



FEATURE

THE COLOUR OF MONEY [\(L\)](#)

# POURING OIL ON TROUBLED WATER

As Zaytoun celebrates its tenth olive harvest in Palestine, co-founder Cathi Pawson looks back at a time when she was told her plan to import a Fairtrade Palestinian olive oil was impossible.

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2003, after a closure lasting three years, Palestinian borders reopened. In those years of isolation imposed by the Israeli occupation, Palestinian olive farmers had lost traditional overseas markets in the Gulf States for their olive oil. With a glut of high quality olive oil from a bumper harvest, Israeli traders were buying it up at below the cost of production.

In that same year, Heather Masoud and I were staying with rural Palestinian communities to witness the effects of the occupation and intervene non-violently where requested. It was clear that the years of isolation and war had taken their toll on Palestinian families, many of whom lived below the poverty line.

So we sent out an email asking friends and family to commit to buying Palestinian olive oil at a fair price. Our friends agreed but most people said, “It can’t be done”. Access and movement was restricted in Palestine, and economic activity had been stifled under the occupation, but these were the very barriers were what inspired us to take action. 10 years on, Zaytoun has bought £3.5 million worth in products from Palestinian producers, launched the world’s first Fairtrade olive oil and sold 300 tonnes of oil to British consumers.

It hasn’t been easy. When we initially explained the concept of Fairtrade to farmers, they were sceptical. Fairtrade and organic certification requires a commitment of time, energy and money – and it wasn’t immediately obvious to farmers how they would benefit. Enough of them agreed to give it a go, however, and in collaboration with Canaan Fair Trade and the Fairtrade Foundation we started work toward the certification of the world’s first ever Fairtrade olive oil.

We also worked with families growing dates, almonds, maftoul and herbs and we began bringing customers out to Palestine. Those encounters were life-changing for many of the visitors who were taken aback by the sheer scale of hardship for farmers. We also invited farmers over here during Fairtrade Fortnight so they could get to know the market, and share the story of their land and communities with our customers.

**“We don’t want aid, we want a strong Palestinian economy. You supporting us by buying our products is far more**

# of an impact than any other type of support.”

Odeh Qadi, Palestinian farmer

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In the 10 years since we started Zaytoun, the situation for farming families across the West Bank has deteriorated. Illegal settlements continue to grow, on fertile land stolen from around Palestinian villages, and land access is still highly restricted, resulting in high unemployment and a growing poverty rate.

As I write this, I have read a report from Burin, one of the villages where our annual harvest team picks. Closures have cut inhabitants off from travel for work, study or socialising, so it is unclear how much of the harvest will be brought home through the roadblocks and checkpoints.

Regardless of these difficulties, Palestinian farmers work hard to supply Zaytoun customers. They have won awards for the high quality of their products and sales continue to increase, not only among the politically motivated, but among customers who love artisan food and care about its provenance.

Embedded in the products is the love of the Palestinian people for their land, their trees and the rich traditions of growing and cooking. As farmer Odeh Qadi explains: “We don’t want aid, we want a strong Palestinian economy. I respect and appreciate every single penny spent on buying this fair-trade Palestinian olive oil, because this money helps farmers in Palestine to stay on their land, and live in dignity regardless of the difficult situation we live in. You supporting us by buying our products is far more of an impact than any other type of support.”

If you would like to support Palestinian farmers staying on their land, you can sponsor the planting of new saplings to replace those destroyed by settlers or the army.

(<http://www.zaytoun.org/products/catalogue/trees-for-life/>).

Cathi Pawson, co-founder, Zaytoun

## CV ZAYTOUN

Heather Massoud and Cathi Pawson founded Zaytoun in 2004, inspired by peace missions to Palestine. The social enterprise was initially funded by hundreds of people willing to put up their money in advance of receiving their oil. It soon became clear that there was a huge demand for fairtrade Palestinian products in the UK. In 2006 a loan from Triodos Bank enabled the Zaytoun to place another order with the Palestinian producers, and they began to bring in not only oil but maftoul (couscous), dates, za'atar spice, almonds and soap. In 2009 Zaytoun launched the world's first ever Fairtrade olive oil.

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