat, air and light, which cause the quality of the oil to deteriorate rapidly. It is also expensive to store and ship; the days of the Roman terracotta amphorae are gone, and now olive oil is often stored in glass bottles, heavy and easily breakable. These particular qualities of olive oil plague all producers who wish to sell their surplus, but Palestinian olive oil producers face additional challenges when trying to produce and export their oil because of the Israeli occupation.

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As Palestinians produce more olive oil than they consume, they need to find markets for the excess. Two important markets were lost in the last two decades: the Palestinian workers in the Gulf states who were evicted after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and Jordan, because around the same time, King Hussein closed the border to Palestinian oil to encourage Jordan's own olive oil production. Palestinian producers and marketers are often reluctant to sell to large Israeli firms, who buy olive oil from poor farmers for less than it costs to produce it. (There is also considerable resentment at the fact that the fruit of Palestinian labor is then sold as a "Product of Israel," extending the occupation into the culinary realm.) Palestinian olive oil producers now aim at markets in Great Britain, France, the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Consumers abroad often buy Palestinian olive oil out of a desire to help the Palestinian cause, but are



unwilling, even for the sake of solidarity, to do so if the oil is not graded as “extra virgin,” a relatively recent designation of quality established by the International Olive Oil Council. The designation means that a chemical analysis of the oil affirms an acidity level of at least 0.8 percent and that the oil passes an organoleptic taste test where its flavor is determined to have no flaws.

“Extra virgin” is a term with little currency in everyday Palestinian life. Traditionally produced Palestinian olive oil, with its thick consistency, heady fragrance and dark green color, is beloved of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; of Palestinians forced from their land and homes in 1948; and of Israeli peace activists and leftists. Yet it cannot be graded as extra virgin by international standards because of its high acidity level; it also diverges quite markedly in taste from the international hegemonic standard. Palestinian olive oil traditionally had a much higher

acidity level of 2.5 to 4 percent,¹ and the taste of the “new” oil seems but a pale reflection of the oil Palestinians recall with such affection. Olive oil plays a significant role in what Nadia Serematakis calls “secondary commensality,” connecting displaced Palestinians with a lost homeland. References to this role for olives abound in Palestinian cultural production. In Najwa Qa’war Farah’s short story, for instance, the protagonist Abu Ibrahim, his heart broken by his forced exile to Lebanon, has only olives to connect him to Palestine. “He lived in dread that the jars of oil and olives he’d brought with him should all be consumed, for it was only when he tasted them that his misery would leave him briefly.”²

In the last two decades, there have been several initiatives to transform Palestinian olive oil production, funded by the US Agency for International Development, the European Union and individual EU countries, primarily Italy and Spain,

in order to bring Palestinian oil up to the standard where it can be graded as “extra virgin.” The EU in particular has very particular customs requirements about the chemical content of foreign-produced olive oil. This reorientation of the Palestinian olive oil market toward international consumers has required dramatic transformations in the cultivation, harvesting and pressing of olives—in turn rendering the olive oil industry ever more sensitive to time.

Time on Their Hands

The cumulative loss of labor opportunities in Israel after the 1987–1993 *intifada*, and in the Gulf after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, left many Palestinians unemployed and with time on their hands. The enforced idleness deepened in late 2000 with the second *intifada* when the Israeli military imposed a lockdown on entire districts like Salfit and Jenin, blocking people and goods from entry or exit. In the words of one olive oil producer, these closures led to a kind of involuntary “reruralization” of the West Bank. The revitalization of the olive oil industry was a way of providing meaningful work to Palestinian farmers, and therefore enough income to encourage them to stay on their land, and a way of alleviating the boredom produced by checkpoints, curfews and closures, the flip side of the terrifying incursions of the Israeli army. It is ironic indeed that the agricultural labor undervalued when the more lucrative Gulf and Israel were open is revalued now that the Palestinian population has been bottled up by intensified Israeli occupation.

