

Fairtrade: making a real difference to farmers in Palestine

Cathi Pawson of Fairtrade company Zaytoun CIC, explains how Fairtrade is helping Palestinian rural communities reclaim their voice



Dates are just one of the products of Palestine. Photograph: Mohammed Saber/EPA

Cathi Pawson

Zaytoun CIC was launched a decade ago as a creative response to the story of Palestinian farmers' loss of land and livelihoods under Israeli occupation. Starting with olive farmers who were selling their oil at a price below the cost of production to Israeli traders, Zaytoun sought and found a market in the UK which guaranteed producers sales at a fair price.

Working with Fairtrade Foundation to agree on standards for Fairtrade olive oil, in 2009 Palestinian producers were the first in the world to sell Fairtrade certified oil. Today, Zaytoun's range includes Medjoul dates, almonds, herbs, maftoul and freekeh as well as olive oil soap, and is sold throughout the UK in shops and through a private network of Fairtrade enthusiasts and supporters of justice for Palestine.



Palestinian producers were the first in the world to sell Fairtrade certified oil. Photograph: Nik Pickard/PR

Every Palestinian is a farmer, because each family owns a grove of olive trees handed down through generations, tended on ancient terraced hills and harvested every autumn by the whole family - from small children to grandparents. The link of the Palestinian people to their land is

embedded in the foods Zaytoun sells, as is the heritage and craft of the farmers who grow them. Yet the conditions for farmers continue to deteriorate.

With an ongoing increase in new construction by Israeli settlers in the West Bank, farmland is stolen, trees are burnt and cut down and water resources reallocated to the settlers. Exclusion zones and Israeli-only service roads put many more acres of farmland out of reach. All of this, in addition to severe restrictions on access to farmland through the Separation Wall, and blocks to movement of people and goods through the network of checkpoints, has a devastating impact on farmers' incomes.

Finding and developing a market in the UK for Palestinian produce has been a successful way to support rural communities, as well as to highlight the plight of families facing land grabs, intimidation and violence on their land. Because the products have to compete with other products from around the world, often from subsidised agriculture, Fairtrade and organic certification has been key to establish a point of difference on shop shelves. Palestinian agriculture is naturally more organic than in other, more developed countries, and the rich heritage of handmade food and special local varieties has recently made Palestinian food more popular in delicatessens and fine foods customers.



Palestinian agriculture is naturally more organic than in other, more developed countries. Photograph: Nik Pickard/PR

Because the import of goods is so restricted, it is often a struggle for Palestinian exporters and manufacturers to obtain basic materials such as high quality packaging. Despite these challenges, in the last decade farmers and processors have worked with Zaytoun to improve packaging so that it reflects the artisan nature of the products sold.

According to the World Bank, a quarter of the Palestinian workforce remains unemployed, and a quarter of the Palestinian population still lives in poverty. Making a living from farming is a good option for increasing numbers of families whose breadwinners find employment hard to find, and where travel to work is difficult due to checkpoints and permit restrictions.

Women are coming on board more than ever as breadwinners, finding their traditional skills in the kitchen are useful when working together to roll maftoul, the nutty large-grain Palestinian couscous, or gathering herbs for the iconic za'atar mixture that goes so well with the olive oil and fresh bread. Working within cooperative structures gives them additional skills in decision-making, conflict resolution and shared strategy, raising their confidence and their profile in their villages.

Sadly though, olive trees continue to be burnt and uprooted by settlers and the Israeli army. Many of these are hundreds of years old, some over 1,000. Zaytoun sells tree sponsorship called

Trees for Life, which aims to provide olive and almond saplings to Palestinian fair trade and organic farmers. The program covers the majority of the cost but the farmers pay a symbolic amount as demonstration of their commitment to stay on the land and in farming. Many Zaytoun customer and buyer groups have sponsored saplings – a gift of hope and a future.

Our commitment to Palestinian producers goes beyond the sales opportunity. We work together with them to trial new products and bring product quality and packaging up to exacting UK standards. We also get our products certified as Fairtrade and organic wherever possible.

An expanding UK market and Fairtrade premiums have really made a difference to many farmers, who use the premiums for community projects including buying new equipment for schools, agricultural tools for the co-op, and computers for village youth centres. Although it was a new concept ten years ago, farmers were quick to realise the benefits that Fairtrade has brought them. In their eyes, though, it's not just about the money. It's about reclaiming a voice, a way to talk about their lives as farmers, as families and as communities under an occupation that often stifles economic development and cultural expression.

Cathi Pawson is co-founder of Fairtrade company Zaytoun CIC

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