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* Peer reviewed article.

EDITORIAL

A Hunger for Life

In the past twelve months, Palestinians have faced a chain of genocidal assaults meant to obliterate their communities and identities. Israel's war on the Palestinians of Gaza is savage and relentless, deserving of the world's attention. At the same time, in Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, Israel continues to undermine Palestinian territorial rights, foment settler violence, and launch major military incursions into population centers – all of which would certainly draw greater focus if not for the staggering loss of life and blanket destruction taking place in the Gaza Strip.

In late June, Israel approved the most significant seizure of West Bank lands since the Oslo accords, indicating that the government was using the war on Gaza as cover for an intensification of settlement building in the West Bank. Israeli settlers have also stepped up their campaign of intimidation and violence against Palestinian villagers in the West Bank. On 15 August, an estimated one hundred settlers rampaged through the town of Jit, setting homes and cars afire, launching teargas and Molotov cocktails, and shooting, killing one Palestinian.

Jerusalem remains at the heart of the settler struggle to uproot Palestinians and take their homes and lands. The Armenian Quarter of the Old City continues to be threatened by Israeli settlers attempting to build a hotel on a plot purchased under dubious legal circumstances. This has coincided with an uptick in settler harassment of the quarter's residents. In early July, an Israeli court rejected efforts to block the eviction of more than sixty Palestinians from their homes in the Batn al-Hawa

neighborhood of Silwan, just outside the Old City walls. This followed an Israeli High Court ruling in late May against a family in Batn al-Hawa and leaves some seven hundred Palestinians in the neighborhood vulnerable to eviction and displacement by settlers. Further inflaming the situation, on 13 August, the Jewish fast day of Tisha B'Av, the right-wing extremist Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's minister of national security, led a group of settlers to pray at al-Haram al-Sharif in violation of the long-standing Status Quo agreement that governs Jerusalem's holy sites. He later expressed support for establishing a synagogue within the Haram.

These actions have been accompanied by intense Israeli military activity. At the end of July, Hamas political leader Isma'il Haniya was assassinated in Tehran, where he was attending the inauguration of Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian. One day earlier an Israeli airstrike in Beirut killed senior Hizballah commander Fu'ad Shukr and six others (including an Iranian military adviser and two children), and wounded eighty residents. Exchanges of rockets across the Israel–Lebanon border intensified and Iran promised retaliation. Hamas announced that Yahya Sinwar would succeed Haniya as the movement's leader.

In late August and early September, Israel launched raids in the West Bank – among the largest since the second intifada – in and around Jenin, Tulkarm, and Tubas. These attacks targeted Jenin, Nur Shams, and Far'a refugee camps and employed tactics that mirrored those used by Israeli forces in Gaza: distributing leaflets ordering evacuations, employing airstrikes and drone attacks, bulldozing crucial infrastructure, and targeting hospitals.

Israel's genocidal campaign against Gaza shows no sign of coming to a halt, despite disingenuous statements from U.S. officials that a ceasefire is nigh and massive Israeli street protests against Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his refusal to negotiate a deal with Hamas. The people of Gaza, most of whom have been displaced multiple times over, face ever more desperate physical insecurity. Israel's limitations on humanitarian aid entry have predictably led to famine, medical facilities are functioning at bare minimal levels due to lack of supplies, fuel, and damage to buildings and equipment, and in late August a ten-month-old infant in Dayr al-Balah became the first proven case of paralysis from polio infection in Gaza in a quarter-century. The threat of a serious outbreak of the highly infectious disease prompted a series of short pauses in some Israeli military activities to allow the World Health Organization to vaccinate hundreds of thousands of young children in Gaza.

The appalling conditions that Palestinians in Gaza are enduring remind us of the tremendous significance of basic necessities like food and healthcare. Last summer when we began planning a special issue of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* around the theme of food and foodways, it was impossible to imagine that we would be releasing it during Israel's intentional starvation of Gaza's population. Guest editor Christiane Dabdoub Nasser makes a compelling case in her introduction to this issue for drawing our attention to the cultural, economic, environmental, and political dimensions of food. The contributions to this issue and the next do just that, and while they recognize that food can be personal and pleasurable, they insist (and Palestinian suffering in

Gaza affirms) that food is always also about the identity, resilience, survival, and resistance of the collective.

In addition to the food-related content in this issue of *JQ*, Christopher Burnham's review of *A Beacon of Hope*, a history of the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital, is a reminder of the vicissitudes of Palestinians' access to healthcare and of the courageous ongoing efforts of medical workers to provide health care to Palestinians in Gaza, under what is surely the most difficult of circumstances. Their work, like the creative efforts of Hani and Mahmoud Almadhoun to establish a soup kitchen for Palestinians in Bayt Lahiya – one of a number of such local attempts throughout Gaza to provide food to those in need – show the resourcefulness of how those deprived of the most basic amenities manage to still care for the collective and inspire the unbreakable resolve of the Palestinian people.

Discussing Food and Foodways: No Better Time Than the Present

Christiane Dabdoub Nasser

When the *Jerusalem Quarterly* launched its call for a special issue dedicated to food and foodways, the aim was to promote scholarly work that would shed light on Palestine's food traditions as a core element of Palestinian culture and identity. Affirming the salience of these topics and the depth of interest in them, we received more contributions than initially anticipated – in fact, enough to dedicate two issues to this theme. Meanwhile, another war, unprecedented in scope and scale of violence, has once again hit the region. The present slaughter in Gaza and the deadly rampaging in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are evidence of the unfolding of another Nakba which is certain to impact Palestinians for generations to come.

Given such brutality, does a discussion of food, food systems, and food traditions sound grotesque or frivolous? The answer is a definite no, and here is why. What is happening in Gaza is obscene – the number of deaths, the level of destruction, the looming famine that is likely to kill a large portion of the Gaza population by the end of the year – are all part of a wider scheme to annihilate the Palestinian people and give Israel ultimate supremacy over the whole of Palestine. Israel's current war on Palestine is yet again portrayed in much of the mainstream Western media "as a struggle between two opposing national aspirations on the same land" (with one contender, Israel, representing good and the other, Palestine, representing evil). This masks the colonizing apartheid system and the brutal military regime behind it, and deflects attention from

the global apparatus put in place to legitimize it.[1] The contributions to the two *JQ* issues reveal this fraudulent portrayal that is ubiquitous in the English language media, explain the colonizing framework buttressing Israel's policies with regard to Palestinian food and food systems, and expose how the starvation of Gazans is yet another link in a long process of disrupting and sabotaging the Palestinian food system and hijacking Palestinian food to "make way for a settler-colonial vision of utopia," as Amanny Ahmad writes in her essay in this issue.

There are other, equally urgent reasons to make the case for this publication. First, food culture and food production systems are the result of centuries of interacting with the land and the elements when farming communities adapted their agricultural practice to the topography, the climate, and annual rainfall – as contributions from Amanny Ahmad, Omar Qassis, and Samar Awaad in this issue examine in detail. Palestinian food culture has also been impacted by its exposure to diverse cultures by virtue of Palestine's location at the crossroad of three continents, which nurtured its openness to the "other" and its receptiveness to ideas, products, and different ways of doing.[2] As part of what Fernand Braudel calls the "cosmopolitan superstructure" that invigorated the Middle East in ancient times, Palestine evolved as an important link in the regional and international market economy in the nineteenth century, responding to market fluctuations and developing an export market and a cash economy.[3]

Second, Palestinians have come to view their food traditions as one pillar on which to build their national narrative and their identity as a people.[4] Until recently an agrarian people in the majority, Palestinians derived (and in many cases, still derive) their sense of honor and dignity from the land: *al-ard hiya al-'ard* (literally, one's land is one's honor). This gives their connection to the land particular meaning and illuminates the extent of the trauma that accompanies its loss. Ahmad quotes Ghassan Kanafani, who confirms that the agrarian in the less developed world generally, and in the Arab world in particular, "is not only a mode of production, but also the deep-rooted social, religious, and ritualistic way of life." This continuity was interrupted after World War I with the establishment of the British Mandate: the agricultural sector, predominantly Palestinian, began shifting in favor of Zionist settlers who, with British support, acquired Palestinian land and applied new methods of high labor and input intensive agriculture while Palestinians proceeded with low labor and organic input extensive agriculture.[5] This foreshadowed the radical rupture to Palestinian agriculture that took place with the end of the Mandate and the fragmentation of Palestine in 1948.

The Nakba, unquestionably the lowest point in Palestine's modern history, looms large in most of the contributions to these two special issues, irreversibly marking food production systems, practices, and forms of consumption.[6] Beyond the substantial material harm, the displacement and dispossession that it brought on unsettled an entire nation's psyche and frame of mind. And it continues: the further fragmentation of Palestinian territories in the post-Oslo era – with its cluster-bomb-like effect –

further disconnected citizens and reduced their ability to access their farmlands.

It is estimated that 57 percent of Gaza's agricultural land was damaged as of May 2024, up from over 40 percent in mid-February 2024.[7] And now, while the war on Gaza claims all attention, land grabs have accelerated: in 2024, Israel has so far illegally seized 23.7 square kilometers (9.15 square miles) of Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank, which is more than it took over in the past twenty years combined; 12.7 square kilometers (4.9 square miles) of this land are in the Jordan Valley and therefore mostly agricultural.[8]

The power of food in shaping identity, both individual and collective, is salient in all of the pieces constituting these special *JQ* issues. A closer reading of the contributions confirms that food culture is "a palimpsest of meaningful practices and a system defined by its own intrinsic properties and the relational properties it generates," as I write in my contribution to the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Palestine*. And there is more to the relationship between individuals, the collective, and food than meets the eye.[9] The complexity of this relationship and the ambiguities it triggers give new meaning to the accepted notion that we are what we eat: food culture lays down the foundation on which a society regenerates itself and evolves.[10]

In Qassis's article, we encounter the power of olive oil in evoking the "taste" of the homeland: "While conducting a tasting in Vienna," Qassis writes, "my memory was jolted to childhood harvests of familiar groves in Birzeit … I was convinced that the oil I was tasting was not just a Palestinian oil, but one from the highlands of the West Bank." Yet, as he explains, this powerful and sensual experience can be deceptive, veiling "the variety, richness, and colorfulness embedded within the multiple ways of experiencing olive oil in Palestine" in favor of a homogenized "Palestinianness" succumbing to the pressures of local and global forces. Narratives obliqued by nostalgia, on which Awaad's piece sheds a certain light, attempt to make sense of the past (mostly pre-Nakba) in relation to the present (in the diaspora, in the refugee camps, and in this case in Jerusalem). But as a study of the Moroccan community in France demonstrates, we should also be warned that "senses and perceptions, as manifestations of identity, are not about truth, the objective, or what is real, but about the construction of meaning" – producing feelings of belonging and integration through food that allow the mind and body to anchor to a here or an elsewhere.[11]

In Elisabeth Vebert's documentary film *Aisha's Story,* reviewed in this issue by Yafa El Masri, Aisha's liminality between the here and there – *here* being her present home in Baqa'a refugee camp in Jordan, and *there* being Palestine, where she wants to be – acts as a positive force beyond forlorn nostalgia or constructing identity and is at the root of her creativity and resilience. Hanine Shehadeh's account of Mary Tanous-Farah, who converted "[her] kitchen table [into] a transformative space for trauma healing for the Farah family and their community" after being expelled from Gaza in 1948 is a way of creating her own version of *al-'awna*, or community support. This, as Awaad explains, "epitomizes the core of Palestinian solidarity" which the

displacement and dispossession of the Nakba shook, "disrupt[ing] the equilibrium of well-being inside … communities." Qassis's example provides the framework for defining Palestinianness as more than the sum of its parts, while Awaad's, Shehadeh's, and Vebert's vignettes, intimate examples of resilience and survival, belong to, in Shehadeh's words, "the broader examination of how familial spaces provide a richer understanding of coping mechanisms and the potential for healing within Palestinian exile."

The theme of the land is also prominent as both symbol of continuity and object of rupture, provider and witness to the tragedy inflicted on Palestinians, creative force and victim. The land has been irreversibly altered by colonial design which has crushed in its wake what Ahmad describes as the "cultural, culinary, and societal relationships" that stem from people's relationship to it. As an identity marker in the days prior to the Nakba, the land succumbs to Israeli ownership and undergoes much violence at the hands of Israeli occupation forces, agrarian policies, and illegal settler encroachments. This violent dispossession continues to inflict immense damage that goes beyond what has been reduced to a purely national confrontation. The loss of land has created a "sense of disparity" (Ahmad), scarring forever the Palestinian psyche. On a more mundane level, Israel's land grabs and its treatment of the land have demolished the functional agricultural model that supported Palestinian food culture through many stages of its evolution; it resulted in the loss of agricultural knowledge, which was felt like an amputation by a people who had been its caretakers for generations and found themselves landless and thus deprived of their livelihoods. As a product of the land, food became interconnected with the sense of loss and deprivation after the Nakba (Awaad). If it is true that "language of origin may be abandoned before diet changes,"[12] then one can only imagine the sense of alienation caused by a change of diet imposed on 750,000 refugees forced out of their land in 1948 and during the early formation of the State of Israel.

The weaponization of food has been a long-standing tactic and part of Israel's collective punishment of the Gaza population even before October 2023. The current artificial famine comes in the wake of a policy established by Israel's security establishment in coordination with the Israeli Ministry of Health and summarized in a 2008 report[13] – typical of colonial settler movements to "force indigenous populations into submission" (Ahmad). This earlier policy was not intended to starve the Gazans but to restrict the amount of food entering the Strip to a "daily humanitarian portion" without causing hunger and malnutrition.[14] These restrictions were a tool to put "indiscriminate pressure" on the entire population in the context of Israel's armed conflict with Hamas.[15] The ramifications of these restrictions were many, but those affecting the food industry were dramatic: between June and October 2007, half the food production plants in Gaza stopped operating, the rest operated at 30 percent of their capacity, and the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics registered a 26.6 percent drop in employment in the agriculture and fishing sectors.[16] As I write, three hundred days into the war, the situation has reached catastrophic levels: the army "has destroyed

one-third of Gaza's agricultural lands, 80 percent of the fishing fleet and wrecked its irrigation systems. Israeli forces have prevented countless food convoys from entering the territory by land or by sea, directly shelling aid workers in the process."[17]

The obliteration of Palestinian food systems is a central part of Israel's strategy toward Palestinians and complements the equally violent but less obvious Zionist program to marginalize the Palestinians, their history, their memory, and their cultural product, to make way for a new country, a new allegiance – to Israel, and "invented traditions."[18] Food is weaponized not only in its physicality – through land grabs and agricultural and economic subjugation – but also as a medium to disseminate propaganda. While Gazans are subjugated to famine, Israel whitewashes its reputation through promotion of Palestinian food that it claims as its own. As Mirna Bamieh explains in an interview in this issue: "Israel is building a culture; it's creating the cultural identity of the country. And part of it is culinary culture. How can they build that? They look at the land and what grows in the land."

A war correspondent has written about how, when she is on assignment to cover a conflict, she uses cooking to transform every new location into "a dwelling filled with flavors, textures, and aromas that make her body be the site of home."[19] At the core of this exercise is the human body that is reduced to a wreck (and death) or elevated into a receptacle of inherited practices, constructing "culinary identities" and asserting "gustatory boundaries in relation to 'others'."[20] As the war rages in Gaza, Instagram shows men, women, and children engaging in cooking and reinventing recipes to celebrate Eid under the bombs. While the United States was dropping food packages, some of which resulted in killing even more Palestinian civilians, these Gazans broke their fasts with a reinvented version of *maqluba* and a smile on their faces and thanks to the Almighty for his bounty on their lips.

Is Palestinian interest in studying, analyzing, and showcasing their food culture political? In many ways it is, as the contributions to the two *JQ* editions demonstrate. In a context of failed diplomacy, sterile negotiations, and overt and covert violence, food culture is a dimension that needs to be explored much further. Cultural resistance is a potent way for Palestinians to assert their constantly challenged identity and their right to live on the land of their ancestors, to negate Zionist discourse, which appropriates aspects of Palestinian heritage, and to counter the Israeli government's measures to, in Tamir Sorek's words, "discipline Palestinian memory."[21] In Claude Lévi-Strauss's view, cooking is a language into which a society unconsciously translates its own structure. In other words, food is chosen not (or not only) because it is good to eat, but because it is good to think.[22] Food thus reflects not only the "tastes of the homeland," but also a society's ways of understanding the world around it, its forms of mental ordering and classification. We present these special issues with these broader implications in mind, and with the hope that these offerings will encourage further research.

Christiane Dabdoub Nasser is an independent cultural consultant, researcher, and writer. She published her first novel, A Moon Will Rise *(David Paul Books), in 2021.*

Endnotes

1 On the "clash of nationalisms" framing, see Ruba Salih and Sophie Richter-Devroe, "Palestine beyond National Frames: Emerging Politics, Cultures, and Claims," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 1 (January 2018): 1–20, quote at 2.

2 Christiane Dabdoub Nasser, "Palestinian Food: Commensality and Cultural Resistance," in *Routledge Handbook of Palestine*, ed. Michael Dumper and Amneh Badran (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2024).

3 Fernand Braudel, *Memory and the Mediterranean* (New York: Albert Knopf, 2001), 127; Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Dabdoub Nasser, "Palestinian Food."

4 Dabdoub Nasser, "Palestinian Food."

5 See Samar Awaad's contribution to this issue and Dabdoub Nasser, "Palestinian Food."

6 During the Nakba of 1948–49, 78 percent of the land was captured to create the new State of Israel and some 750,000 people were expelled.

7 "Gaza: By Destroying Agricultural Lands and Blocking Food Aid, Israel Uses Starvation as a Weapon of War against Civilians," Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 24 June 2024, online at euromedmonitor.org/en/article/6377/Gaza:-By-destroying-agricultural-lands-and-blocking-food-aid,-Israel-uses-starvation-as-a-weapon-of-war-against-civilians (accessed 30 August 2024).

8 Mohammed Haddad, "Visualizing How Israel Keeps Stealing Palestinian Land," *al-Jazeera*, 11 July 2024, online at www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/11/how-israel-keeps-stealing-palestinian-land (accessed 29 August 2024).

9 Dabdoub Nasser, "Palestinian Food."

10 Dabdoub Nasser, "Palestinian Food."

11 Marie-Pierre Étien et Laurence Tibère, "Alimentation et identité entre deux rives," *Hommes et migrations: Revue française de reference sur les dynamiques migratoires* 1301 (2013): 57–64, quoting Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L'Invention de soi: Une théorie de l'identité* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

12 Peter Atkins and Ian Bowler, *Food in Society: Economy, Culture, Geography* (London: Routledge, 2001), 274, as cited in Anne J. Kershen, "Introduction: Food in the Migrant Experience," in *Food in the Migrant Experience*, ed. Anne J. Kershen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 13.

13 The report, titled "Food Consumption in the Gaza Strip – Red Lines" was obtained through legal action by Gisha, an Israeli NGO dedicated to Palestinians' freedom of movement; the Israeli Ministry of Defense denies ever implementing the report's recommendations. Gisha, "Reader: 'Food Consumption in the Gaza Strip – Red Lines'," October 2012, online at www.gisha.org/UserFiles/File/publications/redlines/redlines-position-paper-eng.pdf (accessed 19 August 2024).

14 Gisha, "Reader."

15 Gisha, "Reader."

16 Gisha, "Reader."

17 GRAIN, "Genocide and Food Weaponisation in Palestine: Global Resistance as Hope," 11 June 2024, online at grain.org/en/article/7161-genocide-and-food-weaponisation-in-palestine-global-resistance-as-hope (accessed 24 July 2024).

18 Zeina B. Ghandour, "Falafel King: Culinary Customs and National Narratives in Palestine (I)," *Feminist Legal Studies* 21 (2013): 281–301.

19 Meredith E. Abarca, "Foreword," in *Food Identities at Home and on the Move. Explorations at the Intersection of Food, Belonging, and Dwelling*, ed. Raúl Matta, Charles-Édouard de Suremain, and Chantal Crenn (New York: Routledge, 2020), xii.

20 Emma-Jayne Abbots, "Approaches to Food and Migration: Rootedness, Being, and Belonging," in *The Handbook of Food and Anthropology*, ed. Jakob A. Klein and James L. Watson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 115–32, quote at 117.

21 Tamir Sorek, *Palestinian Commemoration in Israel: Calendars, Monuments, and Martyrs* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 139–62.

22 Luis Cantarero, Elena Espeitx, Marta Gil Lacruz, and Pilar Martín, "Human Food Preferences and Cultural Identity: The Case of Aragón (Spain)," *International Journal of Psychology* 48, no. 5 (2013): 881–90.

Olive Oil and the Tastes of Palestine

Omar Qassis

Abstract

The study looks at the heterogeneity of olive production in Palestine and challenges the idea of one single taste that can be attributed to Palestinian oil. Using an ethnographic method and years of research as the backdrop, this article asks, "What is the taste of the homeland and how might it have changed?" Along the way, the question transforms and wonders, "Can we taste the homeland in an oil not made in Palestine." Taking two distinct foodways for olive oil, this article tours the sensual landscape of tastes that constitute home for many Palestinians.

Keywords:

Palestine; olive oil; anthropology of food; Mediterranean; taste of the homeland; political ecology; EVOO.

فش حدا بحكي عن زيته عكر(مثل شعبي)

"No one calls their [own] oil rancid."

– a popular saying

"Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth."

– Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*[1]

While conducting a tasting session in Vienna, my memory was jolted to childhood harvests of familial groves in Birzeit. The scent of the oil took me to

the old half-automatic mill, the "green" taste and color of the oil reminded me of just-pressed oil – still slightly warm. I was convinced that the oil I was tasting was not just a Palestinian oil, but one from the highlands of the West Bank. In short, I tasted and smelled the homeland. Although I knew that most likely this couldn't be, the taste tugged at my memories in powerful and undeniable ways. After filling in the sensory analysis sheet with all the information, I moved to the online platform to check the results. I was shocked when it was listed as a Spanish oil.[2]

The Arbequina variety – as this olive cultivar and its oil are named – is considered one of the best in the world, both because of its yield and the quality of the oil. The flavor profile associated with it is "smooth olive oil with fruity fragrances, a vibrant green color, and a delicate and pleasant flavor."[3] It is reputed to have medium fruity taste with low levels of bitterness and spiciness. Yet the oil is considered "unstable": it has a short lifespan (shelf life).[4] Arbequina trees are adaptable, produce abundantly in hot dry climates and endure cold weather and draught well.[5] It is hardier than other varieties and resists diseases such as tuberculosis, maculation or spotting of the leaves, and verticillium, a fungus, which can affect it only slightly. It thrives in most average, slightly alkaline, well-drained soils. The Arbequina is famed for being grown first and most extensively in the Catalonia region, originally in the village of Arbeca.[6] The Duke of Medinaceli, who is credited with first growing Arbequina trees in the palace of Arbeca, built upon an Arab fortress conquered in the mid-twelfth century, brought the saplings home with him from Palestine in the eighteenth century.[7]

This sensual experience took me not just home but to the other side of the Mediterranean. It also led me to ask, what is the taste of the homeland? Olive oil is often understood as "the taste of the homeland" for Palestinians.[8] Mired in the loss of home and homeland created by the Nakba, food and the flora and fauna which constitute its raw forms enable intergenerational transmission through organoleptic processes.[9] Yet Palestinian nationalism's centering of Jerusalem and peasant culture might have homogenized "Palestinianness" from one region at the expense of other areas of Palestine. Some Palestinian intellectuals have expressed a certain unease with this homogenization: for example, Salim Tamari's metaphor of the "mountain against the sea" or Mahmoud Darwish's "Palestine of the orange and Palestine of the olive" speak volumes.[10] Taking our cue from there, what follows is an intentional shift away from homogeneity and hegemony entailed in state-building and an attempt to show the variety, richness, and colorfulness embedded within the multiple ways of experiencing Palestinian olive oil.

This paper uses political ecology and traces the circulation of Palestinian oils to see how various oils are produced and why they are consumed. Studying food illuminates political-economic value creation, symbolic value creation, and food-centered memory.[11] Combining the study of food and the senses opens up analysis not just to distinction but also to components of ritual for the instantiation of social or cosmological value.[12] Food studies as a field has also shed light on changes in agriculture upon commodification created through colonial history or globalization.[13] The economic and the symbolic, the sensual and the intangible, the material and the

ritual, meet within the study of food more generally and, as we will see, in the study of olive oil to Palestinians. In this paper, I make three arguments: First, land confiscation and fragmentation and population increases threaten the circulation of Palestinian oils. Second, no single oil can be called "the taste of the homeland." Finally, extra virgin olive oils (EVOO) are reshaping production methods. As a result, the variations that in the past distinguished different kinds of olive oils within Palestine, as well as variations of Palestinians' tastes and preferences, are steadily being homogenized by local and global forces.

This article is divided into four parts. The first introduces olive trees, oils, and their relations to land and people in Palestine. Then we will look at types of oils that circulated, investigating exported oils, locally consumed oils, and changing food trends. Third, the "taste of home" will be thrown into question to distill and document local preferences. Finally, we will zoom out to look at Palestine of the Mediterranean, allowing the reader to see multiple landscapes, social relations, and olive oil tastes. This study draws from two years of field work, archival research, oral histories, and interviews with specialists and sector representatives, academics, and researchers.[14] Data gathering for this paper was impacted by the Zionist reaction to the 7 October attack of Tufan al-Aqsa (al-Aqsa Flood). Road closures and increased settler attacks not only impacted my ability to travel as a researcher, but had considerable impact on this year's olive harvest, where people press their olives, and the circulation of new oil in the local market and for export. In this period, Ramallah, Birzeit, and surrounding towns and villages whose access does not require crossing checkpoints or settler roads became that which was "accessible," a much narrower scope than I hoped. Despite the resulting diminished color and additional information, however, the main arguments of this paper have not been impacted.

Home, the Trees, and the Oils

Palestine remains under settler-colonial rule, which structures the lives of Palestinians to a large extent. Settlers and their army routinely show their cruelty by uprooting olive trees. Much attention has rightly been given to the fact that between 1967 and 2011 an estimated eight hundred thousand olive trees were destroyed.[15] Alas, less attention has gone into how many olive trees Palestinians have planted.

The West Bank and Gaza Strip are home to thirteen million olive trees – two and a half million wild olives and the remaining fruit bearing.[16] The oil from those same trees circulates among inhabitants of historic Palestine and the diaspora, allies, and ethical consumers who –through consumption – connect with the people and land of Palestine and the struggle for liberation. Here, we come to the relevance of the quote from Marx with which this article begins. Marx analyzes the co-constitutive nature of production and consumption, where objects are specific objects produced to create consumption but simultaneously shaped by consumption while produced. Employing the dialectics of production and consumption enables us to understand not just olive oil, but who produces it, who consumes it, how it circulates, where it circulates, and

why. This method also allows us to see the undercurrents of change in agriculture, trade, culture, and taste flowing through Palestinian society.

Nature and culture meet in olive oil production. In a sense, there is a techne and techno science to production, especially when looking at artisanal EVOO production.[17] However, as we will see below, most of the oil produced in Palestine is locally circulated and consumed. It does not adhere to – and often contradicts – both the techne and the techno science of extra virgin olive oil. A mixture of geography and artisanal skills of producers gives value to local oils. Therefore, we can broadly discern two distinct foodways for Palestinian oil: EVOO and oils produced according to local taste standards. Both foodways will be discussed in this paper.

Olive culture in Palestine dates back at least to the early Bronze Age, but the modern expansion of oleo-culture started around the time of the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms in the mid-nineteenth century.[18] By the 1930s Palestine was home to an estimated six million olive trees; and while Nablus and the highlands of Jerusalem accounted for a large number of olive trees, so did the Galilee, coastal plains, and foothills.[19] British aid to the post-Nakba West Bank, through schemes employing refugees to build terraces, enabled the extension of olive agriculture.[20] The 1967 war brought about more shocks to Palestinian society and reduced the vigor of the agriculture sector.[21] A shift in gender dynamics occurred as men went to work in the Israeli construction sector, leaving women to take on traditionally male agricultural work.[22] The 1970s also saw the expansion of volunteer work committees, often with links to the Palestine Liberation Organization, which between 1978 and 1988 succeeded in planting an estimated two millions olive trees as a means of land defense.[23] The 1970s and 1980s expansion led to significant changes in the landscape of the southern West Bank, which prior to these campaigns had considerably fewer olive trees. Finally, since 2008 the Palestinian Authority has overseen the Greening Palestine Initiative, which distributes 350,000 trees yearly, 150,000 of which are olive trees.[24] As the land under Palestinian control shrinks and olive trees increase, we can see that the native population resists elimination through land defense mediated by oleo-culture, slowing and stopping the settler project in hundreds of locales.

Olive trees are planted on half of all agricultural land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and generate income for one hundred thousand families.[25] The nature of agriculture is family based: family ownership makes up 99.7 percent of agricultural holdings, while corporate and cooperative ownership is 0.3 percent. Palestinian society is considered a youthful society with 53 percent of the population under eighteen, yet 81.5 percent of agricultural holdings are owned by those over forty years old.[26] Meanwhile, land confiscation and growing populations are leading to rapidly shrinking holdings, disincentivizing investment in agriculture and gradually decreasing employment in the sector. Generational inheritance rights combined with a relatively high birthrate also lead to continual division of land and its parcellation, making plots smaller and reducing oil production to that sufficient for household consumption with little surplus. Making matters worse, on average the amount of oil each tree produces is decreasing.[27]

West Bank oleo-culture is extensive, mostly rain-fed (known as *ba'li* agriculture), and averages fourteen trees per dunum. Oleo-culture in the Gaza Strip is intensive, irrigated, and averages forty trees per dunum, making Gaza the second largest oil producer by region. Only Jenin outproduces Gaza: it averages a quarter of all olive groves, a quarter of all the oil presses, and a quarter of national production in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Around 75 percent of oil is produced in the north of the West Bank, with sizable production also in Tulkarm, Nablus, and Tubas. Ramallah is the only other governorate that competes in volume of production with the north of the West Bank and Gaza. The average yearly production of olive oil in the West Bank and Gaza Strip this decade is estimated at twenty-two thousand tons.[28]

Palestinian trees and oils seem to have some specificity to them. Olive trees in Palestine average 25 percent oil content, which is relatively high in comparison to other countries.[29] One account claimed that Palestinian olive trees produced up to five times more than their French counterparts.[30] Chemical analysis of Palestinian oils by olive cultivars shows that all the main types grown can produce oils with acidity below 0.8 percent, the limit required for chemical designation of extra virgin oil.[31]

Producing quality olive oil requires embracing seemingly contradicting concepts, specifically stress and care. The best oils are the ones produced while the tree is under stress, and the stress of the Palestinian landscape creates a unique taste profile.[32] Spiciness is the taste produced by the *ba'li* nature of Palestinian oleo-culture. When describing this spiciness, my interlocutors said it is a "burn in the mouth and throat." Organoleptic descriptors in English differentiate between spiciness, which is felt in the mouth and tongue, and pungency, which is felt in the throat. Pungency is one of the most valued attributes of EVOO, while spiciness seems secondary. When discussing in Arabic with Palestinian consumers, they viewed spiciness as the most prized attribute.[33]

When oil is made and stored according to EVOO standards, its spiciness rises gradually upward in the back of the taster's throat in an "elevator" style.[34] Produced by local methods, spiciness can jolt the taster's throat suddenly and intensely, and can be described as "sharp." The intensity of spiciness depends on limited water and humidity, with *ba'li* olives in the hills of the West Bank and those along the dry fringes of the Naqab in the south of the West Bank producing oil with the most intense spiciness. Irrigated and plains olives have spiciness, but the taste is less intense and more in sync with other taste attributes of the oil, giving a more harmonious flavor. The spicy tasting, *ba'li* natured, smallholding-centric Palestinian oil is one of the most expensive oils in the world. Specialists attribute the price to labor shortages, which increase cost. Yet exporters cited strong taste as the reason at least a portion of consumers pay the additional cost.

Care impacts polyphenol rates in an oil. Polyphenols are antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds in the oil that make it a health food craze. Palestinian oil is relatively low in polyphenols. While polyphenols in olive oil range from 50 to 1000 units per liter, polyphenols in Palestinian oils average 280 to 300 units per liter. Care

of the trees can raise polyphenol levels. A Japan International Cooperation Agency project succeeded in raising the polyphenol rate of oil in Palestine to 350 units per liter. Polyphenol levels in oil from continually-cared-for groves in Tulkarm reached 548 units per liter in 2022.[35]

The contradictions of stress and care likely account for another contradiction, the infamous instability of the oil and durability of the trees. Palestinian oils are seen as unstable, quick to oxidize and deteriorate if not stored properly. They are best kept in the dark, raised off the floor, and in stainless steel containers. When exposed to light and air, the oil is quick to oxidize. If stored in humid conditions or in the standard plastic "tanks" (often called yellow tanks) the oil will develop a taste defect. The trees themselves – whether *rumi* or *nabali* cultivars – are drought and disease resistant, can live and thrive in poor soils, and are essential for biodiversity.[36] Where most olive trees live an average of six hundred years, the Galilee alone has an estimated two hundred thousand millenarian olive trees. No clear statistics exist for millenarian olives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but many cases of thousand-year-old trees exist, including those of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, al-Sayyid al-Badawi in al-Walaja, Bethlehem, and Tal Rumayda in Hebron, and with at least a handful of such old trees in hundreds of villages.

Figure 1. An olive tree in Birzeit, February 2019. Photo by author.

There is no single taste for Palestine's oil. There are several tastes and a plethora of flavors in different oils. Locally, people differentiate between oils in several ways, as we will see below. The majority of Palestinian oil is produced by the standard of local tastes. The following section looks at production and consumption of Palestinian olive oil through its circulation. In it, we will see exported oils, tastes of locally circulated oils, and waning and burgeoning trends in the world of Palestinian olive oil.

Palestinian Oils in the World

The West Bank and Gaza Strip produce 0.2 percent of global olive oil output, with only about five thousand to seven thousand tons exported each year. Oil export is divided into three categories: *amanat* to the Gulf; gifts sent to Jordan; and formal export (with the United States and the EU as the main destinations). *Amanat* are considered gifts sent from Palestine to relatives working in the Gulf and hence are untaxed. *Amanat* make up the majority of oil exports from Palestine, an average of three thousand to five thousand tons yearly. The largest recipient of *amanat* is Saudi Arabia, followed by the United Arab Emirates, and then Kuwait. Qatar imports as well, but there is no direct market to Bahrain (only transit). An *amanat* market has opened in the last two years in Oman. The *amanat* market used to consist only of direct receipt of oil between relatives, yet with the passing of time it has developed into a broader market. *Amanat* are now shipped by no less than sixteen companies in the West Bank and are received by shops owned by Palestinians in the Gulf who bottle and sell to the Palestinian diaspora in their area through social networks. It seems this market is enhanced by a tightly knit diaspora community. Generational changes do not seem to have diminished the desire for the tastes of home, but only transformed the distribution from direct to commercial networks of Palestinians. Palestinian oil is the most expensive oil in the market, even though in quality it is similar to Jordanian and Syrian oils.

Gifts to Jordan are similar to *amanat* in that they are also untaxed. Yet Jordan's olive oil self-sufficiency programs ended Palestinian oil's once dominant position "across the bridge." Today, a mere seven hundred to one thousand tons are sent as gifts to Jordan, and this number is shrinking. This is dependent in large part on the amount of oil allowed entry into the kingdom. The number of tanks allowed entry per person has fluctuated: initially four, it then dropped to one, was raised to two after political lobbying, and then came to a complete stop during the COVID-19 closure of the bridge. The period for entry of West Bank oil has also been subject to decreasing time intervals. The Jordanian olive oil industry seems to have developed a strong lobby; with Jordan now home to over seventeen million olive trees, it seems the days of Palestinian olive oil supremacy in Jordan are over. The trickling out of the remainder of this market is a matter of time.

Borders hardly change ecosystems and only recently succeeded in stopping the flow of people. The non-Mediterranean Mediterranean country of Jordan is home

to several cultivars of olive also found on the western bank of the river. In addition to a shared border, history, and culture, the kingdom shares at least five micro-ecosystems with historic Palestine. The century or so of modern colonialism in the region might enable writers of school textbooks to overlook shared history, but to assume that a "taste of the homeland" cannot be produced from a tree just across the river might be a bit of a stretch in the history of the Levant.[37]

The final form of export is that of EVOO quality and either organic or fairtrade certified. The main markets are the United States, the EU, and Japan, but inroads have been made in Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Australia, New Zealand, and Chile. Formal export, an official told me, "was two thousand tons yearly a decade ago and remains two thousand tons today." Donor funds poured into the sector seem not to have changed the volume of export, but they did diversify exporters, creating a situation of competitive saturation. While the volume has remained the same, the number of companies exporting olive oil has increased from four to forty. The top four exporters are the oldest and their structure can be called "social enterprises"; their purpose is to support farmers, whereas the new exporters are predominantly private enterprises.

The "corporate structure" of the four main exporters is worthy of further examination. The two largest exporters are al-Reef and Canaan. Al-Reef is a non-profit corporation that was spun off as an independent entity from the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee. PARC set up al-Reef to assist farmers in the marketing and sale of agricultural products. Al-Reef is the largest exporter to the European market. Canaan comprises more than one legal entity, with Canaan Palestine and Canaan Fairtrade serving two different functions for the same organization. The farmers that export through Canaan are organized to produce and mill together and Canaan offers services to member-farmers for development of farming practices and production. Canaan is the largest exporter, by a margin, to the U.S. market and its oils are found in large chains like Whole Foods. Both act as "producer synergies" or cooperative marketing societies. That non-cooperative entities are set up speaks more about the limitations placed on cooperative organization by the Palestinian Authority than anything else.

Indeed, nearly any Palestinian exporter that is able to produce oil at the quality and quantity required to export to the United States, the EU, or Japan, functions as a kind of social enterprise. Hence, the oldest and most established exporters are tied to organizations, whether NGOs or church-affiliated, that prioritize sustaining livelihoods of producers. The manner or form of "beyond profit" logic differs from place to place, though. Those certifying fairtrade aim to ensure the farmer-producers receive better prices.[38] Other exporters represented by agricultural organizations and church affiliates will use half-automated bottling and labeling machines to ensure local community members or university students receive income through seasonal packaging work, creating jobs in the community.

Sometimes the borders around Palestine seem so impenetrable that we forget that on the other side is a vicious market. This seems to happen often in the

olive oil industry, where exporters to the EU continue to face hurdles. Initially, importing olive oil into the EU required a chemical test for acidity levels. Once most exporters managed to incorporate lab testing into their document preparation, a taste test certification requirement arose. Since the Palestinian National Tasting Panel is in its infancy, and expanding its membership is a difficult process of recognized organoleptic training through the International Olive Council, many exporters submit and pay for a certified taste test from either Jordanian or Israeli panels.[39] Yet always one step ahead in its attempt to privilege its producers, the EU has already moved to require peroxide rate testing, which measures the degree of oxidation. Exporters are aware that these shifting goalposts are indirect means of protecting European producers from competition.[40]

Importers, meanwhile, have various motivations for importing Palestinian olive oil. According to specialists, Palestinian oils stand on their own in the United States and compete based strictly on merit. While the quality of Palestinian oils is unquestionable, I am not sure the claim holds. The oils exported to the United States are fairtrade certified, hence already catering to the community of ethical consumers. In addition to ethical consumers, there is solidarity purchase. Many of the online retailers in the United States who stock Palestinian olive oil have, for example, from as early as December 2023 started listing that years' oil stock as sold out. Quality taste surely has impact, but in this case, we can see that solidarity purchase also plays a part.

The various reasons for importing into the East Asian market are noteworthy, especially since these locations historically produced little olive oil and have low consumption. In South Korea, cooperatives and consumer societies import Palestinian oils produced by Palestinian cooperatives and sell them in their stores. The cooperative connection here shows a form of solidarity purchase by retailers not necessarily only because Palestinian oil is Palestinian, but out of cooperative-to-cooperative solidarity and seemingly divorced from the aesthetic of taste seen elsewhere. The newer markets of Indonesia and Malaysia seem to be growing out of Muslim solidarity with Palestine. Finally, bottled olive oil is also sold in the Gulf (led by Kuwait); it is more expensive than the Italian and Spanish oils sold there, but sells well for both taste qualities *and* solidarity.

As different export destinations shrink while others grow, we also see where and why Palestinian oils circulate. To an extent, it becomes possible to better understand the various consumer rationales for buying these oils, and the various forms of solidarity present in some of the purchases. We also see the role of some exporting bodies in supporting farmers, developing production, and job-creation. Consumers of Palestinian oils, regardless of the rationale for purchase, receive a taste of Palestine.

Tastes of Home

Most olive oil produced in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, roughly sixteen thousand tons, is consumed locally. Based on specialist information, about thirteen thousand

tons are consumed in the West Bank, and three thousand tons in the Gaza Strip. These numbers do not account for West Bank oils sold to Jerusalemites or inside the Green Line. No trade statistics exist for such exchanges as people sell through informal networks to relatives and friends inside. Local production standards are a unique foodway different from EVOO standards. Understanding taste preference in the West Bank is essential for understanding both consumption and production patterns. Considering the scale of local consumption and the importance of the olive sector on peoples' income, local taste preference is understudied.

In looking into this understudied area, the first thing we notice is that there is no authoritative "taste," but multiple ways people value their oils. This section looks at different forms of taste: what I term "town designations," northern/southern oils, and the subtly shifting tastes in West Bank olive-culture. Yet as the popular saying goes, "no one calls their (own) oil rancid." Quite the opposite: the small farm nature and peasant background of olive oil producers often lead to claims that their oil is the best. This is hardly unheard of when labor is not alienated from its means of production.[41]

Town designations can be seen somewhat as a local understanding of the concept of terroir. It is the valuing of an oil because it originated from places renowned for their oil production. These assessments do not seem to be based on any type of chemical or lab testing. There is no clear standard or guide, and it is the bane of authorities on EVOO. When prompted, an oil producer will list the villages or towns that produce good quality oils: the names usually listed are Bayt Jala, two or three other places in different districts, and then the speaker's hometown.

Mill owners and operators tend to be more "regional" in their assessments as opposed to naming single towns. Mill owners interviewed would usually list the same three or four village names but, when arriving to their specific area of operation, would also list a group of villages in their region. The mill owners interviewed in the north of Ramallah listed many (but not all) of the nearby villages as producing high quality oils. Those northwest, for example, list the olive oils of Birzeit, Abu Qash, Surda, al-Mazra'a al-Qibliyya, Abu Shkhaydam, Kubar, Burham, and 'Atara. Press owners in the northeast listed eastern villages like Silwad, Dayr Jarir, Ramun, Taybeh, and Yabrud as producers of high-quality oils. Presses in the Bani Zayd region list the oils of Dayr Ghassana, Bayt Rima, 'Abbud, Dayr Abu Mish'al, and al-Nabi Salih as the best. The northeast and northwest considered the Bani Zayd oils as too light, and the Bani Zayd area considered the northwest and northeast as too heavy. As olive press owners informed me in interviews, this assessment impacts which oils are stored together for sale. Oil from unknown or "lower quality" areas are placed together, while those deemed high quality are stored alone. Mill owners will sell the oils from the areas they privilege at higher prices, setting them aside for sale to return customers, exporters, and bulk purchasers. It is important to note that the origins of oils are not the only characteristics mill owners will look for when assessing an oil. Here, their artisanal skill is central because they assess the quality of the oil as it comes out of their machinery. And they do not like sharing how they

can tell, since their ability to assess oils is also the trick of their trade. Ultimately, assessing oil and town reputation does translate into circulation and sale, giving it economic importance.

Related to, but not synonymous with, town designation is the division of West Bank oils into northern or southern oils. Northern oils, epitomized by the Jenin governorate, are seen as light oils. Southern oils, epitomized by Bayt Jala and Hebron, are seen as heavy oils. People from the north of the West Bank generally prefer light oils and people from the south prefer heavier oils. Both northern and southern oil consumers claim their oils are "spicy." The "north-south" divide is not uniform or determinative: Nablus and Tubas are northern governorates, yet their oil is considered heavier oil. Likewise, "southern" oil is a label applied not just to Hebron and Bethlehem, but to Ramallah and Salfit, both of which are central governorates yet nonetheless produce, value, and consume heavier oils. Although this differentiation has softened and decreased in recent years, the north-south differentiation deserves a more detailed analysis and further research, if only for the connoisseur's delight.