Advisers from France, Spain and Italy recommended changes in the Palestinian olive oil industry, in accordance with the latest European techniques for producing high-quality extra virgin oil. These foreign experts pushed for a holistic approach to olive production, “from tree to table,” seeking to reshape every aspect of cultivation, harvesting, processing, bottling and shipping. For instance, foreign experts recommended that Palestinian farmers give up plowing with a tractor directly under the tree’s canopy, as this disrupts the shallow root system of the native olive trees, adapted as they are to Palestine’s dry climate. Olive cultivation, like any other kind of agriculture, is governed by seasonal time. October is the month for spreading organic fertilizer (sheep, cow or chicken manure), then tilling the soil (foreign experts have recommended horizontal instead of vertical tilling on the terraces, in order to preserve water). In Palestine, olive production has a biannual cycle of poor and plentiful harvests, and pruning practices shift accordingly. In February and March the trees are pruned with scissors in the year of a good harvest, but with saws before a bad year. June is the month where traps must be put out for the olive fly: Infected olives rot on the branch. In August and September, the foreign experts encourage frequent irrigation but do not press the point because many farmers do not have access to wells, as Israel will not allow

Palestinians to dig wells without a permit that is difficult to obtain. All of these cultivation activities need to be carried out according to the seasonal cycle, yet for many Palestinian farmers seasonal agricultural time is disrupted by what one might call “occupation time.” This concept is closely related to what anthropologist Jeff Halper has defined as the Israeli “matrix of control”: the military bases, outposts and checkpoints in the West Bank; the Israeli-built “separation barrier” that encloses illegal settlements, along with a good deal of Palestinian agricultural land, on the “Israeli” side; and the bewildering thicket of residence and travel permits that hinders the movement of Palestinians and the few commodities they have available for global circulation. In addition, illegal Israeli settlements, protected by the Israeli army, have expanded apace, often next to, or obliterating, Palestinian olive groves. These elements combine to distort the time horizon of olive oil production, irrespective of the requirements of the seasons.

The many farmers whose land is close to a military outpost or a bypass road connecting settlements to Israel proper, or whose land is walled off from the village by the “separation barrier,” are required to get special permission to gain access to their own land. Egress is through small “agricultural gates” in the wall, which may or may not be open when the farmer needs to pass. Those Palestinians whose land lies close to an illegal settlement or outpost are in particular danger. Settlers are apt arbitrarily to declare a “security zone”; Palestinians who come close, even if they own the land, are at risk of being beaten or shot.

By far the most sensitive time, in both the seasonal and bureaucratic-military senses, is the olive harvest. For high-quality, low-acidity oil, it is best to pick olives when they are half-green and half-black; they should be harvested by hand, not by beating the branch with a stick, which is faster, but can damage the fruit, raising the acidity level. The olives should be collected and stored in a ventilated plastic box, and taken directly to a mill that uses cold processing. All of these processes should be undertaken with the utmost speed. A friend told me of his memories of picking olives as a child, when children were given time off school to help with the harvest. His family would pack food, cooking implements and drums, and then after a hard day’s picking, they would have a celebratory meal. The extended family would camp out in the olive groves. Polyphonic songs were common, when men in the trees would sing one humorous refrain and women would answer with another. But for those whose land lies close to a settlement or army encampment, the fear of being shot has taken the joy out of olive picking. The olive harvest has gone from being a time of communal hard work and celebration to being one of isolation, tension and fear.

The problem is the direct interference in the olive harvest by Israeli settlers, who harass the pickers, and by the army, which seldom intervenes to stop the settlers’ attacks, and

administers the bureaucratic restrictions upon the number of family members who will be given access to the land. Harvesting is the most labor-intensive phase of the agricultural cycle, but in areas near settlements or military bases, permission is only given to the nuclear family members, who cannot possibly pick all their olives quickly enough by themselves. If the olives are left to sit, they begin to rot, and the acidity level of the oil produced from them rises. Of late, groups of international volunteers have come to help pick the olives of vulnerable farmers and also provide a human shield against army or settler harassment.

