



Slow Food[®]

Akli Baladi (I Eat Local) – Slow Food in Palestine

26 February 2019 by Nazarena Lanza



Bread with Za'atar

Gastronomy is an essential part of our cultural identity, and draws links between us, our past, and our environments. Its significance is intensified in situations where other elements of our identity are denied, all the way to the extreme of seeing our homeland removed from maps. This is the case for Palestinians, who are now called "arabs" in Israel, and their gastronomy labelled Lebanese, Jordanian, Syrian, Israeli... but not Palestinian. Yet, Palestinian exists, as a distinct people, with a distinct gastronomy, and a homeland, no matter how reduced and broken-up it has become. Despite these obstructions, this land and its inhabitants foster a rich and delicious culinary tradition: moajanat made from local wheat, wild herbs and their various uses, knafeh made with honey and goat's milk cheese, za'atar, olives and olive oil, filled battiri eggplants...

The product that best represents Palestine is perhaps olive oil, pressed from the fruits of ancient olive trees, which have defined the landscape for centuries. The olive trees are the source of great pride for local farmers yet are at the heart of some of their greatest troubles: olive trees are ever more frequently uprooted,

chopped down, or even poisoned by illegal Israeli settlers, who encroach ever more on Palestinian land. Farmers are restricted from tending to orchards near settlements for all but 3 days of the year, the annual harvest, which they are forced to do under the constant threat of violence. To deal with these conditions, some Palestinian farmers, like Doha, who told her story at Terra Madre Salone del Gusto 2018, have started to organize and host groups of volunteers, who come from all over the world, to help with the harvest and provide some sort of protection against attacks.

During our visit in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, Slow Food discussed the possibility of launching a Slow Food presidium with olive oil producers from Qira. The presidium would recognize and guarantee the quality of the oil its cultural value, and its provenance, the fruit of centuries-old trees scattered throughout a dry, stony landscape. A presidium would create links between communities of olive oil producers and promote an exchange of ideas and support. Fareed Taamallah, a Palestinian producer, journalist, and member of Slow Food Ramallah, tells us: "The olive tree is seen by many Palestinians as a symbol of nationality and a connection to the land, particularly due to their slow growth and longevity. Because the trees are draught-resistant and grow even in poor soil, they represent Palestinian resistance and resilience. The fact that olive trees survive and bear fruit for thousands of years is parallel to Palestinian history and continuity on the land, Palestinians are proud of their olive trees, they take care of them with care and appreciation".

The Slow Food network in Palestine, which met in Ramallah on February 3, is working to organize a Slow Olive event in 2020, using it as a chance to launch the proposed presidium, and to welcome producers from around the Mediterranean.



Olive trees growing on traditional terraces in Qira, near Nablus

In the heights of the Jordan valley, near Jericho, in the village of Al-Jiftlik, a Slow Food community of date producers, supported by the Fondazione Giovanni Paolo II, survive in increasingly difficult conditions. Dwindling water reserves and repeated Israeli incursions make planning for the future no easy task. To make matters worse, the village falls under the Israeli administration of Area C, which covers some 60% of the West Bank. This means that local representation is nonexistent, and leaves nobody to fight against the influence of the agrochemical industry that pushes for the indiscriminate use of Round-up and countless other chemical fertilizers and pesticides. It is with the help of Saad Dagher, the 'father' of agroecology in Palestine, that Slow Food is promoting better agricultural methods in the area. Progress tends to move slowly, but generally farmers will see what their neighbors are doing and if they see things working, will be inspired to try it themselves.



Workers for the community of date producers in the village of Al-Jiftlik, Zone C of the occupied territories, in the heights of the Jordan valley

Currently the closest thing to a Palestinian presidium is at Oum Suleyman farm, a community garden near Bil'in, located on a hill overlooking an illegal Israeli settlement that seems to grow every day. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is practiced at Oum Suleyman, around 30 families in Ramallah pay in advance for a weekly share of the farm's offerings. The farm was built by a group of young activists fighting for their land, to preserve biodiversity, and to live with agency and dignity. The initiative is spreading to other farmers in the area, who see the CSA approach as an outlet for their products. The group welcomes visitors and volunteers, for more information visit their site Hostel in Ramallah.



Oum Suleyman community farm, near Bil'in, overlooking an illegal Israeli settlement being built

The situation for farmers and producers in Palestine is difficult and unparalleled. Yet, in spite of the challenges that they face, ranging from illegal settlements encroaching on their land, to difficulty in selling or sharing their produce, people are resisting. With the support of Slow Food and other local and international organizations, many farmers are cooperating and reaching beyond the boundaries that have been imposed upon them. In face of roadblocks, people are finding ways to cope and resist.