Climatic, environmental, and ecological factors play a role in the taste of the oil. But human factors are no less important. The mixture of nature and culture here produce very different local oils. These oils are rarely made to EVOO standards, but the people who produce and consume it consider it their own. There is value in understanding local preferences, if for no other reason than because it is a culture that doesn't seem to have been registered previously. Building on both the town designation and the north-south taste preference, we can to some extent distill the sought-out qualities and how one might choose to use particular oils.

The closest we can come to a rule of thumb on the matter of oil tastes is that the stronger the taste of the oil, the better its ability to flavor a food; the lighter the oil, the better its ability to blend and accentuate the flavors of food. In this sense, heavy oils stand on their own as a flavor, suited for being dipped by bread alone or with the addition of salt in the oil. Lighter oils suit complex mixtures to enable amplitude, to be used for example in an Arabic salad composed not just of cucumber and tomatoes but also onion, dried mint, lemon, and salt. Both oils work alongside *za'tar* and, depending on if you like your oil to spice your hummus or *ful* plate or would rather it be blended, the *daqqa* (a mix of spices and seeds) topping it.

Yet "northern and southern" divisions are misleading. Historic Palestine has at least six microregions, making each group of villages unique ecologically and topographically, and creates an agriculture that requires opportunism in utilizing the local niche.[42] These microregions and the local niches produce different tasting oils. But even in this typology, what is missing far outweighs what is listed, and the descriptions below are merely illustrations.

First, Bayt Jala oil is distinct in its heaviness. This is related to the production process itself where the olives are picked as late as December and stored in piles called *chomer* for prolonged periods. The piling up of olive fruit leads to the release of heat, discharging the olive-water from the fruit and fermenting them. An

organoleptic test would show unacceptable levels of mustiness and fustiness, while chemical tests would show high peroxide levels. Yet this oil is the most sought out in Palestine. Where some oils sell for as low as sixteen shekels per liter, Bayt Jala has sold for as high as one hundred shekels per liter.[43] That price is the selling price for Bayt Jala oils pressed without the *chomer* method used as well. Specialists try to point to the religious importance of Bayt Jala as the reason for its price, while I have heard economists explain the price by pointing out the proximity of Bayt Jala to Jerusalem and the Green Line, which makes Bayt Jala accessible to Palestinians on the other side of the wall who have higher income levels. I do not believe the flavor of a Bayt Jala oil should be so quickly dismissed; rather, this is a unique oil produced by a method rarely used elsewhere. Those militant in their super-food health regimen might prefer a different oil – to each their own.

The only region in the West Bank that can ascertain a single cultivar is Hebron, where the Improved Nabali (or *nabali muhassan*) variant was grown en masse as part of the land defense programs throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This variant was selected due to its quick rooting nature, but it struggles at times because it requires irrigation – unlike most local cultivars which thrive in *ba'li* conditions. Yet the ever-inventive cultivators have resorted where possible to growing their trees in a type of soil called *huwwar* or spreading *huwwar* around their trees in winter to ensure water preservation in the soil.[44] The oils produced in Hebron, especially those bordering the Naqab to the south, produce an oil famed for its sharp and intense spiciness. These oils are not astringent and come off as greasy at times. They pair particularly well with dairy foods. This oil is at its best alongside Nabulsi cheese or using the oil to fry the cheese. It also pairs well as a topping for sour cream or labneh. Unfortunately, Hebron oils are hard to come by since the district only produces an average of one thousand tons in good years; Hebron is required to import oil from other districts for its needs.

Finally, in the central highlands (including both eastern and western areas of northern Jerusalem and the Ramallah district at elevations between 550 and 900 meters above sea level) the oils have a marked "green" taste. Green taste is locally associated with freshly milled oils and it is also present – albeit in an incomplete form – as an aroma when entering an olive mill. This green taste is also influenced by overtones of bitterness and spiciness in various proportions, depending on if the oil is from the eastern end or the western end of the highlands (bordering the Jordan valley or the Mediterranean, respectively). These oils go great with a fellahiyya variation of the Arabic salad, particularly pairing well with tomatoes. The spiciness can lose its distinction if mixed with hot peppers or other spicy foods. That does not necessarily mean it should be avoided, rather drowning out the spiciness extenuates the green and bitter flavors. Meals that are famed as harvest meals are the best for highland oils. These include the "national" dish *musakhan*, but also green dishes that center around black lilies (*Arum palaestinum*), known locally as *luf*. Usually, lily leaves are rubbed down with salt and then washed so that they do not numb the tongue. Then the leaves are chopped and added on top of onions frying in fresh

oil. Another meal, called *bahthula* is made by rolling flour, water, and oil until pea-sized pieces form, which are then added into the *luf* mix to be fried in the oil, lily leaves, and onions. Sweets like *hilba* (fenugreek seeds) and *maltuta* (a "peasant's treat" made from freshly pressed olive oil, flour, sugar, sesame, and anise or fennel) are harvest treats and taste best when the oil is fresh.

Waning and Burgeoning Forms and Tastes

Having looked at different taste preferences, we understand better which flavors people want in their oils. Yet changes have occurred in the palates of Palestinians in the West Bank. These changes have pushed some forms of oil production to near disappearance and encouraged the development of new forms.

Two handmade forms of olive oil are hard to come by today. They are known as *zayt tfah* and *zayt badudiya*. Maissoun Sharkawi informs us that these two types of oil were traditionally made in September.[45] *Zayt tfah* is made by grinding the olives into a paste and pouring warm water over it. The paste is then squeezed by hand and left. The oil eventually separates and rises to the top of the bowl where it can be collected. Sharkawi cites this practice in al-Zawiya, Salfit. I could not find anyone who produces this oil in the Ramallah area. *Zayt badudiya* is made by roasting olives "until they are completely reduced in size as a result of water evaporating from the fruit; then they are struck with a stone. The obtained paste is put into a tissue and then twisted to exert pressure and extract the oil."[46] One producer was found in Dayr Dibwan. An interlocuter who is familiar with *badudiya* oil stated that it takes a *shawwal* (fifty-kilogram bag) of olives to make a bottle, and a bottle is worth more than a sixteen-kilo tank of olive oil produced by typical methods. Hence, as Sharkawi points out, this oil is much more expensive

Figure 2. Birzeit oil emerging from an olive press at the Kubar mill, October 2019. Photo by author.

than oil produced in mills. Unfortunately, the timing and checkpoints did not allow for a sampling of *badudiya* oil.

Another waning taste is for stone-pressed oils. Oil industry specialists seemed generally not well informed on the status of stone presses (known colloquially as *ma'asir hajjar*). Stone presses and traditional presses (*al-badd*) are not synonymous. The category of stone presses includes older (half-automatic) presses, but also new state-of-the art mills that incorporate stainless steel machinery which moves traditional limestone crushing stones over olive fruit to create the paste and a distinct taste. The potential of these presses seems to have been largely missed.

Stone pressed oils are not easy to find locally, although it seems that some producers will press using stone. As one stone mill owner informed me, some producers will mill most of their harvested olives using modern mills yet press oil for their family's consumption in a stone press. How many people continue to do this is uncertain, but considering the number of stone presses that have closed in the last few years this phenomenon may not continue much longer. The 2023–24 agricultural year seems to have been particularly hard on stone mills, as many of the people who stone-press could not reach the presses due to road closures. In the Ramallah area, there are known stone presses in Ramallah, Dayr Abu Mish'al, and 'Abbud. None of them opened in 2023.[47] Likewise, the 'Asira Shamaliyya (Nablus) stone press did not open in the 2023–24 agricultural year, while the Jinsafut press (Qalqilya) closed in 2021. The only stone presses open this past year – to the best of my knowledge – were the stone presses of Bazariya (Jenin) and Burka (Nablus), both of which seem to cater to local farmers as well as export.

An interlocutor relaying the introduction of modern presses in the 1990s informed me, "When we first used them, the elderly told us the oil was burned and ended up tasteless, that we should sell it to the soap factories in Nablus." The "traditional" press created more acidic oils (due to friction during the stone press and base and lack of cooling systems) and was much more bitter (due to the presence of small amounts of olive leaves among the fruit pressed). It is unclear how much the stone pressed of today resembles that "traditional" oil. Regardless, oil and stones are things that have become synonymous with Palestine, and these stone pressed oils deserve a taste.

Finally, olive mill owners play a central role in the supply chain and changes in the industry that have an immediate impact on oil production. As mills are competing for the most efficient and state-of-the-art milling production lines, along with the latest machinery they are also importing the methods from Spain and Italy – methods and tools that were developed specifically for extra virgin oils. Long gone are the days of olive paste spread on baskets for hydraulic pressing. Now most mills operate decanter centrifuges to release oil and olive-water from the pulp. Mill owners pay very close attention to the temperature throughout the processes of crushing, malaxation, extraction, and separation. Some even refuse to raise the temperature of the process when harvesters explicitly request it, citing quality of the harvesters' oil and the oils of the harvesters after him, who would be impacted by the residual temperature of the machinery. Many mill owners also pay close attention to the acidity and peroxide rates of oils.

These observations indicate that mill owners are adhering to EVOO best practices. They did not necessarily cite EVOO as the reason or aim, but rather cited machine producer technical specialists' guidance on method. In a sense there is a process of hybridity, where machinery developed to produce EVOO products and terms developed as indicators of quality required by EVOO (like attention to temperature, low acidity rates, low peroxide) are used to explain the mill operator's preference of one region's oils compared to another region's oils. In assessing the direction the Palestinian oil industry is headed, and based on the interviews I conducted with specialists, I believe this hybridity is just one step on the road to greater EVOO hegemony over Palestinian oils.

While some oil traditions wane, new trends are in their infancy. The first of the new trends relates to the phenomenon of bottled oil sold in the local market. Tank storage and sale are still predominant but the presence of oil bottled locally is a testament to shifting currents in Palestinian society. These bottled oils usually sport top-of-the-line marketing and packaging, like al-Ard's Palestinian embroidery patterns and Arabic calligraphy or Saleh Khalaf's unique "for home or the diaspora" packaging. Al-Ard exports these bottled oils while it seems Saleh Khalaf's oils are designed with the intention of both local consumption and as gifts to relatives and friends abroad.

The rise of bottled oils seems tied to the shift in retail stores in the West Bank. The rise of larger grocery shops facilitates the circulation of bottled oils. These shops take two forms: chain stores like Bravo, Shini, and Mashhadawi, which offer wide isles, shopping carts, and often include parking garages, catering to those with cars and disposable income that define the middle class; and lower-middle-class friendly wholesalers like Sudani, Tarifi, and others. Yet the consumers of these bottled oils are not only urbanites without rural roots or relatives. Many of the recently urbanized have come to cities – mostly Ramallah – but also have ever shrinking plots in their home villages. Since production is intermittent, based on harvesting every other year, these consumers will buy a bottle of oil or two should they run out before it is time to harvest again. Yet this market is in its infancy, and the same shops that sell these oils sell imported Italian and Spanish oils at a lower price, simultaneously enabling and threatening this new form. Bottled oils are produced in virgin and extra virgin standards. Saleh Khalaf oils are sourced from the Ramallah and Birzeit areas, while al-Ard oils are sourced from the Nablus, Tulkarm, Ramallah, and Jenin. Yet these companies stress that the selection of their sources is based on organoleptic and chemical testing, which is to say EVOO standards.

A second budding trend, albeit niche and smaller in scale, is olive oil packaged for single use. Packaged by Nazazeh company in 'Arraba, Jenin, these elongated seven-gram packages look much like ketchup or mayonnaise packages distributed in fast food restaurants. Sold for one shekel per packet in local stores, this oil seems to have been conceived as an accessory to bread-dipped breakfast on-the-go (hummus, ful, or labneh). While not much marketing seems to have gone into it, from what shop owners have relayed it seems to be quite popular with university students, manual laborers, and taxi drivers.

The shifts in production associated with adoptions of advanced milling methods and new packaging forms is thus suited for an increasingly urbanized demographic. Having inspected several forms of taste, we have a sense of the tastes circulating in Palestinian oils from the first three sections of this article. While we see how there is no one single taste of the homeland, it is worthwhile to ask the provocative question: Can we taste the homeland in an oil not made in Palestine?

The Taste of Jerusalem in Catalonia

Throughout this study, I have highlighted the circulation of Palestinian oils and their forms. Consequently, this work has so far remained predominately framed in the bounded field site of the nation-state. Yet nature, environment, and biological species cannot be contained within human fields of this sort. I was reminded of this lesson in the tasting session that I described at the outset.

Upon returning to Palestine and harvesting the family groves, I decided to compare the Arbequina I had sampled with freshly pressed home(land)-made oil. The Arbequina was an extra virgin, it was smoother and better rounded. The local oil was sharper in its spiciness and stronger in its bitterness. The green flavor seems to be what I registered with familiarity the first time I consumed the Arbequina. Therein is the paradox: many oils have green taste, yet it is the spiciness that is supposed to differentiate a Palestinian oil. But it was the green taste that returned me to my adolescence in the olive presses.

A few weeks later, online forums for importers of Spanish oils were noting interesting information. The Spanish harvest was negatively impacted by a heatwave that struck the Iberian Peninsula. One of the outcomes of this heatwave was that the Arbequina produced sharp spicy notes. And in two coincidences of time and space, sharp-tasting Palestinian olive oil can be tasted in Catalonia.

As this example shows, the taste of home can be complicated in places were interconnectedness stretches back so far. Interconnection entails both *back and forth* connections. Hence, it is important to point out that Palestine was not only the place where olive cultivars come from but was also a recipient of numerous "foreign" breeds. Ali Nusouh al-Tahir lists several such imported cultivars: al-Barouni from Tunisia planted in the coastal village of Susa, Talmisani from Algeria for oil, and Italian Santa Katrina and Grossissima di Sardegna for table olives.[48] Al-Tahir attributes some role to churches and missionaries in importing recent olive breeds (specifically French and Italian cultivars), while also noting the introduction of new cultivars through the agriculture research stations established by Mandate authorities in 1933, located in 'Askar village near Nablus and al-Farradiyya near Safad.[49] Yet not all cultivars' origins were covered or are known, understandably so considering the trade, travel, war, and colonization that characterizes the history of the Mediterranean.

The landscape and the ecology of the Mediterranean create similarity between locations hundreds of miles apart and diversity in the next town over.[50] The history of the Mediterranean shows that olives trees were traded and planted in distant

places, whether introduced to new Mediterranean shores by trading polities like the Phoenicians or Italian city states, or through trade colonies like those of Carthage in Spain or Greek city-states in Italy and Egypt, whether planted in the age of empires like those of the Romans, Umayyads, and Ottomans, or by individuals like the Duke of Medinaceli, just taking some saplings home while returning from pilgrimage.[51] This diversity showed itself in Palestine's own repertoire of olive cultivars and the tastes they produce. The interconnected history of the Mediterranean, its peoples, and species here shows us that tastes can be produced far from home, revealing that the "taste of the homeland" is an unstable category.

Conclusion

Palestinian olive oil circulates in many ways, and tracing these circulations enables a view of the nexus of consumption and production. We have seen how different oils are valued locally, among the diaspora, and internationally by their consumers, how changing tastes have led to gradually fading methods of oil production and new burgeoning ones, and how some tastes of home aren't produced at home at all but are tied to home through a shared heritage. In terms of changes in the "taste of the homeland" there are two patterns. First, land holdings continue to shrink, which will inevitably lead to a situation where it becomes no longer viable for many households to produce oil for their own needs. Should population growth, land fragmentation, and land confiscation continue at this pace, oil will need to be imported into Palestine. As we saw above, export relies heavily on the efforts of social enterprises, and export standards and certification require larger scales of operation. The local increase in aggregate demand that colonial land confiscation, land fragmentation, and increased population would lead to will influence export first. Later generations of diaspora might be denied the tastes of the homeland.

Second, EVOO standards are making inroads into the palates of Palestinians. Whether from production standards or from market available oils, the consumption of EVOO is growing, if only slowly for now. A tipping point might eventually be reached in its favor. In this sense, the techne science of a global taste regimen is slowly infiltrating local artisanal skill and transforming it at the levels of both production and consumption. As this paper has shown, taste is hardly the only factor influencing production and consumption but is just one among many other factors. Here we see Palestinian oil producers trapped between the colonial hammer and the anvil of global capitalism.

Yet, if this article has striven for anything it is to push back on homogenizing views of what constitutes a "good oil" and where and how we can experience the tastes of the homeland. Rather, there is no ideal type and there are numerous ways to make, eat, and enjoy the different olive oils that flavor our ties to Palestine. The Proustian moment described at the outset of this paper is about tasting home. It is what most people who want Palestinian oils wish to receive: taste that stirs memory of the scents, smells, and tastes of their homes. Maybe the significance isn't in spiciness, greenness,

bitterness, or pungency but in deeper yearnings. Especially since where tastes take us is *return*. What yearning could have more resonance for a Palestinian?

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Endnotes

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in particular included interviews with the Olive Oil Unit in the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Agriculture, the Palestinian Olive Council, Palestinian Standards Institute, agricultural NGOs, exporting bodies and companies, mill owners, and district agronomists. Agricultural statistical data was gathered from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and oil trade statistics were kindly shared by Pal-Trade.

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27 Production on the level of individual trees is not measured officially anywhere to the best

of my knowledge. Based on oral histories in Birzeit, per tree production has dropped over the decades since the 1960s, from around fifty kilograms of oil to less than twenty kilograms of oil per mature Rumi tree.

28 Averages are needed because olive trees are alternate bearing. Good years are called *massi* and bad years *shalatuni*. Good years have higher fruit production, but bad years have higher oil content, hence higher press rates; the averages depend on olive cultivar, ecological and meteorological conditions, and human care.

29 This rate was provided by both the Palestinian Olive Council and the Ministry of Agriculture's Olive Oil Unit.

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31 See: Ramiz Ebiad and Hassan Abu-Qaoud, "Morphological and Biochemical Characterization of Three Olive 'Oleaeuropaea L.' Cultivars in Palestine," *Jordan Journal of Agricultural Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2014), online at archives.ju.edu.jo/index.php/jjas/article/view/6064 (accessed 28 August 2024); and Enrico Maria Lodolini, Serena Polverigiani, Saed Ali, Mohammed Mutawea, Mayyada Qutub, Taysir Arabasi, Fabio Pierini, Mohammed Abed, and Davide Neri, "Oil Characteristics of Four Palestinian Olive Varieties," *Journal of Oleo Science* 66, no. 5 (2017): 435–41, online at doi.org/10.5650/jos.ess16184.

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40 In a loophole, Palestinian oil is regularly denied entry to the United Kingdom due to the presence of a compound called delta 7-stigmastenol, which in Palestinian oils is naturally slightly above the permitted 0.5 percent, due to the large pit size in the olive fruit. Despite several objections and clarifications from the Palestinian government sources, many Palestinians have not been able to consistently export oil to the UK as a result.

41 To see how coffee producers in Papua New Guinea viewed their production, see: Paige West, *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

42 Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Wiley, 2000).

43 The price per liter I give is for the reader's ease. Local measurements are in fifteen to sixteen kilogram "tanks" of oil. Some oils sell for as low as 250 shekels per tank and Bayt

Jala has reached as high as 1,600 shekels per tank.

44 Known locally as *turab al-huwwar*, this is a type of soil that preserves water in the cold and releases it during the heat, acting as a moisture preserver in the soil and nourishing tree roots.

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46 Sharkawi, "Introducing Olive Culture," 55.

47 In a phone conversation with the owner of the ʻAbbud stone press, he cited the difficulty of his customers in reaching ʻAbbud due to the closure of the entrance of the village by the army as the reason he did not open his press this year. The Dayr Abu Mishʻal stone press was closed in 2022 as well as 2023.

48 Al-Tahir, *Shajarat al-zaytun*, 387–96.

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Freekeh and Fellahin: A Symbiotic Relationship of Sumud

Amanny Ahmad

Abstract

Within Palestine, there is widespread understanding of the catastrophic effects of settler colonialism and Zionism on the Palestinian economy – especially as related to the agrarian way of life. Prior to the significant setback to Palestinian sovereignty from the Oslo accords in 1993, there was already ample evidence of intentional economic suffocation of the agricultural sector by Zionist design, with the intent to transform the Palestinian population of predominantly self-sufficient fellahin (peasant class land workers) subsistence producers into captive consumers. Using the ingredient of freekeh as a throughline, this essay examines Palestinian relationships to the land, and how they have been changed by colonial occupation, causing traditional foodways and food sovereignty to be imperiled. Part of this essay is based on the author's time spent harvesting and processing freekeh with her teacher and friend, Umm Maghareb, in the West Bank in May 2023. It also examines the relationship between the Zionist narrative and the construction and projection of an Israeli culinary identity, which absorbs heritage ingredients like freekeh to reposition them as keystones to an imagined "Israeli food."

Keywords:

Culinary colonialism; food sovereignty; freekeh; fellahin; Palestine; Indigenous; agriculture; wheat; sumud; cultural food heritage.

Local stories have it that the original tree of good and evil – the centerpiece

of the Garden of Eden – was a stalk of wheat but, at that time, the plants were so magnificent that each wheat berry was the size of a cucumber. It was one of these fruits that the serpent plucked as its irresistible offering to Eve. And when Adam was sent from Paradise by the archangel Gabriel, it was these swollen grains wrapped in seven silk handkerchiefs that he was given in parting. But when he sowed them on lowly Earth, they grew only to the size we know today.[1]

Figure 1. Wheat growing in the field; Ramallah area, May 2023. Photo by author.

It has been fourteen thousand years since the making of the oldest bread that we know of – primarily from the wild grass predecessors of emmer wheat (*Triticum dicoccum*). A remnant of this primitive bread, fire baked on hot stones by the Natufians, was found recently in an ancient hearth in the area referred to often as the Levant. The majority of wheat grown today for human consumption globally is believed to have evolved from this early varietal. With the assistance of many thousands of years of human ancestors – alongside the evolution of ruminants, agriculture, and early civilization – it paved the way forward for human diets over many millennia and the foundation of society as we know it. According to archaeologists, these hunter-gatherers of pre-Abrahamic Palestine used primitive *manajil* (sickles) to harvest wild cereals (the grass family predecessors to wheat and maize), and developed mortars that allowed them to produce a fine flour that eventually led to the bread we now recognize. First the Natufians, then the Ghassulians, then the Canaanites – all thousands of years before the time of Abraham and the monotheism that holds wheat in a most venerable position – milled various

wild grasses and mixed them with other plants and vegetables, eventually cooking the slurry in the precursor to the tabun oven.

