

La Política del Aceite

the politics of (cooking) oil

by Yoly Zentella

Yo soy Chicana y en mi cocina I cook some pretty suave food! Sometimes frying or sauteing is called for—curry, omelettes, tacos, pollo—all taste outstanding cooked with the good fats, grass fed cow milk Irish butter, and olive oil from Canaan, ancient Palestine.

Growing up in New York City, my Mexicana mom and her Puertorriqueña friends used aceite de olivo Goya, importado de España, a colonizer of the Americas. At that time my understanding of food consisted of: my mother, the food she prepared and aceite Goya. Simple. Who would have thought that years later, olive oil, a familiar household staple, would sustain the impact of colonialism and be a player in activism! That ripe olives picked from ancient trees would be the focus of violence, arson, malicious destruction, and sometimes murder of Palestinian farmers and family members by Israeli settlers supported by the military. That the tradition of growing olives would be one of the many pieces to be destroyed in the effort to ethnic cleanse Palestinians from the land of their ancestors, in favor of a Zionist, Jewish only state of Israel.

In Palestine, called Israel under the occupation, the order of the day is the killing, maiming, arresting, imprisoning, torturing of Palestinians, adults and children, all genders. This state of terror that began with the Nabka, the catastrophic dispossession, the desmadre—demothering—beginning in 1947, continues. Against this background of land theft unfolds the story of Palestinian olive groves, it's oil and its precarious path to my cocina.

The politics of Palestinian economy post Nabka is quite complex and too broad in scope for this article. The interested reader is urged to access the article by Cook (2016) cited below, a meticulously documented path of the destruction of Palestinian economy since the Oslo Accords, mid 1990s—made possible by Israeli laws, blockades of communities and Palestinian everyday movement—and Jewish settlements, designed to deprive Palestinians of their land, leaving them a precarious existence (Cole, 2019). Here is where olive harvesting, central to Palestinian economic survival, factors in.

Amound

Across the West Bank, there are Arabic olive trees—known as amound, or column because of

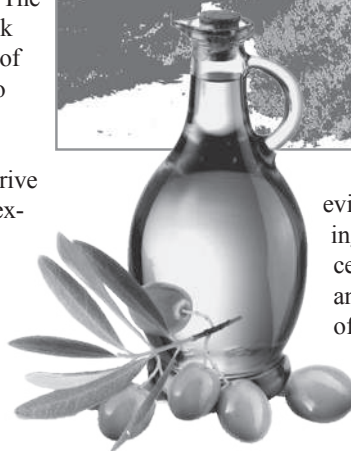
their wide twisting trunks—surviving since the time of Herod. For Palestinians the olive tree symbolizes economic stability, physical permanence and an intricate connection to tradition and identity. Part of this tradition is the mobilization of the extended family during harvest, a time when each Palestinian embodies the value of summond or steadfastness. Harvesting olives symbolizes solidarity between individual, family, and community. Harvesting is experiencing the tie between humans and nature, it follows the natural agricultural cycle, a thousands of years old legacy left by Palestinian ancestors in ancient Canaan. Communal harvesting symbolizes steadfastness in remaining on the land despite the Nabka.

In Palestine, growing olives takes place in the midst of an economic struggle between two competing models. One is a colonial vision promoted by Israel and the international community that encourages economic dependence and exploitation of Palestinians. Central here is the distancing of Palestinian families from their lands and agricultural traditions, creating an unskilled class surviving as casual labor in Israeli industrial zones. An alternative, is that of self-sufficiency present in the idea of cooperative farming, as in the case of Canaan Free Trade (CFT).

The Canaan Fair Trade Project, Organic and Fair.

Nassar Abufarha, born in Al-Jalama, a small farming village near Jenin, north West Bank, is a PhD cultural anthropologist, graduate of the University of Wisconsin. He established the Palestine Fair Trade Association (PFTA) in 2004, followed by CFT, the latter, becoming the largest fair trade supplier of olive oil in the world. The success of CFT appears based on several factors. Among these is Palestinian defiance of Israel's efforts to

evict them from, in most cases, ancestral lands by engaging in an organized effort that places CFT farmers at the center of a growing global movement supporting fair trade and organic agriculture. Another factor is the tradition of working cooperatively, characterized as the familial solidarity embodied in olive harvesting. Forming cooperatives allows production at a larger scale, a major strength behind the success of CFT.