Though Palestinians’ agricultural labor has been revalued when bottled as extra virgin olive oil, it can also be cheapened by “occupation time,” as Palestinians attempt to distribute their oil to global consumers. E. P. Thompson’s chapter “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism” from *The Making of the English Working Class* notes the transformation from agricultural time, structured by seasons

associated with varied tasks, to “clock time,” which organized the working hours of industry to extract maximum surplus value from the workers. “Clock time” grew faster and faster as capitalism developed, with advances in communication and transportation eventually making it possible for agricultural products susceptible to spoilage, like extra virgin olive oil, to be exported intact around the world in a timely fashion. Such late capitalist, “just in time” production is the mode to which Palestinian olive growers aspire, but the occupation has effectively obstructed them from realizing the benefits that





Jewish settler tries to chase Palestinians away from their olive groves in Salim, near Nablus.

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their economy desperately needs. “Occupation time” works to prevent Palestinians from realizing the value of their labor, as embedded in the product of extra virgin olive oil, at the same time as it interferes with the seasonal rhythms of old. It is its own temporal category.

Time-Space Distortion

Olive oil travels on the same roads as Palestinians do, and suffers the same delays. It takes far longer to traverse the

tiny territory of the West Bank than it should. The newly constructed bypass highways provide efficient transport for settlers who work in Israel, but Palestinians are forbidden to use them. The highways that serve the Palestinian population are not only poorly maintained by comparison, but they are interrupted by frequent Israeli checkpoints, some of them massive, permanent structures where people are often forced to make long, boring, thirsty and humiliating waits. The fact that a Palestinian woman felt compelled to invent “queuing socks” to alleviate the stress on the feet produced by hours

of standing is a testimony to how long these waits can be.³ Temporary roadblocks known as “flying checkpoints,” in an unintentional oxymoron, also appear without warning. And then there is the unsightly “separation barrier,” multiple barbed-wire fences or, in many spots, 25 feet of concrete rising to cut off roads and dirt tracks from top to bottom of the West Bank.

“Here in this country you cannot plan!” exclaimed the head of the olive oil division of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee (PARC), an NGO founded in 1983 and designed to help farmers stay on their land, upon encountering a flying checkpoint on the road to Jericho. He said he had learned, in his time with PARC, every back road that might provide an escape from the monotony of waiting and the potential harassment by the Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint. For olive oil fares no better than people’s feet: Its quality and market value deteriorate rapidly in the heat and the sun. The unpredictability of the flying checkpoints severely distorts the ability of olive oil professionals to predict how much time it will take for them and their oil to get from one part of the West Bank to another. Since the second *intifada* erupted, said the head of Zaytoona, an olive oil company based in Ramallah, he no longer fixes the time of business appointments, because there is no way to know whether there will be new flying checkpoints or lines at the permanent checkpoints.

Along with chemical analysis to determine acidity and sterol count, a test that can be performed at universities in Nablus, Ramallah and Bethlehem, or at the Ministry of Agriculture, high-quality extra virgin olive oil needs to be anointed as “without defects” by a certified olive tasting board. As part of the transformation of the industry to serve global markets, European tasting experts now train Palestinians to be professional tasters. There are three tasting panels, one for the south of the West Bank, one for the central part and one for the north. Each batch of oil needs to be judged by seven or eight professional tasters, but the combination of unpredictability of travel and the restrictive nature of many Palestinians’ permits has necessitated the superfluous triplication, another result of Israeli efforts to fragment the West Bank.

My first visit to a Palestinian olive oil cooperative was in Qira, in the Salfit district. The day before, on my way north from Jerusalem, I had navigated the Qalandiya checkpoint, with its crowds of buses and taxis, for the first time. Once in Ramallah, I had to wait for a man who had the correct permit to accompany me to Salfit. The bus in which we rode was stopped twice at flying checkpoints, where all the young male passengers had to disembark. Yet deep into my interview with Hamid, head of the olive oil cooperative, he had not mentioned these obvious obstacles to his work. With deliberate naïveté, I asked: “How does all this permit and road-block stuff affect your capacity to export your oil?” Laughing and looking at me as if I were from Mars, he answered, “Oh, in every single way, every single second!” As the Palestinians