These technological advancements laid the groundwork for future descendants to thrive and evolve into more stationary agricultural societies. Natufians are believed to have developed quasi-sedentary settlements that interwove practices of hunting and gathering with a nascent agricultural economy long before wheat became thoroughly domesticated. Wheat went on to become the backbone of human consumption, necessitating a restructuring of the human relationship to movement and the land. Today, wheat fields occupy more land globally than any other crop. After emmer wheat came the domestication of the durum variety (*Triticum turgidum* subspecies, *durum)* in the Fertile Crescent around ten thousand years ago.[2] Currently, it amounts to 5 to 8 percent of wheat grown globally, or approximately thirty-eight million tons annually.[3] The hardness of the wheat berries makes it ill-suited to the production of bread flours; it is instead used most prominently for the production of semolina pastas. However, another product made from durum wheat, freekeh, is a highly nutritious grain used by many throughout Southwest Asia and North Africa and holds a particularly prominent place as a traditional ingredient and cultural food staple in the Palestinian diet.

For thousands of years, wheat has constituted the most important food not only of the fellahin of Palestine, but of Bedouin communities as well. Both cultural groups – historically considered the poorer classes of society – lived primarily on bread, fresh spring water, wild foraged greens, and other subsistence crops until relatively recently. Among the effects of Western colonization in the late nineteenth century were the changes inflicted upon the ability of fellahin and Bedouin to continue living with the land as they had previously. Freekeh has long been a component of this diet, as it was a way for the land workers to harvest a nutritious food product that could be dried and stored as insurance against drought, heavy rains, or locusts decimating the later wheat harvest. Some stories say that freekeh came to be after the dry grain silos for winter were emptied and people looked for ways to sustain themselves until the following year's harvest was ready in the field. Other stories recount that it was discovered by chance – when a field of perfectly unripe wheat was set aflame by invaders. The people tried to salvage the charred remains of the crops, serendipitously discovering a new way of using the wheat.

How the Fellahin Make Freekeh

Fellahin have long gathered wheat berries for freekeh in the liminal space between the milky nubile state of becoming and the golden, hard berry that is later dried to become wheat products like bulgur or semolina flour. Young green durum wheat is harvested during a brief window of a week or two: typically at the end of spring, beginning of summer. Climate change has drastically affected when the freekeh harvest falls from year to year, making intimate relationships with the plants and the land even more important. After collection, the green wheat tops are systematically burned over a fire of dried

thorny burnet (*Poterium spinosum*), known as *netesh*,[4] and wood. High moisture content protects the succulent wheat berries from burning entirely – leaving the grains with a particular smoky and nutty flavor, while the burning process also kills off insects and other contaminants so that the freekeh can be stored. The freshly roasted green wheat berries have a chewy texture and are wholly different from the dried freekeh that is kept for year-round use.

Figure 2. Umm Maghareb gathers a bundle of wheat to give to her sister; Ramallah area, May 2023. Photo by author.

In the late spring of 2023, I had the opportunity to meet Umm Maghareb – a friend, teacher, elder fellaha, and the subject of the photographs accompanying this essay. Umm Maghareb still fills her pantry in the traditional ways, a now rare example of a once commonplace Palestinian fellaha, and is a part of a community network of fellahin producers, makers, and craftspeople. Her pantry holds a wealth of homemade ingredients, evidence of the traditions and knowledge that embody the symbiosis between her and the land of Palestine. From her, I learned the ancestral practice of harvesting and producing freekeh. She grows the same wheat that her father, grandfather, and many generations before them grew, on a small plot of land behind her house and in a larger field located twenty minutes from Ramallah, toward Jericho. As we worked in these two locations, she sang the traditional songs she has sung throughout her life, told us the stories her ancestors told her, stories that she has lived, and the stories that following generations will tell about her as they harvest their freekeh. Like most Palestinians, her life has not been easy, and as she ages, her health makes many things more difficult. Yet she continues to work as hard as she can – with joy, beauty, resilience, *sumud*, and strength.

We began our work at 4:30 AM, harvesting wheat tops into buckets and large plastic sacks until the sun made it too hot to continue. Umm Maghareb instructed us on which plants were ready to be harvested, which were best left to ripen, and which had already passed their prime. We worked with small paring knives to clip the heads off the stalks. Of course, she worked faster than anyone, quickly filling the sack tied to the belt around her *thobe*. After a tea break, we prepared our communal harvest by spreading it out in an even layer on a hammock made of metal mesh with long handles on either end, so that two people could swing it over the fire that we had made of wood scraps and thorny *netesh* gathered by Umm Maghareb and her husband. According to Umm Maghareb, the *netesh* – in contrast to the propane used in commercial production styles – gives freekeh the "right" flavor.

Figure 3. Umm Maghareb hand harvests wheat. The young green wheat berries will later be hand processed for freekeh; Ramallah area, May 2023. Photo by author.

Working in batches, two people swung and maneuvered the hammock over the fire. A third used long sticks to dab clumps of flaming *netesh* both below and above, while those swinging continued to reposition the hammock over the fire so that no one area of the grain was burned while other areas were left green. All the while, Umm Maghareb instructed and offered suggestions, occasionally deftly using her cane to assist where our novice attempts fell short. One critical marker of progress that she taught us was to make sure that what she referred to as the *rumush*, or eyelashes, of the wheat had been singed off. Once a batch was finished, we spread it out on a mat to cool, rest, and dry – preventing the formation of moisture that could lead to mold

– before further processing. Meanwhile, Umm Maghareb began transferring portions of a previous batch to her *ghorbal* (a round wooden and mesh sieve) to begin the final namesake stages of the production process.[5]

Freekeh, from the Arabic word *farik* for "rub," etymologically embodies the process by which it is produced. We do the threshing by rubbing the skin of our hands into and against the chaff covering the burned berries, the wheat plant's fruit, first against the mesh of the *ghorbal*, and then against the coils of flat baskets made of the stalks of previous wheat harvests. Unlike with dry, mature grains, the chaff is not yet ready to separate from the seed – true labor must be given to yield results. To rub, rubbed, rubbing: directions, commands, instructions for the continuation of ancient techniques are encoded guidance for manifesting sustenance out of something that the earth has given for thousands of years. Today, most of the freekeh produced is not made using the small scale of bare hands, open fire, and thorns; instead, commercially scaled threshers and propane are used to produce much larger amounts in much shorter times. Commercially produced freekeh mainly comes from the agricultural areas in and around Jenin – an area known in Palestine for its agriculture, its freekeh, and for its strong and resilient spirit of refusal against occupation. It has a historic reputation for armed resistance and has experienced increased attempts of ethnic cleansing via military raids, siege, destruction of infrastructure and housing, and settler attacks on the land itself. In the agricultural lands of Palestine, assaults on the people and the land continue to converge into multifaceted forms of violence that affect sovereignty and security not just over agriculture, but over life itself.

Figure 4. Freshly picked wheat spread on the metal mesh hammock, next to a fire of *netesh* and wood; Ramallah area, May 2023. Photo by author.

Weaponizing Food

Figure 5. Swinging the metal mesh hammock over the fire in the field; Ramallah area, May 2023. Photo by author.

Food has been wielded as a weapon since time immemorial; it is only the application, location, and ingredients of the recipes that change. Invariably, colonial settlers manipulate subsistence resources to starve and consequently force Indigenous populations into submission. It is one of the most effective tools used against entire populations by colonial forces in "war," particularly in the case of Palestine's more than a century of oppression and occupation. In modern times food is weaponized not only in its physicality – through agricultural and economic subjugation – but also as a medium to disseminate propaganda. Zionism has stolen and violently rebranded Palestinian foodways to impose a culinary identity within the fledgling state of Israel and on the global stage, and to obfuscate the true relationship of Israelis to the culinary and land-based elements they nefariously market as their own.

Within historic Palestine, there is widespread understanding and acknowledgement of the catastrophic effects of the Oslo accords on the post-Nakba Palestinian economy – especially as related to agricultural production, land and water access, imports, and exports. Yet, prior to that significant setback for Palestinian sovereignty in 1993, there had already been ample evidence of the intentional economic suffocation of the Palestinian agricultural sector by Zionist design. The strategy was to transform the incumbent Palestinian population from a majority of self-sufficient fellahin and Bedouin subsistence producers into captive

consumers of Israeli agricultural exports that were produced using inputs and land that were once theirs.

The methodical collusion of global capitalism, Zionist immigration, and British colonial subjugation, funded and underwritten by exorbitant taxation on the Palestinian fellahin, saw the displacement of many Palestinians and the eradication of many of their customs and superstitions. As with all colonial projects, the foundations of current ethno-fascism were laid through massive land seizure.[6] In Palestine, this proceeded via strategic and expedient colonial organization with the expressed interest of obliterating and replacing the Indigenous way of life to create space for a settler-colonial vision of utopia – for some – in the Holy Land. The landscape continues to be altered irreversibly, as has the relationship of the people to it, and therefore – by colonial design – the cultural, culinary, and societal relationships that stem from it.

Previously in Palestine, inclinations toward a communality of resources and measured relations with the land were codified, not only into cultural and religious practices, but also in the *hamula* systems used in the region from before Ottoman rule.[7] Employing the *musha'* system, communally owned lands were shared and rotated among villagers every few years, so that everyone could try their hand at different areas of the villages' land, each with its own variables, creating a sense of equanimity within local society. This organization of the society, built on and around mutual ownership and communality rather than on excessive colonial extraction, began to be dismantled by the Ottomans with the introduction of new land laws in 1858. This was perpetuated by British colonialism, furthered by early Zionist systemic land grab practices designed to dispossess fellahin of their land and capital, and continues in the form of apartheid-like structures buttressed with full support of the imperial United States.

The dissolution of pre-capitalist communal land care systems, and the subsequent overdevelopment and land-based violence of settler colonialism – followed by the neo-liberal interests of the Palestinian Authority in collusion with the occupying government – has greatly exacerbated the degradation of human relationships to the land; this has led to accelerated ecological devastation that today sees increased wildfires, species extinction, and water depletion. Meanwhile, the Zionist state's greenwashing policies provide cover for the state transfer of its waste (untreated sewage, garbage, hazardous and toxic waste) to Palestinian lands within the West Bank. In this way the state attempts to bureaucratically recuse itself of the ecological violence they commit through industrialized agriculture and overdevelopment.[8] Much Indigenous knowledge has been set on a path of extinction due to settler-colonial projects intent on maximizing capital extraction that, in turn, decimates the soil, water table, agriculture, and human health.

Early on, the founder of political Zionism Theodor Herzl himself made it clear: "We must seize the privately held lands in the areas allocated to us from the landowners. The poorer inhabitants must be quietly moved beyond the borders by securing work for them in the countries to which they will relocate; we will deny

them employment in our country."[9] This is essentially what happened, and with profound consequences. In his incisive analysis of the roots of the 1936–39 Great Revolt in Palestine, Ghassan Kanafani writes that by the early 1930s

> the expropriation of around one million dunams – about one-third of the arable land – entailed the impoverishment of the peasants and Bedouin at an unprecedented scale and rate; the Zionists had expelled 20,000 peasant families by 1931…. The agrarian in the underdeveloped world generally, and in the Arab world in particular, is not only a mode of production, but also the deep-rooted social, religious, and ritualistic way of life. As such, this violent dispossession took on a form that appeared primarily as a purely national confrontation.[10]

As the Zionist movement continued to acquire agricultural land, Palestinian fellahin were forced off their lands. Those who remained in rural areas "could only eke out a livelihood in the countryside from seasonal waged agricultural work," leading many to move to city centers, "where they became cheap unskilled labor."[11] They no longer grew their own food and were instead forced to buy most food products on the market.

Soon after the 1948 Nakba, many of the Palestinians who had been violently forced from their land had little choice but to eat the imported rice, white flour, and oils provided in UNRWA ration boxes. Initially, these packages that were given to the refugees introduced and normalized the use of foreign ingredients, and later, came to supplant many of the previously produced goods:

> Crops such as wheat, fruit trees, and vegetables are increasingly replaced with olive trees as these require less maintenance (but also generate less income and do not improve food security). Wheat production, for instance, has dropped drastically in the last decade, and domestic production now covers just 10% of the W[est] B[ank] market needs. The import-dependency on such a staple crop has severe consequences in terms of vulnerability.[12]

This fracturing of the people and the land furthers the negative impacts on food culture and traditions – rupturing the networks that create a sustainable and sovereign food system. As the occupation has expanded and pursued ever-intensifying militarization, it has also severely impacted the traditional Palestinian agricultural economy – disrupting the ecosystems of the land, human beings, animals, and plants.

This pattern continued through the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, as those parts of Palestine occupied in 1967 were forced to link with the Israeli economy and became its third largest export market, drastically undercutting the prices of domestically produced Palestinian goods.[13] In the West Bank, local produce comprises only 4 percent of the food market, while the remaining market share is entirely imported – making it one of the most import-dependent places in the world.[14] Due to ongoing settler land grabbing and an almost non-existent demand for locally produced agricultural products, fellahin have been forced to move away from land work to take low-value jobs in other sectors.[15]

The Israeli government continues to ensure that Israeli products dominate the marketplace by providing Zionist farmers with free land and water and subsidizing their often massive agricultural endeavors.[16] For Palestinian farmers, the high cost of agricultural necessities like land, water, equipment, or greenhouses creates prohibitive conditions for competing in the marketplace. At times, water for irrigation in the West Bank has cost approximately five times what it does within the Israeli sector, and over thirty times what it costs in subsidized Israeli settlements in the Jordan Valley.[17] Palestinian farmers not only have to pay for water, they are forbidden to harvest rainwater.[18] The material reality of checkpoints, difficulty of access to lands in Area C, and longer transportation routes due to the illegal Separation Wall creates a logistical complexity that most would rather leave behind for more reliable and profitable employment.[19]

While harvesting in Umm Maghareb's wheat field out near the land of a Bedouin community, I went with her to purchase butter so that she could make *samna* (ghee). As we walked to a structure made of corrugated metal and salvaged materials, a Bedouin woman described how, for months now, the occupation army and the settlers had been coming to try to intimidate them off of their piece of land – to displace them to another yet-to-be-determined location – continuing a process that has happened to many fellahin and Bedouin communities before.

Freekeh and the Zionist Search for Identity

Food is, of course, integral to national identity – and how better for a fledgling settler nation to forge its cultural identity than to dispossess the people whose food practices are intrinsically tied to the land, while simultaneously adopting and performing these same mannerisms and relationships in an effort to legitimize themselves? The settler-colonial cultural and dietary redesign enacted on the Palestinian population – when viewed from the perspective of nutrition, genetics, and public health data regarding chronic illness – is inextricable from the forced degradation of land relationships that previously had supported appropriate nourishment.[20] Studies of "ancient grains" show them to be more nutrient-dense and higher in protein than the wheat that is now imported into Gaza and the West Bank after being grown and heavily processed elsewhere.[21] Freekeh contains more vitamins, minerals, fiber, and nutrients than most grains – contributing to its newfound popularity as a "superfood" in the diet-conscious West. Meanwhile, decreasing access to the land and traditional foods has led to a deterioration in health for the Indigenous population. Dependence on foreign aid, imported agricultural products, and Israeli pharmaceuticals not only foment, but are also used to address, the health conditions born of cultural and territorial dispossession. This cycle enforces the decline in food sovereignty that had previously exemplified the Palestinian way of life.

Knowledge and traditions that once defined Palestinian agricultural practices, dietary identity, and symbiosis with the landscape have been decimated, stolen, and repurposed as the culinary heritage of "Israel's cuisine." Specific ingredients have in

recent decades found themselves consumed through the Zionist propaganda machine – absorbed and deployed both within the confines of Zionist culture – and globally via restaurants, cookbooks, and chefs. Freekeh, rebranded and exported as an "authentic Israeli ingredient," is just one example of Zionism's culinary colonialism.

The concept of "Israeli food" in the West is a relatively new development, only rising to global prominence in the last two decades. Early Zionist rhetoric sought to root the mainly European Zionist immigrants to their imagined homeland through colonial land relationships: acquisition, development, commercial agriculture, and the establishment of allegedly socialist utopian kibbutzim. It also had to invent a relationship to a land to which these immigrants had no prior lived experience. The search for a cohesive cultural and culinary identity ranged from early Zionist literature that called for embracing Ashkenazi Jewishness – and emphasized its contrast with the Jewish communities in the Arab and Muslim world, later known as "Mizrahim" – to rejection of the stereotypical weak and fragile "Diaspora Jew" and idealization of the "Sabra," a strong, empowered Jewish worker of the land.

As Jacob Bessen writes, "Mimicking the manners and diet of the indigenous people was a performance of the Zionist belief in the return to Israel as the Jew's intrinsic telos."[22] New arrivals to Palestine attempted to affect the mannerisms of the locals, aided by resources like *How to Cook in Palestine*. This trilingual (English, German, and Hebrew) cookbook, published in 1936 by the Women's International Zionist Organization, sought to familiarize Jewish immigrants with the ingredients and recipes of this foreign land – and to learn local food-related words in Hebrew. By the late 1940s, Zionist settlers were incorporating Palestinian ingredients into their diets.[23] The use of indigenous ingredients like freekeh served to legitimize claims of longtime presence and connection to the land, while simultaneously working toward the erasure of the population that has continuously held those relationships for many generations.

The period immediately after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 witnessed an influx of Jewish populations from Arab and Muslim lands – designated pejoratively as "Mizrahim," meaning "Oriental Jews," by the Ashkenazi Zionist leadership. There were of course similarities and redundancies between some of the foods and ingredients of these Jews and those eaten by Palestinians. However, these foods were not exclusive to Jewish communities in their countries of origin, where they were also prepared by members of other cultural and religious groups. They did not suddenly become solely Jewish foods once replicated within the newly formed "Jewish state." In fact, while Palestinian fellahin and Bedouin's culinary vernacular stemmed from a durational and deeply ingrained relation to the land – through an intertwined lifestyle dependent on the seasons – the Mizrahim had little to no previous experience as agricultural landworkers.

While "Mizrahi food" was originally seen in a negative light by the fledgling settler society who viewed the Mizrahim as the lower class, recent years have seen a drastic increase in Zionist chefs and restaurants using this catch-all phrase to lend provenance to their output. Their absorptive "culinary melting pot" legitimizes their

exploitative engagement with Palestinian and Levantine ingredients, and further promotes the idea that the Zionist entity is a place wherein all people live equally and harmoniously. While previously in Zionist society "Mizrahi" was degrading at worst and Orientalizing at best, it has become the foremost weapon in the arsenal that Zionists employ to normalize and obfuscate their theft of Palestinian culinary identity. As Zionism approaches its apex of attempted self-indigenization, Arab-ness or "Mizrahi-ness" have now become markers of authenticity as modern "Israeli cuisine" seeks to appear legitimate. Nomi Abeliovich, an Israeli food media creator and former recipe developer for Israeli British cookbook writer Yotam Ottolenghi, says that, "After decades of looking to the West for inspiration and some answers, the culinary soul-searchers hunting for an 'Israeli cuisine' have turned their gaze much closer to home."[24] Such statements incriminate and highlight Zionists' ongoing existential search for identity. It remains an irreconcilable dichotomy that they see themselves as both natives and settlers. Thus, even as Zionists admit that the name freekeh is rooted in the Arabic language, they do so unperturbed by its implication of Arabic-speaking Palestinians as the stewards of freekeh into the present through their continued practices of its cultivation, harvest, processing, and consumption.

Zionist chefs and food scholars bring up a reference to something called *karmel* in Leviticus 23:14, which may or may not refer to freekeh. They then skip over a few thousand years of inconvenient history – when it was lost to them – and now laud their "rediscovery": a colonial phenomenon wherein time is collapsed in favor of the Zionist narrative.[25] Many "Israeli" cookbooks for Western audiences continue to popularize and proliferate the conceit that freekeh is an ancient "Israeli super food" rediscovered, yet they simultaneously acknowledge it as an atypical part of the average Israeli's pantry[26]. The Palestinian landworkers who continued (and continue) to produce freekeh – an ingredient that requires human intervention to be produced – thus did (and do) so only as caretakers of an "Israeli tradition."[27]

Though it is common for Zionist chefs and restaurants to list multiple Arab countries as their influences, they rarely mention the Palestinian people from whom they most directly take inspiration. Even when named as such, Palestinian ingredients are rarefied, fetishized, and othered to absorb them into the lexicon of settler pantries. Abeliovich's description of freekeh offers a telling example of this discourse: "Part of traditional Arab cuisine, it emerged out of a shared terroir but went unnoticed for decades – until it finally caught the attention of Israeli chefs and food writers looking for a culinary identity based on local ingredients."[28] It is clear that these chefs engage in extractive practices to forge a relationship to the land that mimics that of the Indigenous population, while disappearing them and their labor entirely.

Omitting the critical role of Palestinians as the stewards of these ingredients simultaneously codifies what constitutes "Israeli food" in the cultural sphere, while erasing the Palestinian people from their own stories – locally and globally. Internationally, many major cities now have a multitude of "Israeli," "Mediterranean," or "Middle Eastern" restaurants with Zionist chefs at the helm, serving labneh, freekeh, *za'tar*, "Israeli salads," *knafeh*; *maftul* becomes "Israeli couscous." Palestinians are

banned from foraging *'akkub* (an edible wild thistle) while settlers work on making it a Jewish-only export. The list goes on. Bookstores now feature many more "Israeli" cookbooks than just *Jerusalem: A Cookbook* – Yotam Ottolenghi and Palestinian Sami Tamimi's hugely successful foray into mixing liberal Zionism and olive branches with their hummus, a paragon of culinary colonialism and normalization that spawned a gastronomic empire across the UK and laid the foundation for Westerner's understanding of what constitutes "Israeli food." Efforts like theirs, masquerading as peaceful visions for the future, minimize and glaze over the reality of life for Palestinians, never mind the existence of their own cultural food traditions. In the United States, Israeli American chef Michael Solomonov, inspired by his brother's death while serving in the Israeli military, has grown an empire of restaurants and food businesses with the express intention of making a case for Israel through food.[29] In North America and Europe, public discourse makes no attempt to think critically about the conditions upon which the existence of "Israeli food" relies, or to connect the obvious violence related to food production to the farm-to-table kibbutz fantasy being sold.