As of 2016 the CFT's successful organization of Palestinian farmers into cooperatives and a pooling of resources has resulted in 52 villages existing as separate cooperatives, representing 2,000 West Bank farmers (Cook, 2016). CFT buys their product at above market prices to ensure sustainable living for the farmers and finds local and foreign markets for the product, bypassing Israeli control. The cooperative approach appears to curtail exploitation by Israeli buyers who in the past have used various conditions to their advantage when setting prices. Instead, foreign markets eager for fair trade and organic products can pay the farmers a much higher price for the oil. Here the traditional Palestinian approach to olive growing has proved an advantage in selling to a growing organic market as family run farms have used methods closely resembling organic cultivation.

Palestinians have witnessed the war against the ancient olive tree and traditional growing. Since the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem (arij.org) and Gaza, Israel has relentlessly confiscated Palestinian land, reclassifying it as state land—used by the military, as national parks, or by illegal Jewish settlements. In addition, the military has uprooted and cut down hundreds of thousands of olive trees for “security” reasons, as stone throwers or snipers could be concealed among the trees! Settlers have burned down trees and attacked families when they try to reach their fields for the harvest. Trees have also been lost, cut off behind Israel's separation barriers, keeping families from tending their crop. Also stolen and re-directed to illegal settlements are water resources, depriving Palestinian farmers of a key element needed for a good harvest. Scarcity or inaccessibility of land and water has resulted in numbers of farmers in the West Bank (see map concentrating on a single crop, the olive, because mature trees can survive through a dry summer. Lack of an adequate supply of water does impact the size and amount of the olives.

For Palestinians, living within a Nabka context, to be part of CFT



Source: bit.ly/west-bank-map-2007

is to preserve the tradition of olive growing, living within a sustainable framework, staying on their lands, and resisting erasure as a people by Israel. The erasure (Cole, 2019) continues daily as new approaches are devised by Israel and investors. Destroying Palestinian olive production, demolishing schools, homes, bombing hospitals during the wars on Gaza, refusing to allow Palestinians to return to the lands from which they were dispossessed to make way for Jewish settlers, enclosing Palestinians behind walls, limiting their movements with military security checkpoints making inaccessible education and medical care, and terrorizing children (Parker, 2018), is not enough. Hiding the Palestinian population from tourist eyes by means of a cable car is a most recent scheme in East Jerusalem designed to “hide the local Palestinian population and their history from the millions of tourists who visit Jerusalem each year . . .” (Cook, 2019, p. 19).


For me, CFT provides supporters of Palestine liberation a way to show solidarity with the farmers. Buying Jenin olive oil, learning the history of the oil itself, telling friends about this organic product, and giving bottles of Jenin oil along with a copy of Cook's 2016 article *Agro Resistance* as holiday presents, is a way to educate on Palestine and expand the consumer field for this product. In my cocina no other olive oil plays a part and each time I use it, I'm sending an anonymous message to not only olive growers in the West Bank, but all Palestinians living under occupation, “You may not know me, but you are very much a part of my life and of my familia, you have not been erased and could never be forgotten”.

BIO: Yoly Zentella is a Chicana PhD researcher and writer focusing on El Norte's culture and attachment and loss of land and place. She lives in Las Vegas, NM.

Note: Request references cited from: lavoz@esperanzacenter.org


Read!

LA PLATICA DEL NORTE
A Chicano bi-annual periodical published in Las Vegas, NM

 Recent *La Platica* issues include articles on La Raza history, culture and tradition, local organic growing, immigration, neo-liberalism in the Americas, plants of El Norte, substance abuse, and the short story

Cost of the most recent copy, if available, is an SASE with 85¢ postage to:

Y. Zentella
P.O. Box 1515 Las Vegas, NM 87701
 For more info, laplaticadelnorte@outlook.com



On October 17th, the San Antonio City Council will vote on ratifying the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan (CAAP).

Climate Action Now! • Come Join Us!

Date: Thursday, October 17
When: 8:00am
Where: Municipal Plaza Building, 114 W Commerce St, San Antonio, TX 78205
What: Press conference & Council meeting for CAAP vote