have no airport or seaport, the facilities built in Gaza in the 1990s having been destroyed and cut off from the West Bank by Israel, their oil has to depart through the Israeli port at Haifa. (Oil from the southern West Bank commonly goes through the southern Israeli port of Ashdod.) Before it goes to Haifa, the oil is sold to PARC. When the *intifada*-era curfews started in Qira, a PARC volunteer moved from house to house to collect olive oil from each farmer. And then there were the travel permits. PARC needed a courier with an East Jerusalem ID card, whose bearers have Israeli residency and travel documents (but not citizenship), and hence can move more freely than other Palestinians from one city to another, or, in the cases of Nablus and Hebron, from one part of the same city to another. Even when the oil arrives in Haifa, there is no guarantee that it will be shipped with any speed. In fact, said Hamid wearily, “They [the Israelis] always try to stop the oil.” PARC therefore packs it very well, insulating the bottles in anticipation that the shipment may sit for several months in port. Hamid suspected that oil destined for an Italian Palestine solidarity group was sent to a fair trade distributor in Britain out of deliberate malevolence.

Another olive professional, head of a group of olive oil cooperatives in Bethlehem, spoke of an occasion when a shipment languished in Ashdod “for 25 days in the sun.” The olive oil was completely ruined. Another time their oil sat in Haifa’s port for six months, and yet another time, the Israelis broke so many of the bottles that the oil could not be shipped. This professional said his organization always insures the oil before it is shipped, to guard against delays. In the past, PARC was able to fill shipping containers with pallets of carefully packed olive oil directly from its bottling facility in al-Ram, a suburb of East Jerusalem. But Israel abruptly changed the procedures, requiring that the pallets be shipped to the Beitunia checkpoint near Ramallah where there is no storage facility. There the olive oil sits in the sun until it is searched and waved on to Ashdod, where it undergoes another search before it is packed in containers and shipped. PARC also needs to obtain permission from the military to ship the oil, a process that can take from 24 hours to three weeks. PARC has clients of long standing in the US and Japan, but the conditions of circulation (or lack thereof) of Palestinian olive oil mean that long-term marketing plans and reliability of delivery, essential for establishing consumer trust, are severely hampered. I met one PARC client (or “partner,” as they called her) in Ramallah. She is a Jewish American woman who expressed her opposition to Israeli policies in the West Bank by starting a non-profit olive oil company to sell Palestinian oil to private customers, at small fair trade shops and fundraising events. She runs her organization on a shoestring budget, often paying for shipments out of pocket, so any delay in her olive oil shipment is nerve-wracking. If she does not receive the bill of lading on time, she is still charged storage fees in the US.

It is not only the Israeli state that can hold up olive oil deliveries: The shipment of a man who sold Palestinian oil through his Presbyterian Church network was stopped at the US border because the label said “Product of Palestine” and the US does not recognize “Palestine” as a state. Every year, the annual work party for Zatoun, a Canadian non-profit that depends on volunteers to pack the olive oil into 12-bottle boxes and stuff brochures into envelopes, is postponed because Canada Customs has stopped the shipment to search it, without explanation, but with a charge of Cdn \$1,200, a significant sum for this small operation.

Sending olive oil through the port of ‘Aqaba in Jordan is no solution to the problems of going through Israeli ports, because the road to ‘Aqaba, with delays at the Israeli-controlled border bridges, takes two days. So Palestinians only use the ‘Aqaba facility when shipping to Arab states like Saudi Arabia that will not accept goods from an Israeli port. Since the majority of their exports now go to the US, EU, Canada and Japan, the Palestinians continue to ship through Haifa or Ashdod, because “occupation time” notwithstanding, the ports themselves are only an hour away. They can only insure the oil and hope the shipments will proceed smoothly.

Trees and Time

He had gone to his olive trees. They consoled him, but they also gave him pain. He felt personally related to each of them. He loved their graceful beauty and faithful generosity. The grove was a holy place for him. He was intimately acquainted with each breeze that rustled the shimmering leaves. Weren't they the children of last summer's winds?... These olive trees had witnessed the era of the Turkish sultans. They had survived the British Mandate. They remained now, unperturbed and strong, combating time itself with their silent endurance and devotion. Why couldn't he be like them? Why must he desert them? Why could he not endure steadfastly, as they endured?