Recent years have seen Zionism weaponize culinary diplomacy as part of a widespread and well-funded public relations campaign to propagate the association of "Israeli cuisine" with liberal values of pluralism and heterogeneity. State funding and Zionist NGO resources are devoted to inviting a diversity of foreign chefs to come experience "Israel's culinary offerings"; though as Shira Rubin puts it, "Israeli cuisine is currently having its moment on the international stage, but at home, many chefs and food scholars still struggle to determine what makes Israeli cuisine Israeli, or if it even qualifies as a cuisine."[30] The same gastro-tourists relishing in falafel and hummus never see what goes on beyond the checkpoints or the other side of the Separation Wall, and hear of Palestinians only by the mysterious catchall "Arabs." Through the messaging of liberal Zionist cultural centers such as Tel Aviv's Asif or the Jewish National Fund's Galilee Culinary Institute, foods that Palestinians have cooked for generations are suddenly reattributed to "Mizrahi" Jewish settlers and other Arab nations, divorcing them from their roots with the people that most citizens of the Zionist state would prefer simply didn't exist.

A few do name Palestinian influences in their restaurants, cookbooks, and culinary worldviews, but their liberal attitudes of sharing the land and all things under the sun denote a fantasy of a settler-colonial utopia wherein the colonized have finally given in and accepted their apparently inevitable fate of coexistence; their resistance is the only thing stopping peace from transforming the lives of all parties. This denies the lived Palestinian reality from which the settlers are exempt: a substandard quality of life, severely restricted access to land, dispossession of food sovereignty, and far beyond. Occasional representation and acknowledgment, through distortions of language, do not translate to an equal redistribution of rights for Palestinians and Israelis, and instead reinforce Zionist image-making – as if "Israeli cuisine" represents the fabled culinary melting pot where all are welcome, and everyone gets along – no segregation walls or checkpoints in sight. "Israeli chefs," within '48 Palestine and

living abroad, often mention in media that they are not interested in politics, only in food, and even in some cases its ability to "bring people together" – a position that can only be held by one blissfully indifferent to or unaffected by the costs others pay for their many privileges.[31]

Figure 6. Umm Maghareb sits on a stool to harvest; Ramallah area, May 2023. Photo by author.

However "Israeli food" presents itself, it is hardly more than culinary colonialism, where the invention of the Israeli entity necessitated the formation of a strong cultural identity to cultivate a sense of continuity and longevity – the intention being not only to survive economically, but also to cripple Palestinians. Culinary propaganda now serves as a cornerstone for normalizing the identity of the Zionist project, regardless of its negative impact upon the human, plant, and animal beings that have long lived on the land and bear witness to these inequities. This material reality has become more publicized in recent years, partly as a result of social media. Yet the international community still lacks the critical resolve to recognize that "Israeli food" is inextricable from the century-old structure of persistent violence, and in fact serves a critical role in normalizing the ongoing ethnic cleansing and displacement of the Palestinian people.

The forgery of freekeh as a heritage "Israeli product," beyond denying its true provenance, is simply another brand of violence perpetrated against Palestinians. The relationship between erasure and appropriation, in the context of Zionism, is reflexive. Though seemingly benign, the framework that provides Israeli society with answers to its existential questions of identity requires the denial of the same Palestinians

whose continuous stewardship enabled this ingredient to survive to the present day. Settler colonialism persists by maintaining control of the land through violence.

Figure 7. Umm Maghareb using the ghorbal to rub the burned wheat onto her flat coiled basket; Ramallah area, May 2023. Photo by author.

Figure 8. Umm Maghareb holds a handful of the roasted undried freekeh berries; Ramallah area, May 2023. Photo by author.

Recently, Umm Maghareb informed me that the larger piece of land outside of Ramallah that we had visited to harvest and produce her freekeh has been expropriated by the Israeli government, in collusion with violent settlers who want it to build more illegal settlements. The Bedouin communities we purchased butter from have been displaced and are no longer to be found there. Umm Maghareb, alongside the other Palestinian landowners of these lands, have received absolutely no compensation for this loss of property, land access, or the effect on their livelihoods. This year, Umm Maghareb did not plant wheat – the plot behind her home would simply not produce enough to make it worth it to produce freekeh or wheat – and instead she planted vegetables and a test plot of sesame that we will hopefully expand upon next spring.

In the case of Zionism, what began as land grabbing, strategic displacement, and economic disruption has evolved and expanded to include marketplace domination, ecoterrorism, capitalist extraction, and global campaigns that serve to obfuscate the truth of life for Palestinians. Freekeh – in its embodied relationship to the land, elements, and the people who coax it into existence – represents Indigenous endurance despite ongoing attempts at erasure. It is an ingredient that, through its continuous presence in their culinary vernacular, affirms the indigeneity of the Palestinian stewards, without whom the instructions for its making would have been entirely lost by now. An ingredient such as this can only survive through co-creative relationships that commit to cycles of life, emblematic in the rubbing still lovingly done by hand by fellahin such as Umm Maghareb.

Amanny Ahmad is a Palestinian American artist, cook, herbalist, writer, and fellaha. In her research-based practice, she studies whole systems design, food as language, land as life, relationships between humans and non-humans, botany, mycology, indigenous culinary traditions and plant use, histories of resistance, and how those things can teach us about preservation, survival, and world-making.

Endnotes

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Nourishing Resilience: The Palestinian Kitchen Table and the Healing of Generational Trauma

Hanine Shehadeh

Abstract

Mary Farah, who started cooking meals for her children in a small kitchen in a remote village in Lebanon after being forcibly expelled from Jaffa in 1948, turned food into something more than just sustenance. The story of Mary Tanous-Farah and her children centers the kitchen table as a transformative space for healing trauma, fostering communal resilience and intergenerational transmission of traditions and hosting diasporic political resistance through the production of Palestinian food and the vocalization of the Palestinian cause. The Farah family centered the profound benefits of connectivity for trauma healing around the kitchen table, which stood as an ancestral refusal of colonial nomenclature and a space of belonging, acceptance, expectation, and readiness. Mary turned the kitchen table into a "remembrance environment" where memories are shared between families and communities through culinary traditions and eating practices, thereby counteracting the experience of forced displacement. The culinary heritage Mary passed down to her children now stands as a testament to the homeland – a story skillfully woven into Johnny's, Jeanette's and Suha's culinary artistry in Lebanon. The Farahs' journey weaves together the strands of "refugeedom," reclaiming Palestine from beyond borders and Israeli colonization and appropriation. The Farahs kitchen table became an epicenter of recovery and safety that allowed them and their community to reconstruct identity and belonging amid the chaos of forced displacement. The Farah family's history is therefore the story of how a meal summons a cause.

Keywords:

Palestine; food; memory; Nakba; kitchen; sumud; trauma; family coping.

As Suha Farah pours me a cup of Arabic coffee, the smell of the roasted beans wins, while cardamon fills the air. With a contemplative look, she shares with me the tale of her quest for a new coffee supplier in Beirut where she resides, confessing that her once reliable source had lost the magic touch in roasting that had captivated her senses for years. The mood takes a somber turn as Suha reveals a sleepless night, the weight of Israel's genocide in Gaza since 7 October 2023 keeping her awake. In these moments, the personal toll of events unfolding in Palestine becomes starkly evident, highlighting the profound impact that the Israeli violence can have on the everyday lives of individuals like Suha. Gaza, under continuous Israeli attacks, where Suha's ancestors lay, is a space that produces a perpetual state of distress and intergenerational trauma for her and her family who were expelled to Lebanon from Palestine in 1948.

Figure 1. Hanna Farah and Philomena Knesevich in the early years of their marriage, c. late 1880s. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

Anton Farah, Suha's father, was born in Gaza in 1899. His parents, Suha's grandparents, Hanna and Philomena, were natives of Gaza as well. Hanna Farah, born in 1869, joined in matrimony with

Philomena Knesevich, born in Gaza in 1877, at the Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church in 1884. The Farah family enjoyed a relatively comfortable life in Gaza, where they welcomed their eight children into the world.

The Farahs are part of Gaza's Christian community, constituting one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, dating back to the first century. The number of Christians in Gaza dwindled to a little over a thousand in 2022, with roughly fifty thousand more in the West Bank and Jerusalem and around two hundred thousand in the state of Israel.[1] Gaza's Muslim and Christian communities have historically been united in resisting their collective entrapment in what has been called the world's largest open-air prison. Just as Muslims have been denied permits to visit Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque, Christians have also been unable to visit sacred places in Jerusalem or Bethlehem, revered as the birthplace of Jesus. These restrictive policies have forced Palestinian Christians into exile, where they participate in a broader construction of Palestinian identity marked by exile and dispossession.[2]

Suha was five years old when she and her family were displaced from their home in Jaffa's Jabal al-'Araqtinji in al-Nuzha neighborhood, as Zionist militia forces intensified mass killings of Palestinians during their colonial conquest of Palestine. But this was not the Farah family's first displacement. Until World War I, Hanna Farah, Suha's grandfather, worked as a customs officer in Gaza, where the family had had a quiet life. From March 1917 until November 1917, British forces attacked Gaza City, then under Ottoman rule. The British conducted massive artillery bombardment, together with air strikes and naval shelling, eventually leading to the devastation and fall of Gaza. The Farah family, like many other families, fled Gaza. Hanna and Philomena Farah and some of their children fled Gaza for Jerusalem. Anton Farah, Suha's father, settled in Jaffa until the Nakba of 1948. "My father, Anton," Suha recounts, "was a public health official for the British Mandate government. Born in Gaza, he worked in Jaffa and stayed there until 1948. This is where he met and married my mother, Mary Tanous. My siblings and I, all six of us, were born in Jaffa."

In 1948, the siblings Suhail, Ayda, Michel, Suha, and the twins Johnny and Jeanette found themselves with their parents, Anton and Mary Farah, and some neighbors rushing to Jaffa's seaport to escape the Zionist massacres unfolding as part of the Zionist effort to take control over Palestinian land while expelling the population in anticipation of the end of the British Mandate. Ironically, they fled on the boat of Tawfiq Gargour et Fils (TGF), a shipping and logistics agency established in 1928 in Jaffa by the late Tawfiq Gargour. In its nascent stages, TGF was primarily a trading company, initiating operations in the export of Jaffa oranges. By 1933, TGF established contact with Mercedes-Benz in Germany, arranging the exchange of automobiles for shiploads of Jaffa oranges. Raja Gargour, Tawfiq's grandson, reports that a Mercedes-170 was exchanged for a consignment equivalent to five hundred boxes of Jaffa oranges.

Figure 2. Palestinians aboard a ship at Jaffa, bound for Lebanon, April 1948. U.S. National Archives.

Sustaining Community in Exile

From early on, the Farah children were exposed to extreme violence. Like all Palestinians who survive Israel's regular massacres, whether in Gaza at present or during the Nakba of 1948, the Farahs carry traumatic memories that leave deep unexpressed psychological wounds. When the Farah family arrived in Beirut, they were advised to find their way to Bayt Shabab, a mountain village twenty-four kilometers north of Beirut. Johnny Farah, Suha's younger brother, recalls that Bayt Shabab was all they could afford: "Beirut was too expensive, we had limited resources, after losing everything in Palestine." The Farahs arrived there with three other Palestinian families displaced from Jaffa, the Saraphims, Sayeghs, and Beiroutis. The hospitality of Bayt Shabab's community still warms Ayda and Johnny's hearts until this day: "They were very generous with us, they would offer services without taking any money, they would share what they had with us, they made us feel welcome and they helped us settle in our new home."

Wartime conditions made life hard, but Bayt Shabab offered them the building blocks for a renewed life, despite the fractured continuity that their displacement caused. Reflecting on these times, Johnny acknowledges that this region, the Levant, has always been multireligious and plural by nature: "We are by default, as Arabs, very different from the Zionist ethno-religious nationalist European project that came to settle in our midst." Mary Tanous, his mother, played a crucial role not only in keeping her family together, but also caring for other displaced Palestinian families. Together, they went through the same estrangements, uprooting, the profound amalgamation of grief and dislocation, and the arduous task of reconstructing a sense of identity

and belonging amid the chaos of forced displacement. Mary was able to collect what remained of herself and safeguard the prosperity of her children. Their kitchen table became the epicenter of recovery and safety.

The story of Mary Tanous-Farah and her children is one that centers the kitchen table as a transformative space for trauma healing for the Farah family and their community, focusing on its role in fostering communal resilience and intergenerational transmission of traditions and as a site of diasporic political resistance through the production of Palestinian food and the vocalization of the Palestinian cause. Their story does not claim to be representative in the structural sense of Palestinian diaspora society. As Edward Said points out: "There are many different kinds of Palestinian experience, which cannot all be assembled into one. One would therefore have to write parallel histories of the communities in Lebanon, the occupied territories, and so on. That is the central problem. It is almost impossible to imagine a single narrative."[3] Therefore, the story of the Farah family is part of a broader examination of how familial spaces provide a richer understanding of coping mechanisms and the potential for healing within Palestinian exile.

Research on people in prolonged conflicts has primarily focused on the impact of terror, trauma, and fear on social imaginaries and representations.[4] While some studies delve into how conflict shapes broader social relations,[5] literature on Palestinian coping has traditionally concentrated on individual strategies. However, a recent study in Gaza revealed that coping with extreme forms of violence and grief is not solely an individual trait but also a structural feature shaping multiplex social networks with various functions and meanings.[6] The study identified five main coping strategies, including giving cultural and religious meaning to trauma, shifting from individualism to collectivism, normalization, belonging and acceptance, and seeking social support. The Palestinian family frequently functions as a buffer against painful experiences and contributes significantly to the development of coping strategies.[7] I argue that all of these coping strategies take place around the "family table" that has emerged as a particularly salient kind of social organization, and which accords with what one study of Palestinian coping strategies described as "the social construction of locality, i.e. how social relations torn by displacement have been reconstructed, transformed or where new forms of social organization have grown up."[8] Additionally, this article responds to the call in social sciences to integrate sensorial experiences into ethnographic observation and writing. Sensory ethnography provides a pathway to delve into the lived and practiced Palestinian experience, its food-based memory and food culture. The practices of eating and remembering are inextricably linked. Moreover, food also serves as a conduit for intergenerational and intercommunity sharing of memories and traditions of past times and places.[9] Integrating findings from studies on trauma healing with research from food studies – which has extensively explored how memory, practiced through the preparation and consumption of cultural cuisines, both influences and is influenced by the places and actors involved – provides a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate ways in which the kitchen table operates as a space for trauma healing.

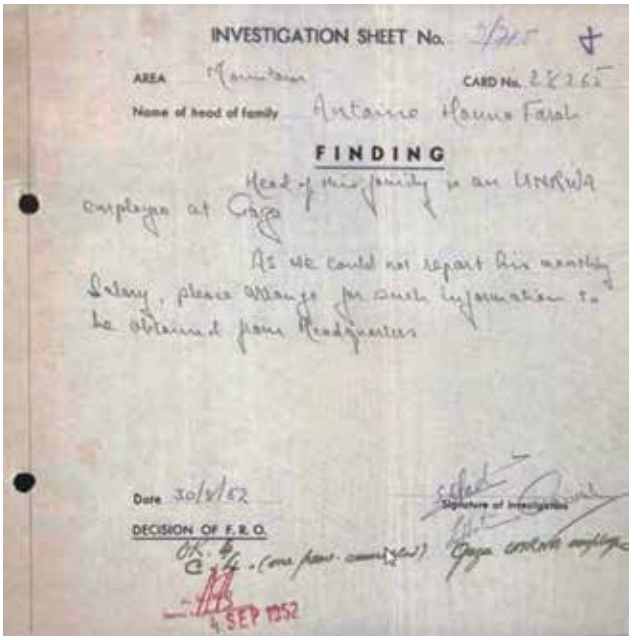
The Psychological Significance of the Kitchen Table

Figure 3. Mary Tanous. Photo taken in Jaffa in 1947. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

Mary Tanous was born in Nazareth in 1913 to a middle-class Christian Palestinian family. She married Anton Farah and they lived in Jaffa with their six children until the 1948 Nakba. She was just thirty-five years old when her entire world was turned upside down. She found herself suddenly forced to run for her life with six young children to an unknown destination. Amid violence and chaos, her parenting style was shaped by the interplay between past traumas and present responsibilities, creating a complex landscape where generational trauma intersects with the art of nurturing. Once they were able to secure a safe haven in Bayt Shabab, Mary Tanous turned food and the kitchen table into something more than just sustenance – she turned it into a source of power and liberation. Gathering her six children three times a day in the kitchen of their temporary new home, she set the tone for food to become the medium for safety, for storing the past, preserving identity, and asserting her and her children's Palestinianness in a world that often threatened to forget or erase it.

Figure 4. Saint Joseph's School, Jaffa, Palestine, 21 March 1948. Little Ayda Farah is the fifth from the right on the front row. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

Mary not only had to compensate for her family's displacement and the dispersal of their extended family, who were scattered in different places, but also for the absence of her children's father. Anton did not stay long with his family in Lebanon after the 1948 Nakba. To make ends meet, he joined the newly established UNRWA as a health services officer and moved back to Gaza. He was occasionally able to visit his family, taking advantage of UNRWA flights between Gaza and Beirut. These opportunities to fly to Beirut were infrequent, coming every few months, as direct commercial flights from Gaza to other countries in the Middle East were no longer possible after the creation of the Zionist state in 1948.


INVESTIGATION SHEET No.

AREA

CARD No.

Name of head of family Antoine Hanna Farah

FINDING

Head of this family is an UNRWA employee at Gaza

As we could not report his monthly salary, please arrange for such information to be obtained from Headquarters

Date 30/8/52

Signature of investigator

DECISION OF F.R.O.

4 SEP 1952

Figure 5. Antoine Hanna Farah's UNRWA employment form, dated 4 September 1952. UNWRA Archive, Beirut, Lebanon.

Johnny recalls how happy they would all be when their dad arrived on one of these short visits and, even more vividly, how he smelled: "He always walked through the door carrying fresh food from Gaza. He'd bring us fresh fish from Gaza, and fresh vegetables and all kinds of spices from home. He would literally walk straight into the kitchen to prepare us a meal." Gaza's fiery chili peppers, delicate dill seeds, and pungent garlic intermingled with Jaffa's sumptuous seafood traditions in the Farah home. Breaking the stigmatized gendered conception of Palestinian food preparation, memories of Anton's return and cooking also bridged the imposed geographical separation. Still, Johnny insists: "The occupation not only dispossessed us of our home and country, it dispossessed us of our father, who I had barely seen until he passed away when I was seventeen. He was an UNRWA employee living on limited income, most of which he sent to us. And when he was in Gaza, he was no longer a native, but a visitor."

Mary's enduring Palestinian identity, manifested until her last days, found its roots in the collective memory and connection to her homeland, skillfully imparted to her children around the bustling kitchen table – a central hub where her children followed their mother's hand movement as she stuffed potatoes or rolled vine leaves, while they were doing their homework under her supervision or playing games. It took a lot of time and energy to chop, sauté, and bake these daily two- to four-course meals, which she insisted on making. Mary Farah carried a bag of

vegetables wherever she went. Whether meeting a friend at a café or at the beach after the children headed to school, she would elegantly produce a bag of green beans to peel or coriander to clean, all while enjoying her nargileh and chatting with her friend. When the children came home, Mary would involve them in the elaborate preparation of lunches and dinners. Preparing the meal itself became a ritual of connectivity, a social activity fostering connection and conversation among family members and friends. Johnny recalls that the few hours before actually sitting at the table were the most intimate because it involved teaching a group to collaborate to achieve a mutual goal. It was also a learning process for him to master these dishes, to learn the difference between *bamiya ghazzawiya* (okra prepared the Gazan Palestinian way) or *bamiya lubnaniyya* (okra prepared the Lebanese way). The difference was to be found in the tomatoes. When cooked, okra – valued not only for its flavor but as a source of vitamins, minerals, and fiber – becomes tender and takes on a slightly viscous texture, making it a key ingredient in stews. The Lebanese would add tomato sauce to it while the recipe from Gaza focuses on garlic, coriander, certain spices, and meat.

Johnny explains that they did not have the means to buy prepared food or go to restaurants, hence they were dependent of their mother's cooking. But "out of nothing and with basic ingredients, she would prepare incredible food." Once a month, Mary would go to Beirut to collect their allocated UNWRA food basket of essentials such as flour, rice, sugar, milk, and oil. One specific recipe that lingers in the memory of the Farah siblings is *madfunat samak*, an iconic Gazan fish and rice dish, a symbol of the seafaring tradition of Palestine's fishermen. The Gaza Strip is the only part of Palestine's coast that was not lost to Israel in 1948. Despite conquering so much of the Palestinian coastline, Zionism could not erase Palestinians' habit of preparing *sayyadiya* or *madfunat samak*, some of the few fish-based dishes from Palestine.

Mary was an excellent cook, as attested by her children, but also by her entire community, Palestinians and Lebanese. Guests naturally gravitated toward the kitchen, where the table served as a dining space but also a conduit for traditional customs. Mary turned her kitchen table into a site of refusal to relegate her attachments to Palestine – its dialects, traditions, cuisine, clothing, folklore, communal and family formations, and so on – to the past. A broader examination of familial spaces provides a richer understanding of coping mechanisms and the potential for healing within the Palestinian exile. While prior research on the "family table" has predominantly examined its nutritional and educational advantages, the Farah family centered the profound benefits of connectivity for trauma healing. The kitchen table stood as an ancestral refusal of colonial nomenclature and a space of belonging, acceptance, expectation, and readiness. Mary turned the kitchen table in a place to gather, talk, and reconnect, and it therefore functioned as a "remembrance environment" where memories are shared between families and communities through culinary traditions and eating practices.[10]

Mary's children also recall how she was adamant not only about food but also about the aesthetics of the dining table. Despite limited resources, she made sure that

when it was time to eat, the table would be set every day as if for a formal feast. The tablecloth, dinner plates, silverware, glasses, and napkins would all make their way onto the table, with the siblings elegantly setting the table under her watchful eye. She understood that the spaces we inhabit transcend mere physical settings; they constitute intricate ecosystems with a profound impact on our psychological well-being. These environments function as silent observers, bearing witness to the unfolding narratives of our lives.

Figure 6. Ayda surrounded by her family on her wedding day, 15 August 1962. From right to left: Jeanette Farah, Suha Farah, Shehadeh Shehadeh, Anton Farah, Ayda in her wedding dress, Mary Tanous-Farah, and Johnny Farah. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

The Farahs' physical connection to Palestine was renewed in 1962 when Ayda Farah, Johnny and Suha's older sister, married Dr. Shehadeh Shehadeh, a Palestinian from Bayt Jala and the first orthopedic surgeon in Palestine. Dr. Shehadeh came to complete his medical studies at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, where he met Ayda. Around the kitchen table, the Farah siblings and Mary would hang on every word Shehadeh would tell them about Palestine, and where they, too, could share with him their story of forced displacement. In 1966, Ayda Farah and Shehadeh Shehadeh moved to Palestine, where their family home remains to this day in Bayt Jala. Mary never gave up on Palestine. She was able to visit Palestine in 1968 to see Ayda. This trip was full of emotion and trauma for her. Johnny explains that when his mother went to Palestine, it was just after the 1967 war. The entire geography of Palestine was still accessible to Palestinians that resided there:

> You could just drive across Palestine, go check on your family members, make connections with people. Palestinian returnees were seeking for their homes. There were no separation walls, no besieged enclaves, there was still a possibility to coexist but the 1967 war meant to disturb that accessibility and finalize the Zionist settler project as a project for only one people, the Jews.

In essence, the Palestinian struggle is not merely personal; it is a collective battle against racial discrimination, bearing the weight of historical injustices, and resiliently standing against forces actively seeking to erase Palestinian identity. Mary traveled to Jaffa, where she easily located her home. As she approached the front door, she could hear Arabic music coming out of the house. Johnny recalls that when she knocked on the door, the settlers who occupied it replied in Arabic. He adds:

> Our home was taken over by one or two Yemeni families. My mother said that they were as generous as Arabs, they were Arabs, and they knew the house wasn't theirs, they didn't deny it, but they wouldn't give it back. Ironically, they spoke to her in Arabic. The entire experience was shocking to her, but what remained imprinted in her mind is how poor they were.

The power of language is so loud because it carries traces of ownership, expropriation, belonging, foreignness, betrayal, culpability and rightfulness. While the voice of Palestine sprung from Mary's throat, she was facing Mizrahi Jews who could not even speak Hebrew, the language of their so-called new nation. Johnny explains that the Yemeni family was not surprised that a Palestinian family would come knocking on the door, telling them this is their home: "Palestinian returnees were a common sight in that period of time, but my mum was gutted that some of her furniture was still in the house." Suha adds:

> You must understand that all six of us were born in that house, so in reality, they were robbing my mother of much more than stones and a roof, they robbed her of her memories. I might have been five when we were expelled, but I still remember our home vividly. I see it now as I speak with you.

Johnny continues that though his mother could not demand her home back from the new settlers, it did not mean that she gave up on Palestine. Before leaving Palestine, she visited her old school, Terra Sancta, in Jerusalem and the nuns recognized her. Mary then got acquainted with members of Matzpen, the premier radical leftist anti-nationalist anti-Zionist organization in Israel in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Matzpen's political agenda was unambiguous: it demanded the de-Zionization of Israel, including erasing the Law of Return, passed in April 1952, which assured the right of citizenship to any Jew in the diaspora who arrived in Israel and stated his or her intention to immigrate. Mary smuggled Matzpen's pamphlets under her corset out of Israel and gave them to Johnny to distribute them to leftist groups in Denmark, where

he was studying. Upon her return to Lebanon, she mistakenly mentioned that she had visited Jerusalem and was imprisoned for a few days, as Lebanese law prohibits Lebanese citizens from visiting Israel. Johnny concludes: "The suffering of my family runs through our DNA. I haven't met any of my grandparents who were displaced to Jerusalem with other family members. My mother was very good at hiding her pain, as she didn't want to project and burden us with a trauma so enormous it would cripple us. She wanted to give us life and possibilities, and she did."

Intergenerational Healing

Like most Palestinian refugees, the Farahs did not find stable refuge in the immediate aftermath of 1948. After a few years, they had to move from Bayt Shabab to Beirut and changed homes quite a few times in Beirut as well. When Anton Farah passed away in 1962, Johnny was seventeen years old. Despite the importance of education in the lives of Palestinians, his mother could not afford to put him through college, so Johnny decided to try his luck outside Lebanon's borders:

> I left Lebanon at the age of seventeen, because there was no possibility for higher education in Lebanon for me. I left with 150 dollars in my pocket. After a long journey through Turkey and Europe, mostly hitchhiking, I ended up in Denmark. There, I was exposed to new ways of socializing and eating. I thought I was doing fine and establishing a new life for myself, but it was only two years into my second exile that I started having physical and psychological reactions to my uprooting. I'd wake up at night having nightmares about missing my mother's food and flavors. I started writing letters extensively to my mother asking her for recipes. I'd wait eagerly for her words that felt like a tangible connection to what displacement had forced upon me.

Johnny explained how by cooking and experimenting with his mother's recipes, through food, he was able to transcend the undeniable foreignness of his guest country. But as much as his mother's cooking, he missed the essentiality and centrality of the kitchen table, where recipes were passed down and intergenerational trauma was healed through cooking, talking, and connecting. Upwardly mobile in Denmark, Johnny entered elite social circles that he nevertheless described as "poor":

> I noticed that rich people were eating relatively good food but did not understand the importance of the kitchen table and the essentiality of spending a good amount of time *together*, sitting, talking, and sharing. The kitchen table is a space of exchange, debate, expression, love. When you eat around the table, when you make it a habit, you create an unbreakable bond. When you eat everyday around the table, especially in time of need, it creates an unbreakable bond. Life around the dinner table is a big part of humanity. You make food for people you love.

Figure 7. Johnny Farah standing in his organic farm in Lebanon. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

After a life which had taken him round the world and seen him establish boutiques and restaurants from New York to Paris, and back in Lebanon, Johnny Farah now owns one of Beirut's most fashionable restaurants, Casablanca. But he remains that same three-year-old who stood on Beirut's harborside, a Palestinian refugee whose family had fled the town where he was born. The culinary heritage Mary passed down to her children now stands as a beautiful testament to her homeland – a story skillfully woven into Johnny, Jeanette, and Suha's culinary artistry in Lebanon and New York. Their culinary influences harmoniously blend the diverse influences of both Palestinian coastal cities that shape their family's history, Gaza and Jaffa. Johnny explains: "My relationship with ingredients, spices and vegetables is organic, it has been passed down to me and I can play with these flavors as much as I want, while still retaining their essential nature." But Johnny's journey into the world of food is not merely meant to provide meals for his (diaspora) friends and family to savor. It is a passionate voyage that weaves together the very essence of refugeedom and homeland. His cooking follows the same processes established by his mother. Family, friends, and acquaintances gather around a festive meal and Johnny involves them in setting the table, choosing the drinks, and indulging them in conversation. He tells me: "You won't believe how many of my Lebanese friends, some having very ardent anti-Palestinian rhetoric, I was able to convert into defenders of Palestine around this very dining table!" In the fragrant embrace of his cuisine, he orchestrates a symphony that resonates with the soul of Palestine.

This celebration of Palestinian cuisine also works to reclaim it from Israeli appropriation. Food appropriation is not just about laying claim to ingredients and mixing spices but needs to be understood as a systemic part of the many forms of

Israeli colonization of Palestine, a violent effort to take away a group's cultural identity and deny its heritage, its land, and the food it produces while manipulating its history. "Israel is a thief on all levels," Johnny concludes. By preventing Palestinians from accessing their homeland, and by controlling and limiting the movement of individuals within their own territories, Israeli authorities not only impede economic activities but also disrupt the cultural exchanges integral to culinary traditions. The confinement of people within specific areas hampers the organic evolution of food practices, inhibiting the natural flow of culinary knowledge and innovation, alongside the control of resources and destruction of agricultural land. The Farahs' kitchen table combats a broader Israeli strategy to assert dominance and reshape the sociocultural landscape. Through the Palestinian kitchen table, the Zionist project is constantly and continuously questioned and reversed. By sharing the foods, traditions, and wisdoms that are carried in generational recipes, the healing process is deeply tied to ancestry and identity.

Resilience and Recovery around the Table

Food's relationship to memory should not be treated merely as a form of evoking nostalgia and enabling specific affect but rather as an edifice constructed out of affective building blocks.[11] The kitchen table maintained its centrality in binding families together, thereby counteracting the experience of displacement, which continued to disperse generations of Palestinian refugee families. Though Mary constructed the kitchen table to safeguard her family, one could state that Mary, in fact, needed the presence of the kitchen table as a healing space, foremost for herself, to cope with her own trauma and anchor herself. In this space, she cultivated a sense of safety through the comforting presence and embrace of her children and friends. In this vein, the therapeutic role of the kitchen table was a reciprocal process. For the Farah family, the kitchen table was turned into a common place of origin where Mary brought together – even after her passing – her children, her grandchildren, and her community to express and reformulate their common identity. The kitchen table, which was a construct (if not a material object) they could "carry" with them wherever they went, allowed them to overcome, to a certain extent, the experience of dislocation, exile, and diaspora.

When Mary's children grew up, they ended up in all corners of the planet, while she stayed in Beirut. When her children were away, she would reproduce her rituals with her friends and neighbors. There were always people around her kitchen table, and the meals always entailed extensive preparation. When she would travel to her children and grandchildren, it did not matter if they were in New York, Paris or Hamburg, she would bring Palestine to them, through language, flavors, spices, and smells. Nicole Farah, Mary's granddaughter who lives in Paris, recalls her grandmother as an exceptional woman:

> Teta [grandma] always looked good, with her lipstick, foundation, heels, and pearl necklace. She'd always wear a skirt; she also always wore a corset and she'd cook wearing it! She had a small, sweet voice, very

> sweet. She raised her six children without shouting, I have never heard her scream. You'd actually have to stop talking to hear her speak. She had the power to adapt quickly to any new situation and I think the fact that she was fluent in several languages helped her in coping with life's challenges. What was also remarkable was that she held no grudges in her heart, despite all the injustice she went through. Despite their limited resources, her children had to eat well and dress well, she sewed clothes for them and cooked the most amazing meals. It was her way of defeating Israel. Around the table, she told her children that Lebanon had given them much to be grateful for. It was through good humor and optimism that she educated her children.

When Mary passed away in 1997, her children carried on the torch. Nicole and her siblings would wait eagerly for those family reunions with Ayda, Suha, Johnny, and Jeanette in Paris. Nicole realizes today that her teta – and Palestine – is always present around the kitchen table. The Farah siblings continue their mother's legacy despite the geographical separation between them and their nephews and nieces. Dinner preparation became a deeply intimate moment; with a smaller group, it was an occasion for catching up and sharing as discussions took on a more personal tone. Nicole reminisces about these moments: "It felt like a behind-the-scenes glimpse at a theater production, we would giggle and laugh. I'd always bring my children, so they could be nourished in this tradition. My husband, who is French, he, too, would never miss our family gatherings." Once the table was elegantly set, all of them, uncles, aunts, nieces, and nephews and their friends and anyone who was homesick was welcome at Johnny's kitchen table. The connections were recreated through cooking, with new friends and new family members, even if they did not speak the same language. Johnny and his siblings kindled a fire of common humanity in the hearts of their fellow displaced souls. They gather, not just to taste, but to partake in a ritual of remembrance and renewal. Their cooking is the story of how a meal summons a cause.

Nicole explains that because her grandmother awakened her children's senses early on, Mary's children embodied the legacy of her education. The significance of large meals, characterized by conviviality, warmth, love, richness, and good humor, symbolized the essence of their family reunions. And that positivity was the magic of the kitchen table, Nicole affirms:

> If the siblings had issues or were fighting, everything had to be resolved before it was time to eat. Everything had to be forgiven and forgotten once the dishes reached the table. That was her rule. No problems, no bickering around the kitchen table. It was a safe space. She believed that food would turn into poison if we eat it while angry or upset. That marked me, because the French would gather around the family table on Sundays only to complain, share, and discuss their problems, turning the

> entire event of eating into a negative experience. That wasn't the case when we were having family meals.

Mary's kitchen table extended its hospitality beyond family, serving as an open space for friends and the community. This realization dawned on me during my time in New York, where every Saturday evening, Jeanette Farah, Johnny's twin sister, graciously hosted me for a four-course dinner in her Wall Street apartment, inviting her American neighbors as well. This weekly ritual, spanning decades, involved Jeanette's pilgrimage to Union Square's Greenmarket for fresh fish, vegetables, and fruits, where she was greeted warmly by vendors who considered her both a loyal customer and a friend. As a spectator at her kitchen table, I never dared to interfere in the delicate artistry of her cuisine, as she gently provided us with a testament of the enduring power of food as both an instrument of remembrance and an emblem of unwavering resilience. In this psychological embrace, the dinner table emerged as a cornerstone in the art of maintaining human togetherness as it reestablished the meaning of home in the local or diasporic context.[12] Around her kitchen table in New York City, Jeanette brought Palestine to us, through her food and her stirring of the memories of a homeland left behind. Even in this buzzing metropolis across the ocean, she forges connections, not just of flavor and sustenance, but of shared history and dreams.

Now visiting Beirut, I am seated at Suha's kitchen table, where I observe Johnny deftly chopping onions while Suha sprinkles salt onto rolled vine leaves simmering over a low flame. The air is thick with paralysis and disgust, as the atrocities committed by an authoritarian Israeli state and its colonial forces proceed relentlessly. Johnny looks sad and defeated:

> Every day I am seeing new images of Palestinian kids blown to bits, smashed by concrete, screaming in hospitals where they can't be adequately treated, burying their parents or siblings. Israel keeps casting a dark shadow over our region.

Once again, it is around the kitchen table that the Farah siblings, family members, and friends deal with traumatic collective pain. The live-streamed images of Israeli and American genocidal violence continuously exercised against Palestinians – mainly in Gaza, but also in the West Bank – echoes and reiterates the moment when this genocidal regime was established and expelled the Farah family from their home in Jaffa. In an uncanny and ironic way, the footage and color photographs of bombed hospitals, schools, bakeries, courthouses, residential blocks, farms, and human flesh, mutilated children, and corpses in Gaza recall the black-and-white still images taken in Palestine during the Nakba of 1948, reawakening the traumas of this family and other Palestinians.

Despite his external composure, a storm raged within Johnny, leaving scars that were invisible to the world. On 20 October 2023, the Church of Saint Porphyrius,

Gaza's oldest active church and the sacred place where Johnny's grandparents exchanged vows, faced a tragic fate. Serving as a refuge for hundreds of Muslims and Christians displaced by Israeli bombing, the church became the target of an Israeli missile. The devastating strike claimed the lives of at least twenty civilians. I shared in Palestinians' anger, and that deep visceral cry of absolute devastation and horror. After helplessly roaming the streets of Beirut, I decided to go to the Farahs' home, which has served as its own kind of sanctuary for generations of Palestinians, especially in times of fear. I knew that at the Farah home, the simple act of breaking bread together would become a bridge for my grief and pain, connecting hearts and fostering a sense of belonging in a world that was seemingly so deaf to the cries of burning children in Palestine.

Figure 8. Chilies from Johnny's organic farm in Lebanon. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

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Endnotes

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Culinary Traditions in the Jerusalem Countryside: Communities Displaced by the 1948 Nakba and Those Who Remained

Samar Awaad

Abstract

This study explores the food culture of Jerusalem's rural villages, comparing the culinary traditions of those communities displaced during the Nakba of 1948 with those communities who remained rooted in their land. Food culture, including the maintenance of traditional recipes and ingredients, as well as alterations and adaptations, is living evidence of the complex and continuing relationship of those living in villages surrounding Jerusalem to their lands. Food is also a marker of resilience, identity, and memory in the face of settler-colonial displacement. Using recipe analysis, focus group discussions, and interviews, this study examines the disruption of the Palestinian agricultural model by displacement and colonization, and how this has impacted Palestinian food culture. Palestinian food culture has thus been shaped by the loss of agricultural land and by the loss of access to certain products, but also by the introduction of new ingredients, labor market transformation, and the presence or absence of social solidarity (*al-'awna*), which includes assistance from extended family members and fellow villagers.

Keywords:

Palestine; Nakba; Jerusalem; rural; fellahin; agriculture; food culture; *al-'awna*; self-sufficiency.

> Like a tongue being torn from your mouth, the tree has been torn from its original soil, and all its roots are exposed, astonished, and writhing in pain. The roots were scattered, as were fragments of its trunk, branches, and leaves that were scattered everywhere, and every limb or organ began to aspire to the rest, to the whole, and when it failed to connect, it piled on top of itself to preserve flavor, memory, or dream if it could.
>
> – Reja-e Busailah, "The Tree"[1]

Palestine has and had, especially before the Nakba, a well-defined agricultural model that consisted of land, fellahin and their families, and knowledge and cultural practices including *al-'awna* (what we might translate as "mutual aid" or "social solidarity"). The agricultural model is rooted in farming practices employed by fellahin who enjoyed a certain local sovereignty over their immediate environment. The Palestinian fellahin, who planted and harvested in accordance with an inherited accumulation of ancestral agricultural knowledge, produced to fulfil their family needs first and then sold the surplus or exchanged it for other products.[2] This model brought general economic prosperity to Palestine, built on the self-sufficient family and supportive village. Each element of the model worked in concert with the others to form productive, sustainable, and prosperous communities. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the agriculture sector was integrated into the global export system, and Palestine began exporting surplus produce to several European capitals. This included a wide range of products from grains like wheat, barley, and corn to sesame, legumes, tobacco, Jaffa oranges, cotton, wine, soap, vegetables, and olive oil.[3]

In terms of rural Jerusalem villages, the western slope plateaus were distinguished by fertile soil, a higher percentage of rainfall, and vegetation cover, where the fellahin grew the majority of their grain and vegetable crops, as opposed to the arid eastern slopes, which are poor in soil and steep toward the Jordan Valley, where they grew barley and grains to feed their animals.

The economic transformation impacted the villages in the hinterlands of Jerusalem differently: while several villages were integrated into the city's transformed economy, others were relegated to producing crops to supply the urban center. After World War I, villages to the south and west of Jerusalem, such as Lifta, Bayt Hanina, al-Malha, Dayr Yasin, al-'Ayzariya, Silwan, and 'Ayn Karim, also witnessed the transformation of agricultural production due to their proximity to the capital and to Jewish settlements that became their main market. Jerusalem's rural villages experienced a quantum leap in economic development as a result of expanded access to education in the city and employment in the public sector and professions such as the police and army. Increased financial resources and new consumption patterns influenced the transition of farmers into employees and workers. Furthermore, numerous communities developed specialization in crafts for use in the rest of the country, such as pottery from al-Jib and glass from Jaba'. Local crops, as well as locally processed foods like dried figs, freekeh, and pickles, were sold in local markets in Jerusalem and Jaffa, with surpluses exported to foreign markets.[4]

Despite these changes, fellahin largely continued to work the land using millennia-old practices.[5] The rich tradition of grinding wheat highlights the Palestinian's creativity in harnessing the abundance of their land. Grains were meticulously processed, and the making of bread for the family was a lengthy, arduous process comprising several stages: ploughing, sowing, and weeding;

harvesting and gathering the sheaves; threshing and grinding or milling; and finally the preparation and baking of the bread.[6] Each step entailed specific tools and procedures perfected over generations. By the Mandate period, a total of 482 operational water mills – a technology dating back to the sixth or seventh century CE – were used to grind wheat and other grains.[7] Fellahin used all parts of the wheat: the actual grain for food and to make bread, the leftover hay called *tibin* to feed the animals, and the straw for women to weave baskets and kitchen utensils.[8] The straw was even woven into a decorative icon called *mishit*, which protected the wheat-brought blessings on the house.[9] According to Tawfiq Canaan, Palestinians scattered a handful of seven kinds of grains (wheat, barley, corn, beans, fava beans, lentils, and vetch) in front of their doorstep on Eid al-Fitr to protect the house from evil spirits.[10]

Each step of this elaborate procedure weaved in a tapestry of traditions and nature's spirituality, including songs and prayers passed down from generations that were thought to entice divine favor. While every member of the family had a role in the process, women were the pillar of this equation, as accumulated knowledge was passed down from mother and grandmother to daughter and granddaughter. As Tawfiq Canaan, Gustaf Dalman, and Elihu Grant recorded, this knowledge was mainly tied to the natural calendar, guided by the seasons and the location of the sun, moon, and stars in the cosmos, which structured Palestinians' agriculture and religious festivals, and their lives.[11] They jointly paint a vivid portrayal of the Palestinian fellahin as harmoniously connected to nature and attuned to the seasonal rhythms. Amanda Batarsah recognizes Canaan's work in particular, as it recuperated the Palestinian fellahin from the Orientalist construction of primitive remnants locked in biblical time to an eloquent assertion of belonging profoundly anchored in kinship with their ancestors.[12] For example, after the wheat harvest was completed, farmers cleared their debts, set aside a portion for personal use, and left the remainder for the less fortunate and the birds – a practice that reflected a deep attitude of communal and environmental well-being.[13]

Palestinian food and food culture was a celebration of the land, its seasons, and nature's abundance. It was founded on a paradigm of self-sufficiency – that the land provided everything needed to survive for the entire year, and those who cultivated the land prepared what they raised and grew in the fields together. Food was typified by its simplicity, its seasonality, and its reliance on local ingredients, with the women who cooked rarely using spices. Fellahin farmed wheat and other grains such as barley and white corn to make bread and feed their domestic animals. They also collected grapes and figs and dried them to conserve them until the winter. They pressed olives and sesame for cooking oil, and sowed lentils, chickpeas, and other crops. Domestic animals and birds such as rabbits, goats, cows, pigeons, and chickens were part of the household and meat and poultry were included in the cuisine on special occasions such as weddings and funerals.[14]

Bread was a staple of peasant food before rice was introduced; it was eaten with almost every dish. Canaan describes it as the primary diet of farmers, and poor farmers and Bedouins relied solely on bread, water, and shrubs that grew in their fields.[15] Moreover, bread had a spiritual value in Palestinian customs. It held a special ritual function for Christians, especially around festivals and religious occasions, and while Muslims did not maintain similar rituals, it still held a sacred status for them. The blessedness of bread for Palestinians is revealed in the names it is given – *ni'mat Allah* (God's blessing) or *mushaf Allah* (God's book). If a piece of bread falls to the ground, one should pick it up, kiss it, and, if it is not eaten, place it on a surface above ground level. Bread is not cut by a knife, only broken by hand.