—Najwa Qa'war Farah, “The Worst of Two Choices: or, The Forsaken Olive Trees”⁴

The above passage captures, and the short story's title suggests, the terrible choice facing families torn apart during the mass displacement of Palestinians during the 1948 war, a choice between the land and the trees and reunification with relatives who had fled or been driven from their homes. The protagonist, Abu Ibrahim, notes the capacity of the olive tree to “combat time” with its endurance. The olive tree is a widely recognized symbol of Palestinians' steadfastness in the face of the appropriation and/or occupation of their land. The longevity of olive trees contests Israeli claims that the land was barren before the Zionist settlers arrived. The terraces on which many of the olive trees are planted attest to the ancientness of cultivation, since terraces do not occur naturally but rather require much hewing of stone and hauling of infill earth. Since the terraces require maintenance lest they be washed out, they are signs

of long-standing Palestinian investment in the land and its productivity. The trees and the terraces serve as a means of transference of the properties of time into the properties of space; the age of the olive trees is a material manifestation of Palestinians' connection to their land. Mature olive trees are supposed to remain rooted, to remain entwined with the land and the people who own them and tend them.

One of the more shocking practices of the Israeli occupation has been the uprooting of these supposedly immovable objects, symbolically and materially breaking the long-lived and seemingly inalienable connection between person, olive tree and land. Israel here transgresses an ethical precept enshrined in the Old Testament: “Even if you are at war with a city...you must not destroy its trees for the tree of the field is man's life.” (Deuteronomy 20: 19–20) It is particularly egregious to see the ancient olive trees dug up from Palestinian land adorning the entrance to new settlements like Ma'ale Adumim and Pisgat Ze'ev.

The semiotic struggle between Israel and the Palestinians over trees has been noted by Carol Bardenstein, Nasser Abufarha and Shaul Cohen, to name a few.⁵ Michael Fischer rather dismissively refers to “olive narratives” as “one-eyed” nostalgic narratives and to olives as one of the several “icons of ecology” that have been contested.⁶ True, olive trees are an important element of the Palestinian nationalist imagery in direct confrontation with Israeli nationalist imagery claiming that the land Israel now occupies was empty of people. Yet olive trees and olive oil are not only images; they are an integral part of the efforts to keep land in Palestinian hands. While Fischer notes that much contemporary Palestinian olive oil cannot be sold, in contrast to the vibrant long-distance trade in olive oil and olive oil soap centered in nineteenth-century Nablus,⁷ he does not mention the obvious reasons why not: the infrastructure of containment imposed by the Israeli occupation, which distorts time as much as space. If olive trees are “icons of ecology,” icons of rootedness, then olive oil is an icon of arrested circulation, as the movement of bottles of oil, bottled Palestinian labor time, is itself bottled up within the occupation time of the Israeli state. ■

Endnotes

1 Mort Rosenblum, *Olives: The Life and Lore of a Noble Fruit* (New York: North Point Press, 1996), p. 64.

2 Najwa Qa'war Farah, “The Worst of Two Choices: or, The Forsaken Olive Trees” [1963] (trans. Ruth Lenox and Thomas G. Ezy), in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 440.

3 BBC News, March 19, 2007.

4 Farah, p. 438.

5 Nasser Abufarha, “Land of Symbols: Cactus, Poppies, Orange and Olive Trees in Palestine,” *Identities* 15/3 (May 2008); Carol Bardenstein, “Trees, Forests and the Shaping of Palestinian and Israeli Collective Memory,” in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2009); Shaul Cohen, *The Politics of Planting: Israeli-Palestinian Competition for Control of Land in the Jerusalem Periphery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

6 Michael Fischer, “Changing Palestine-Israel Ecologies: Narratives of Water, Land, Conflict and Political Economy, Then and Now, and Life to Come,” *Cultural Politics* 2/2 (July 2006).

7 Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).