The simplest recipe in peasantry cuisine that I found was *bahthutha*. It is a combination of diced onions with olive oil mixed with *maftul*-like wheat flour crumbles and shredded bread. *Bahthutha* also served as the base for cooking with foraged seasonal plants and shrubs from the wild such as *khubiza* (common mallow), *lufayta* (mustard), *silq* (chard), *'ilk* (chicory), and *luf* (black calla, *Arum palaestinum*). Communities of rural Jerusalem also made spiced yellow and stamped bread for funerals, which they call *mkhammarat*. The same stamped bread is also known as *ftuteh* or *ka'k asfar* or *ka'k 'eid* in other villages and cities and is made for funerals and festivals. In Silwan, it is made for the family of the deceased to share with their guests as blessings for the deceased soul, and is distributed at home or at the cemetery during funerals.

Weaving together the complex links among families, towns, and even cities across historical Palestine is *al-'awna*. Al-'awna represents a network of community assistance embedded in rural Palestinian society as a social norm, based on foundations of kinship and a strong spirit of participation.[16] This communal support system manifested itself in everyday activities like babysitting and cooking, as well as events like wheat and olive harvests, home construction, wedding celebrations, and mourning. It was often well-organized and regulated, and could include financial support systems such as a rotating family lending fund.[17] Al-'awna epitomizes the core of Palestinian solidarity, equivalent to what we might today call mutual aid. These networks, and the agricultural model of which they were a part, were fundamentally shaken by the ethnic cleansing of more than four hundred Palestinian villages, towns, and cities from 1947 to 1949, and the displacement of some 750,000 Palestinians, half of whom were farmers.[18]

Although all Palestinian communities were impacted, it is possible to identify differences in impact on the food cultures of communities from depopulated villages (in Jerusalem, this includes Lifta, Dayr Yasin, Ishwa', al-Jura, al-Walaja, Dayr Ayyub, al-Malha, Bayt Mahsir, Qaluniya) and those communities that remained in place (such as Bayt Surik, Bayt Duqqu, Silwan, 'Isawiyya, Battir, Artas, Kufr 'Aqab, Qalandiya, Bayt Hanina, and Bayt Safafa). The following sections are based on recipe analysis,

focus group discussions, and over thirty interviews. These focused on the perspectives of fellahin families regarding agricultural ways of life and the impact of the disruption of these ways of life on the preparation of traditional recipes. Testimonies identified which recipes are no longer prepared, which are still used, and whether and how these recipes have been adapted. They also addressed the impact of colonial policies, including confiscation of land, access issues, labor market transformation, and the presence or absence of social support (al-ʻawna).

The Nakba of 1948

> For a colonized people, the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.
>
> – Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*[19]

The Jerusalem region underwent major turmoil as a result of the 1948 Nakba. Thirty-eight of seventy-eight villages from the western hills were ethnically cleansed and their residents displaced to Bethlehem, Ramallah, other villages around Jerusalem, and even across the border into Jordan. In total, 48,649 Palestinians were displaced from the Jerusalem area, nearly half of whom (23,649 persons) were from rural areas and the remainder from neighborhoods that fell under Israeli control in 1948.[20] Before the Nakba, Palestinians owned 1.39 million dunums in rural Jerusalem, 231,446 of which were lost. In addition, villagers from rural Jerusalem lost land that they owned in the plains of Ramla, where they preferred to plant wheat and other grains.[21] As a woman from Bayt Mahsir confirmed, in addition to losing their land in Bayt Mahsir during the Nakba, they lost their land in Dayr Muhaysin near Latrun in the Ramla district.

The dispossession of Palestinians deeply scarred them, alienated them from their homes and land, and disrupted the equilibrium of well-being inside their communities. The Palestinian agricultural model was interrupted and damaged for both those communities that were ethnically cleansed and those villages that remained. Displaced communities attempted to stay together, but most were unable to do so; as a result, the community fabric was torn significantly and, in many cases, replaced with support provided through refugee camp institutions. Families who sought refuge in cities often found their community fiber reduced to their own family, which became the only supportive system for coping with atrocities, addressing new obstacles, and protecting their identity.[22]

The functional agricultural model that supported Palestinian food culture – which is the people's heritage – was demolished by the loss of the land. Food was integral to the fellahin's prosperity and well-being and became interconnected with the

sense of loss and deprivation after the Nakba. Those who were ethnically cleansed experienced a dramatic change in their lives that impacted their cultural and social systems. This transformed ceremonial foods, for example, because celebrations came to a standstill with the loss of land and loved ones. Before the Nakba, it was common in Lifta and Dayr Yasin to serve *jraysha* (a dish of cracked wheat cooked for long hours on an open fire in meat broth, dried yogurt or *jamid*, and lamb) at weddings and funerals. Yet the last time *jraysha* was made for a wedding of villagers from Lifta and Dayr Yasin was before the Nakba. Women tell of cooking the ceremonial *jraysha* for weddings in Lifta with palpable pride as well as a deep sense of loss for that which they cannot have anymore. They mention that people currently cook *mansaf* with rice like everybody else in Jerusalem, and that their ʻawna was scattered and now lives in different locations. The sense of family and togetherness in the city has diminished since the Nakba. They continue to express nostalgic feelings about al-ʻawna and their communal existence that they could not recreate in their refuge.

In al-Walaja, a village from rural Jerusalem that was ethnically cleansed in 1948, a few families refused to be forcibly displaced and resided in their land on the outskirts of their village where they remain until this day. Due to the steadfastness and unity among the families, they preserved their food traditions and food culture. By contrast, the Walaja community that was ethnically cleansed and who now reside in Jordan switched their ceremonial food from *jraysha* to *mansaf* as an adaptation to their surrounding cuisine.

A family from al-Malha who was displaced to al-Amʻari refugee camp, continued returning to their land after they were forced to leave. Thus, despite being denied control over their land, some villagers maintained access to it, in a kind of modified sovereignty. They kept on grazing their sheep and farming their land in al-Malha until 1967, when they were evicted completely and refused access to return. They sold their sheep and had to stop farming due to lack of land in the refugee camp where they currently live. The woman adds that while living in the camp they missed their main recipe ingredients like wheat flour, bulgur, olive oil, and sesame oil. These ingredients were not included in the UNRWA food parcel; instead of olive and sesame oil, they received "Shemen" cooking oil which either they adapted to or bartered away. And, since the parcel included rice, but not wheat, which was expensive, they adapted recipes to use rice. She said, sadly, that almost everything needed to be adapted, nothing was the same anymore.

Mujaddara, a well-known lentil and rice dish in modern Palestinian cuisine, originally was cooked using *burghul* (bulgur).[23] Similarly, maqluba was cooked with freekeh (smoked green wheat), and vegetables were stuffed with bulgur and meat. With the scarcity of wheat and abundance of rice, jraysha was adapted or totally transformed for most of Palestine, except for rural Jerusalem and Hebron villages who remained devoted to making jraysha using cracked wheat and with few adaptations. In

Bayt Safafa, for example, when jraysha is served they place the wheat layer first and lay a thin layer of rice on top. For others, like Lifta community members who reside in Ramallah, the entire dish was adapted to use rice and is now called *mansaf*.

Culinary specificity in Palestinian villages is similar to linguistic dialects in Palestinian cultures. Each village believes that their traditional recipes are unique to them, and express pride in the distinctions that they draw between themselves (and their recipes) and others. For example, two women from al-ʻIsawiyya explained that their jraysha is the best among rural Jerusalem villages because they make it the original way without yogurt (*kishk*), unlike Silwan and Bayt Safafa.[24]

Food is one of the most conservative and entrenched components of culture for a variety of reasons, including psychological ones. Palestinians, like other cultures, use food to communicate gratitude, love, and forgiveness.[25] Food has emotional and symbolic implications since it is used in situations involving strong emotions, such as weddings and wakes. Finally, people become acclimated to specific types of dishes from a young age, often consuming the same meals every day, making it difficult to change one's tastes or eating habits easily. Changes in culinary practice and tastes thus tend to take place gradually, and as part of larger social transformations. Sharif Kanaʻana discovered that certain Palestinian dishes had disappeared as a result of specific commodities, such as wheat products, which were widely used in traditional cuisine, becoming more expensive and less accessible. He found that there was a shift away from basic recipes based on a few ingredients generated by the farmer from his land, with one of the key causes being the transition in the agricultural model away from a self-sufficient and independent model in which the farmer planted and harvested for his family's requirements. Currently, the village has lost its own economy and has been incorporated into an external economy, with the majority of village residents no longer working in farming but instead in Israeli settlements or the urban service economy. Others who farm do not plant to meet the needs of their families, but based on what will allow them to make a profit.[26]

Ongoing Nakba

Currently, rural Jerusalem villages that kept their populations during the Nakba are sites of settler-colonial encroachment and ongoing ethnic cleansing, which aims to alienate the Palestinian population from Jerusalem's metropolitan core and to assault the distinct Jerusalem identity. These policies, prominent among Israeli strategies of separation and colonization, have methodically segregated the city from its rural vicinities using a variety of approaches. This includes the confiscation of land and water resources, the apartheid Separation Wall and its effect on access to and from Jerusalem, imprisonment of adults and children, and displacing families from their homes.[27] Palestinian land and homes are being confiscated to establish further Israeli colonies and the apartheid Separation Wall interrupts Palestinians' connection to

their land. The gradual disappearance of agricultural land has also meant villagers' alienation from farming and their transition to laborers in Israeli settlements.[28] The villages northwest of Jerusalem are perhaps the most stark examples of the enclaves created by these and other colonial policies, and the ongoing struggle against forces seeking to reshape the very fabric of this historically rich and culturally significant region.

In Bayt Hanina, the apartheid Separation Wall divided the village into two sections: one within Jerusalem, requiring a permit to enter, and the other within the West Bank, enclosed between the Ayalon highway and the apartheid wall. The villagers used to cultivate wheat and grains on their western plains, which were confiscated to build the apartheid wall. They were forced to cease farming their land due to Israeli regulations and lack of access permissions. Despite the fact that settler-colonial policies have seized and destroyed the land in Bayt Hanina, its residents continue to prepare their recipes in the traditional fashion, with a strong sense of identity and belonging.

Silwan in rural Jerusalem is likewise an example of resilience. Despite ongoing Zionist settlement, which employs various tactics to displace its inhabitants, Silwan retains its unique food culture.[29] Even though residents must buy the products that they used to farm in al-Bustan, an agricultural area of the village watered by 'Ayn Silwan spring and now claimed by Israeli settlers, they endeavor to prepare their own dishes such as Palestinian chard and black eyed peas, a recipe considered an identity recipe for Silwan.

Culinary traditions and channels that exist beyond generations necessitate enormous power to support people's way of life, which endures despite the loss of land or access to it. All showed particular forms of adaptations to continue their culinary practices. The elderly guided the preservation of culinary practices and the young continued proudly confirming their identity. Despite being denied access to land, they had access to new markets. Thus, one form of adaptation involved families that were displaced to nearby urban areas, villages, or refugee camps, but continued their culinary practices based on the ingredients available. Another form emerged when refugees maintained access to land through various means, such as purchasing or sharing land with locals, and continued to be urban farmers. Losing sovereignty over their lands did not mean losing control over a particular agricultural pattern. They continued the same pattern on the outskirts of the area from which they were displaced, as in al-Walaja, or they resorted to a new system of allotting and sharing land in the West Bank. A third mode emerged based on farmers' obstinacy and determination to retain their land, as in the case of al-Malha. The denial of sovereignty over land was circumvented as villagers readapted, maintaining elements of a rural lifestyle in the urban setting where they sought refuge. Despite living in the city, villagers from al-Malha continued the rural culinary practices and inherited traditions of their ancestors, thereby keeping alive certain forms of knowledge and practice.

Conclusion

> The path of folklore is tied to our love of the land. Separating the bond between land and farmer dilutes folklore and ends the connection to inherited tradition. Reviving popular heritage is no longer merely a sentimental tendency, but the people's orientation toward sustaining their national entities.
>
> – Adel Samara, "*Hawla 'ilaqat al-iqtisad bi-l-turath al-sha'bi*" (On the relationship between the economy and popular heritage)[30]

Food culture is a core component of Palestinian folklore, profoundly linked to the Palestinian agricultural model, which brings together land, people (the fellahin), knowledge, and community practice, including al-'awna. The abrupt halt of the agricultural model of production as a result of the Nakba was the primary source of changes in the Palestinian cuisine.

Since the Nakba, Palestinian cuisine has evolved in a variety of directions, resulting in recipe alterations, adaptations, and even extinction. The destruction and displacement of the Nakba exacerbated the transformation of the political economy of agriculture in Palestine with its integration into the world economy. As a result, the relationship with food became one of consumption rather than production and self-reliance. The village transitioned from a self-sufficient entity in which farmers produced for their own consumption and exported surplus produce, transmitting agricultural knowledge from one generation to the next, to one in which farming knowledge became obsolete with nowhere to practice, and farming was replaced by labor in Israeli colonies as the primary path to economic survival.

Despite colonial policies and agricultural decline, however, villages that remained in place maintained their food identity, and their cuisine retained similarity to adjacent villages and continuity with the recipes prepared by their ancestors. Even if key components are not readily available and require more time and effort to obtain and prepare, they continue to prepare identical meals drawing on locally grown and foraged ingredients and those available on the market. Furthermore, ceremonial cuisine prepared with the support of al-'awna is still available in Silwan, al-'Isawiyya, Bayt Safafa, and other Jerusalem villages/neighborhoods. The inhabitants of these convey their enjoyment in making jraysha and discuss the community that fuels the preparation and serving of communal meals with a radiant pride of identity and fulfilment. By contrast, those villages ethnically cleansed during the Nakba of 1948 have been striving for stability and connection with land and their 'awna to claim their identity through recipes and ceremonial food. Making food is closely attached to the family, the village, and events tied to community and emotion, like weddings, funerals, and festivals. Yet it may be too simple to divide Palestinians between those who were displaced and those who remained: all are victims of Israel's colonial policies. Moreover, among the ethnically cleansed villages of rural Jerusalem there is

the exemplary story of al-Walaja, where despite displacement some villagers remained, preserved their ʻawna, and maintained the food culture of their village where others could not, having been completely displaced.

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Interview

Recipes Carry Voices and Stories: An Interview with Mirna Bamieh

Interview by Christiane Dabdoub Nasser

Abstract

In this interview, guest editor Christiane Dabdoub Nasser and artist, chef, and ethnographer Mirna Bamieh discuss the status of Palestinian cuisine in the world food scene, questions of colonial appropriation of Palestinian food, and the alchemy or *nafas* that makes each individual cook's food uniquely their own. They also delve into the transformations of Palestinian cuisine over time and efforts to preserve recipes as a way of safeguarding the histories and cultures that they represent and resisting settler-colonial erasure.

Keywords:

Palestinian cuisine; foodways; gender; *nafas*; culinary appropriation; food history.

It is difficult to put a label on Jerusalem-born Mirna Bamieh. She wears several hats and navigates between disciplines with elf-like agility. As an artist, she has participated in several international exhibitions and festivals spanning the globe from Brazil to Japan, going through Ireland, Morocco, and Palestine; she also has quite a few grants and awards under her belt. As a chef, she is delving into traditional Palestinian food culture, committing to explore dishes that are on the verge of disappearing. As an ethnographer, she uses the medium of storytelling and food to investigate history, geography, memory, and identity to better deconstruct dispossession and disappearance. She invokes these hats to promote her other role as an activist to better serve yet again her role as ambassador for Palestinian culture.

On the website promoting the event *The Tongue Tracing the Hand Tracing the Earth*, subscribers – maximum twenty-six – are promised that "from the hand taste of the artist to the handprints in the ceramic pieces, the experiential dinner setting will be sensorial on multiple levels, from auditory to textural to gastronomic." Mirna's art reflects her passion for food and her culinary feats embody her soul as an artist and as an activist.

I encountered Mirna on Zoom and not in a Jerusalem café or at one of her Palestine Hosting Society events, as was initially planned when we first communicated. Since our first exchange, the war on Gaza prevented us from meeting physically and our encounters remained virtual. I had sent her the questions for the interview ahead, but preferring spontaneity, she looked at them just before we connected through the ether.

How do you view the role of gender in Palestinian cuisine and changes in foodways, in which women serve as primary carriers of culinary traditions, and men as claimants to the title of chef?

Historically, the act of cooking and caring for families and sustaining communities has belonged to women. The kitchen was the center of this nurturing. Even during the Intifada in Palestine, the women were running the kitchens as part of the resistance. So, it was not just cooking for the family but extended to those active in the resistance.

However, if we look more carefully, we see that men were always cooking for the public: Men were always running the restaurants; they were always running the small operations in the old cities across the Ottoman Empire. So, there was always the private act of cooking versus the public one, and somehow, the private one was always in the hands of the women – the nurturing and the caring, of family meals, of weddings and funerals – but the one linked to money, to the economy, to bringing income to the family in relation to the act of cooking was always in the hands of men.

A long time ago, women were not able to access the public space to be a cook in a restaurant or be seen as the operation holder. It was culturally unacceptable. So, we have those two aspects, and then we have current times when those divisions are not so harsh. It's different now.

Somehow, the way we deal with food as women, the sensibilities, are slightly different from those of men. We are less about the showcase, the display of craftmanship. I went to culinary school and it was really entertaining for me because men were always competing, like who chops faster, but that was never the case with the female chefs that were in training. It's two different viewpoints. I think there are very strong women on the culinary scene now, perhaps less so than men, but the show we create around the act of cooking is more subtle, it's more around practices of care, and our messages are strong, but they do not have the same vocality as men's do. And I think the world sometimes picks on different messages from different people. So, I'm trying to think of why that is, and I think it relates to the fact that being a cook is different from being a chef.

When you look at the 1970s and 1980s the names that made it in the culinary world were men; they were the chefs, there were no female chefs. But we're talking about now and we're talking about Palestine: it's different because neither are really running restaurants; we're dealing with food as a sphere for saying something, for transmitting a message. Even if we're all trained as chefs, it's still different, because it has this resistance approach to it.

Would you use the term *nafas* (literally "breath," but conveying something like soul or essence, and used also to refer to an artist's personal style) with respect to men cooking?

Yeah. Definitely. *Nafas* is a very… it's a very individual thing, it's like the thumbprints that each one of us leaves in the food, even when we cook the same recipe. *Nafas* has nothing to do with gender. Maybe it has to do with the bacteria that lives on our body, this thumbprint that we leave, the hand-taste. And there's been some speculation about what this *nafas* is, what makes a dish that Mirna cooks particular? What makes it taste different, even if someone else followed the same exact recipe?

For example, Koreans, who know a thing or two about fermentation, distinguish between the "tongue taste" of various foods and "hand taste." "Tongue taste" is a simple matter of molecules coming into contact with taste buds. "Hand taste" is the far more complex experience of a food that bears the indelible mark – the care and sometimes the love – of the person who made it. And they concluded that the scientific explanation is probably the bacteria that lives on our body that creates this alchemy that really adds particularity to the taste. And it's personal, because the bacteria that live on my body are different from yours. I love bacteria, and I work a lot with fermentation so when I came across Michael Pollan's introduction to *The Art of Fermentation* by Sandor Katz, I loved it, and I was convinced. I even created ceramic pieces to really think about *nafas* in relation to the finger. Yes, the bacteria that sits on our body contributes.

How do you see the emergence of Palestinian cuisine on the world scene?

It is definitely an interesting cultural phenomenon, but it is also a form of resistance. Even if the term Palestinian kitchen was taken with a grain of salt some years ago, now we can just be so vocal, and write about it. There are cookbooks about it, there are articles about it, there are food practices that are revolving around the Palestinian kitchen. To me that is an advancement, and it means that our voices have been heard and this collective effort – and I'm not talking only about Palestine, but Palestine and the diaspora – of trying to promote traditions and practices and the kitchen voices of a nation, [embodies] all the roots that came out of Palestine.

You know when you flee your home, as happened in 1948, and you're forced to be in a refugee camp, and then you stay there or have to once again move elsewhere, what you considered Palestinian food for you changes – the new ingredients, the new people you're surrounded with. And I could track that with the recipes I was collecting.

As an example, [there] is *rumaniyya*; there are many recipes for this dish but it was a dish that was disappearing. Somehow it was lost in Yafa, but now people know *rumaniyya*, it's one of those dishes that made a very strong comeback. Seven or eight years ago, only the Gaza people knew about it, which was where it was preserved; but it was totally lost in its original place, in Yafa and Lydd. The *laji'in* [refugees] from the coast went to the closest coastal city, which was Gaza, and Gaza was this place that preserved so many recipes because they love food, because it was practiced, but mostly because it was unfortunately besieged and secluded from the rest of the Palestinian territories. So there was a lot of preservation of recipes, which is amazing! Originally called *habbat ruman* [pomegranate kernel] in Yafa and Lydd, it changed to *rumaniyya*, which makes more sense, you know, because of the way we construct names in Arabic, but it did lose the poetry of the original name though. Moreover, the Gazans added ingredients, they added more *'ayn jarrada* [dill seeds], more chili, they added red tahina, which the original recipe did not have. So they preserved the recipe but gave it their own twist, their *nafas*.

This is an example of the movement of people that really affects what's in the recipe, and whether it survives or not. Recipes are story-holders, they carry voices and stories … It's not just food, it's not just nurturing, it's history. I go to a place, for instance Nablus, and I want to understand how the kitchen of Nablus came into being. I look at the history, the geography, I look back into what used to be planted there, at the economy and the flow of money from and into this city, and then I start understanding why they have eggplants and why a neighboring city does not, and when the eggplant was introduced in Palestine. And then you dig into the history of colonialism, and you realize that eggplants were introduced to Palestine through the British, and the route of its farming and distribution follows the Hijaz train project initiated by the Ottomans. And that is just one example of histories of interconnections of what's on our plate.

How would you describe the process of claiming and reclaiming Palestinian cuisine, including transformations and processes of inclusion/exclusion or re-imagining ethnic identity/integration?

It's definitely an open process, because we are sharing! We are sharing our cuisine with others. Let me answer it like this. We're talking about Palestine, we're talking about Palestinians, we're talking about a very specific case of efforts to render the voices of these people heard. We still have to explain what Palestinian means … we're always questioned, whether we exist or not. It's a very brutal way of being. Talking about the food that we're eating makes us visible to the world, because food is culture, and if we have a culture that goes back hundreds of years, then we cannot be invisible. It's like saying: we have culture, we have literature, we have books, we have cuisine, we have customs … How can we not exist?! Unfortunately, we are put into a position where we have to humanize ourselves in the eyes of the world. And food is a perfect way because it's a way of sharing, it's a way of making the other listen. How can you deny that I am there if you are eating my food? So, that's the first part of your question.

Another way of me answering that question is: Why do we see now all of these cooks and all of these chefs and all of these accounts on social media reclaiming the Palestinian kitchen? I think it has something to do with our generation. I personally came to realize that there were so many recipes that I didn't know about, with names that were totally unknown to me. I began questioning that when I went to culinary school and not before. I'm an artist, I'm a visual artist. I have had a practice for a very long time. In 2017, I wanted to take a break from making art, I wanted to come to a new understanding of the role of the artist in a world that is constantly on the verge of collapsing. So I said okay, I'll go do the thing that I love as much as I love art. I'll not stop being an artist, but I'll take a break, and I'll immerse myself into food. This realization came to me when I was in Japan, where I took cooking classes, which confirmed my passion for cooking. When I came back, I enrolled in a culinary school in Ramallah.

I soon realized that when we study cooking, all the culinary schools in the world are just the same: they apply the French system to writing the cuisine of the world, then each school has its own specificities. You have classes in Japanese cuisine – Asian, they call it – and then Mexican, and when it comes to the Palestinian kitchen, we ask ourselves: how do we cook *maqluba* [a home dish of layered rice, vegetable, and meat] for a restaurant service? It's very basic things, but it does not go away, just because we got used to serving *musakhan* [chicken and sumac], hummus, the basics, because there's more to our cuisine. We were not taught the history of dishes and I thought that as a Palestinian culinary school we should showcase our food. We should bring more attention to it. And I'm talking about 2017, so quite some time ago. This boom around the food was still in its first stages, so I started researching and asking questions, trying to understand: why do I have no access to that knowledge, why are these dishes not available, why do the mothers not know them, why do I have to go all the way back to the grandmothers and grandfathers to collect all of those recipes?

And the more I asked, the more recipes I collected, the more amazed I was about how much I was learning about our food, about the history of the place that I come from, about ingredients that are no longer as available, but also about myself as a Palestinian. It was like an investigation … and because you were talking about anthropology and how important it is to always relate things, to understand through different sciences when it comes to food because it is not only culinary – it is all these things that merge. There was this theory that I find really fascinating and that somehow resonated with me: that when we look at Palestine, we have to deal with Palestine as an emigration kitchen, even for those who never had to physically be uprooted.[1]

It is often pointed out that the first generation of emigrants that go to a place take the food of their home with them; they want to cook exactly as they used to in their home. And that was fascinating because I was interviewing people who went to the United States, and they brought their seeds with them. They wanted the exact taste of zucchini that they had back home. You leave home but you take the taste with you. That was very important for the first generation. The second generation, their children,

is the one that wanted to assimilate in the new place, to eat what their classmates were eating – they wanted to eat burgers, sandwiches – and they did not want to bring "weird food" in their lunch box. In order to belong they went as far away from that kitchen as possible.

When we're talking about Palestine, we're talking about the generation that wanted to eat whatever was available. We talk about modernity for that generation as well – the fastest, the quickest, the least time in the kitchen possible for the woman, because she had to have a job now. I think the generation of my mother missed the chance, because there was war, there was humiliation, and it was like they wanted to be as invisible as possible, visually not present, because it was dangerous, you know. Then we have the third generation of emigrants, my generation, and they are the ones that want to understand identity in a new way. It's not enough that I look like everyone else here. I have things that make me different. I have a culture. I have a voice that makes me who I am. And that comes from a point of empowerment. It comes from a point where I don't have to prove myself anymore. I am who I am.

Now it's different, we're in a different position. Many people are trying to reclaim that kitchen and make it part of the story. Being a global identity citizen is not enough. Now we know this globalization of the early 2000s, we actually don't want it. There's so much richness in individuality, in culture, in specificities, in identities, in all the different details that make you different from the others. There is a time and then there is a transformation, and each generation has its own gateway. I am interested to see how that develops because I'm sure it will be different in the future.

What do you think of Israel's appropriation of Palestinian cuisine? Do you consider it as a material manifestation of a form of regional acculturation and indigeneity (sabra culture) or a form of erasing the Palestinian past?

When it comes to food appropriation, I think one of the successes of collecting many people's stories and recipes from the Palestinian kitchen is that we are creating this urgency to address cultural appropriation and open the discussion. There are many voices that are now available for the people. It makes appropriating recipes harder. If you look at the kitchen-scapes and the cuisines in the world eight years ago, there was a boom in Israeli restaurants and, because the Palestinian voice was almost absent, they really had a whole playground to themselves. They could create for their restaurants recipes with our food, sometimes even claiming that it was just the way their grandmothers prepared it, even if it was obvious that the chef was Ashkenazi. How could they? How could that be? Your grandmother is Polish! Somehow, because there are now more [Palestinian] voices it became harder to do this. That's a success.

Israel is building a culture; it's creating the cultural identity of the country. And part of it is culinary culture. How can they build it? They look at the land and what grows in the land. I interviewed an Israeli chef and asked what he would describe as the Israeli kitchen, and he said: "The food that grows from the land." They use all those synonyms of freshness, of sunlight, that make it into the dishes, of the varieties

and the many different tastes … it is their base for defining Israeli kitchen: "To do [what we do] you need the Mediterranean, and a beautiful way of dealing with those ingredients." But those ingredients come from this land which is Palestine! So what do you do?

You look at their cooking methods, and unfortunately, those who cook those ingredients are people that are occupying, are dispossessing. They continue with the dispossessing by taking these recipes and reclaiming them as their own. They're powerful, they're bullies, they don't care, you know. They have all this beautiful street food as well as home cooked food and they learn and take whatever they see because they have no conscience, no moral compass. They like *maqluba*; they say, wow, this is good money and they build restaurants around this dish all over the world. They create menus around so-called Israeli cuisine with *muhammara* [a red pepper and walnut mezze] and with labneh, *mtabbal*, and baba ghanouj, all those dishes that they *found* in the "Land of Israel" are theirs. [Such an attitude] comes from a bully, from a place of power, and from a position of not caring for the voices … for them it's all part of the fabric of Israel.

I think now people are gaining more awareness, even Israeli chefs. It started with [Yotam] Ottolenghi; he opened this empire in London and somehow shied away from dealing with it as an Israeli kitchen, but the Ottonlenghi kitchen became the Israeli kitchen unfortunately. He was the first superstar in that line.

How to respond to appropriation? For us Palestinians it is to create our own story, to write our own texts, our own cookbooks, based on our own experience, words and images; to create our own cultural knowledge; to be active writers of our own history. This is a very important milestone in political liberation, in decolonization, a milestone in mobilizing sources for action and for a new empowered political reality.

Mirna Bamieh explores the politics of disappearance and memory production by unpacking the social concerns and limitations of Palestinian commiunities amid contemporary political dilemmas. With degrees in humanities, visual arts, and culinary studies, she melds food and storytelling to develop socially engaged work through Palestine Hosting Society (palestinianhostingsociety.com), a live art project she founded in 2018. Since 2019, she has also been reflecting on the process of fermentation through text, ceramics, and video works incorporated into site-specific installations.

Christiane Dabdoub Nasser is an independent cultural consultant, researcher and writer. She published her first novel, A Moon Will Rise*, in 2021.*

Endnotes

1 On the emigration kitchen, see Carol Bardenstein, "Transmissions Interrupted: Reconfiguring Food, Memory, and Gender in the Cookbook-Memoirs of Middle Eastern Exiles," *Signs* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2002), online at doi.org/10.1086/341011.

Reviews

From Mill to Memory: A Journey of Food Practices in Exile

Review by Yafa El Masri

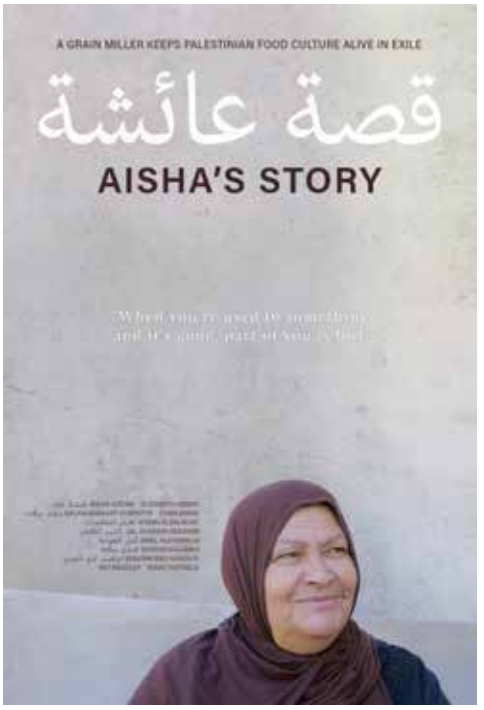
Abstract

The 2024 documentary *Aisha's Story* centers on the life of Aisha Azzam, a displaced Palestinian woman who uses food to create an entire world of belonging, identity, food security, growth and care for her family and community. Scenes of picking herbs, exchanging ingredients and recipes, cooking, baking, and eating together as a family, illuminate the everyday life of Palestinians living in exile and the extraordinary practices of resistance that maintain connections to Palestine's past, present, and future.

Keywords:

Palestinian refugee women; Palestinian food; gender; documentary film; food culture; oral history; climate change.

Aisha's Story. Directed by Elizabeth Vibert and Chen Wang, with Aisha Azzam and Salam Barakat Guenette. Thinking Garden Productions, 2024. Trailer online at vimeo.com/889407916/7b6b44b947.



The first few scenes of *Aisha's Story*, the 2024 documentary directed and produced by Elizabeth Vibert, Chen Wang, and Salam Barakat Guenette, were just too familiar for me.[1] Central to the film is the story of Aisha Azzam – a displaced Palestinian woman who uses food to create an entire world of belonging, identity, food security, growth and care for her family and community. I, too, am a Palestinian refugee who was born and raised in a refugee camp. Even though Aisha and I have had very different lives – Aisha was displaced to Baqa'a refugee camp in Jordan and my family was displaced to Burj al-Barajna refugee camp in Lebanon – Aisha was almost telling my own story, my mother's story, or even the broader story of displaced Palestinian women. Hearing Aisha talk

about her relationship with heritage wheat in the opening scenes of the film, I could imagine my mother's mornings, smell her baking, and hear her call out that breakfast is ready. In this documentary, Vibert, Wang, and Barakat Guenette visually present daily and mundane experiences of an exiled Palestinian. Within scenes of picking herbs, exchanging ingredients and recipes, cooking, baking, and eating together as a family, one observes the very essence of displacement and the extraordinary practices of resistance.

The documentary opens with a quote from Aisha: "When you're used to something and it's gone, part of you is lost." The film then continues to elaborate, through multiple scenes of Aisha speaking and cooking, the experience of loss that older members of her family endured upon their forced expulsion from Bayt Mahsir in Jerusalem subdistrict in 1948. Through storytelling, interviews, and archival material, the film covers Aisha's life, from her childhood between Jerusalem and Jordan to her indefinite exile in Jordan into old age, while also showing how Aisha constantly uses the materiality of food (including the practices around food preparation) between the *here* of Baqa'a camp and the present and the *there* of Palestine.[2] She showcases the heavy stone mill, used to make the family's daily bread, that her grandparents carried all the way to Jordan. Aisha explains the struggle of carrying such a heavy object, but also notes how indispensable it was: "Wheat is the heart of Palestinian life."

Indeed, objects of displacement are heavy, but mostly with memory: they tell biographies, expose crimes, and bring back fragments of a once-upon-a-time paradise.[3] The stone mill has been passed on from generation to generation in Aisha's family since 1948, and Aisha still carries it around to farmers markets and heritage markets today. Aisha and her husband also took over the family mill in Baqa'a refugee camp. This act, so deeply connected to the inheritance of 1948, is undertaken to support the family and to safeguard Palestinian heritage by making healthy and authentic heritage durum wheat available to the camp and surrounding areas. For thirty-five years, her mill has been a destination for Palestinians and Jordanians seeking healthier choices by buying heritage durum wheat and flour. After her husband begins to struggle with blindness and then cancer, Aisha takes on a massive burden of caring for him and their children while running the mill to generate income and feed the family. Bodily and economic sustenance, culture and heritage, and memory are thus intertwined.

In addition to material objects, women in exile like Aisha carry recipes of traditional meals that they continue to cook, such as *musakhan* and *maftul*. Aisha lingers to think about the herbs that she wishes she could have, the ones that grow there and not here, such as wild thyme. She highlights the differences between here and there when she explains that Jordanians cook *mansaf*, while we, Palestinians, cook *maqluba*. Aisha is aware that the distance between the two places is not simply physical. In her words, she wishes she could just walk across the Jordan River and go home. She remembers what she calls the most difficult piece of news that she has ever received: that she would no longer be able to visit Jerusalem and pray with her father at al-Aqsa Mosque after the 1967 war and the occupation of Jerusalem. Forced separation is the essence of displacement, and the distance between here and there marks a painful absence that

needs to be filled. We see Aisha filling the distance with stories and recipes, attempting to make the distance smaller, attempting to bring there, Palestine, closer.

Aisha undertakes extensive efforts to defy the separation and keep her Palestinian culture alive in exile. She employs memory in the revival and protection of her family's sense of identity. We meet a few of Aisha's children, who identify as Palestinian despite being born and raised in Jordan, and who speak extensively of their intimate relationship to a land that they have never seen. They learn about the landscape of Palestine, and the right of return, from the many stories that Aisha tells them while cooking, collecting herbs, or making food with them every day. Indeed, the difference between memory and history is that memory is a site of relocation, which has the capacity to transport you from here to there, despite borders and restrictions.[4] Therefore, Palestinian memory is more than a mere recollection of historical facts or a chronological narration – it is rather a reproduction of Palestine in exile to protect it from erasure.[5]

Aisha's mother taught her everything she knows, and therefore she aims to do the same with her children. When Aisha cooks with her children and grandchildren, she uses the term "hand by hand" to refer to their intergenerational cooperation in preparing the daily food. She seems to be describing how she includes the younger ones in a collaborative reconstruction of Palestine. Even though Aisha claims to focus on teaching the daughters how to cook (because of presumed gender roles), we constantly see the young boys watching, helping out and lending a hand, asking questions, and learning about the sociopolitical circumstances of access to food and land. What might be dismissed as simple chatter about food might better be understood as what Aisha herself calls "oral history" methods employed to preserve Palestinian culture.

Aisha's knowledge of wheat and other plants also reflects a deep and native connection to the land. In the film, she explains how organic wheat should not be artificially irrigated but is rather irrigated by rainwater only. This enables the wheat to absorb its nutrients from the soil and the land, she explains, while non-organic and imported grains gain their nutrients from irrigation water and chemical fertilizer. Her explanation highlights how irrigation and chemicals break the sacred link between the plant/food and the earth, and the resulting loss of taste and nutrition. Aisha is knowledgeable and aware of the wider realm of challenges that threaten the earth and consequently her community's social and cultural well-being. The documentary takes us on a journey into the way Aisha's community experiences the impact of climate change. We visually experience the community's struggles in accessing water, as Aisha narrates her perception of decreasing rainfall and hotter winters through the impact on the crops. Her specific knowledge of both the changes in the rainfall periods and variation in temperatures as determinants of change in the quantity and quality of agricultural production conveys a deep connection to the earth and an awareness of its response to exploitation.

Throughout this film, we come to see the many difficult responsibilities that Aisha has taken upon herself between protecting her Palestinian memory and protecting her

family. Aisha cooks not only to maintain the Palestinian food traditions, but also to provide for her family. Despite the heavy history and harsh reality, Aisha navigates her continuously changing world with strength and love. She brings a family of twelve children and twenty-two grandchildren together over a hot meal, even when she cannot afford all of its ingredients. She teaches her daughter the secrets of nutrition while picking herbs in the olive grove. She bonds with her neighbors and friends over chats about where to buy high quality olive oil. Aisha weaves care as webs of safety for the people and things that matter in her life. She is enmeshed with a caring life partner, a loving family, good friends, and connection to the land, all providing support as she faces social expectations, a difficult market, and a changing ecology. These connections are meant to provide, nourish, preserve, and protect.

Through excruciating circumstances, Aisha is patient. She speaks of waiting to go back to Palestine, *inshallah.* Indeed, Aisha shows us that waiting is more than an undynamic act of nothingness; it is an act of standing strong and being unmoved in the face of challenges. While waiting in exile, these simple acts of acquiring a skill, feeding a family, and caring for a sick partner are acts of survival and resistance.[6] While Aisha waits, she prepares for the return.

Aisha's Story is more than the mere biography of a woman building a life in a waiting zone. It is the story of an entire community that was promised return over seven decades ago and which has been constructing its own vision of return ever since. Aisha, like hundreds of thousands of uprooted Palestinians, has been building her own Palestine in exile. She builds it with all sorts of material – with the stone mill, the *musakhan* recipe, the stories of her family's life near Jerusalem, the medicinal plants, the folklore songs, the quality time with her children, and the gossips with her friends. They are all building blocks of a replica-world of Palestine, meant to preserve the Palestine she knew, so that it does not fade away.

This documentary explores Aisha's emotional and physical worlds. The film's many portraits of the refugee camp evoke the landscape of displacement and attend to the visual contrast between the green home and the grey exile. Aisha speaks of a land full of plants and herbs, yet she inhabits a land of permanently temporary structures. For a refugee, this film will feel a lot like home, for its portraits of both Palestine and exile. For those who have never experienced displacement, this film will be like walking in the shoes of someone who lives it. Even if you only experience for one hour what Palestinians have been living for decades, I hope these scenes will linger beyond the film itself, and that you will remember Aisha as you cook, share family meals, or reach down to pick herbs from the soil.

It is possible to walk away from this documentary with the feeling that you have developed a personal relationship with Aisha the mother, the refugee, the baker, the entrepreneur, the herbalist, and the activist. She may remind you of some amazing woman in your life, or many of them. When I asked the filmmakers about the personal relationship they developed with Aisha throughout this project, they instantly talked about the role of intuition and emotion in mediating this entire interaction (along with the immense role of interpreters, of course). They also applauded Aisha's talents as

a filmmaker: she apparently had a way of always knowing what and how to show things. Before Vibert and Wang could even ask, "What does that look like?," Aisha would be visually representing the concept in question. So when you see her picking the fresh thyme, laying it to dry, and then crushing and milling it, or when you see her eating *zayt* and *za'tar* for breakfast with two of her grandchildren, know that these were scenes suggested by and led by Aisha. Hence the documentary's name: This is not a story *about* Aisha, this is *Aisha's Story*.

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Endnotes

1 *Aisha's Story* has yet to be officially released at the time of writing this review, but the filmmakers granted me the privilege to watch it in its almost-final form. The documentary was produced as part of the dissemination activities of Vibert's SSHRC-funded research project. The larger project looks at community-level initiatives that aim to protect local food systems and resist global and national neo-liberal and extractive pressures and threats in various geographical settings, including Jordan.

2 Jean-Xavier Ridon and Alistair Rolls, "Between Here and There: A Displacement in Memory," *World Literature Today* 71, no. 4 (1997): 717–22, online at doi.org/10.2307/40153293.

3 See Dima Saad, "Materializing Palestinian Memory: Objects of Home and the Everyday Eternities of Exile," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 80 (2019): 57–71.

4 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* no. 26: 7–24 (1989), online at doi.org/10.2307/2928520.

5 Sama Alshaibi, "Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora (Personal Essay and Art)," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 27, no. 2 (2006): 30–53.

6 See Alison Mountz, "Where Asylum-Seekers Wait: Feminist Counter-Topographies of Sites between States," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 18 no. 3 (2011): 381–99, online at doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2011.566370.

Visionary Health Care in the Most Trying of Circumstances

Review by Christopher Burnham

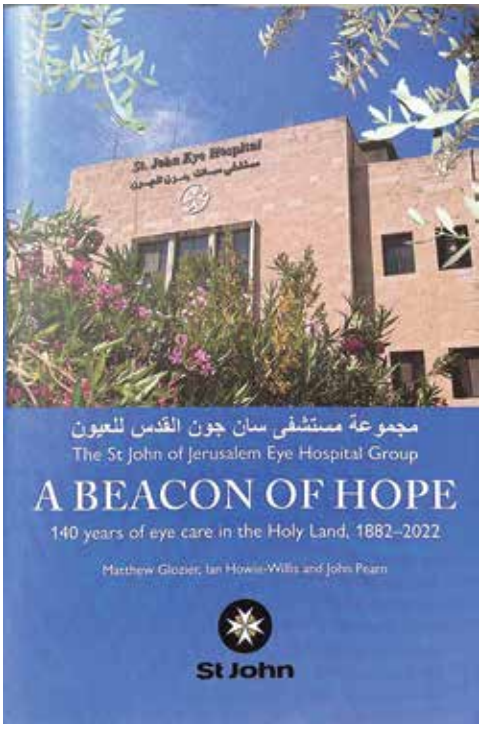
Abstract

Matthew Glozier, Ian Howie-Willis, and John Pearn's book, *A Beacon of Hope: 140 Years of Eye Care in the Holy Land*, provides a fascinating insight into the history of the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital, highlighting the challenges caregivers face operating against a backdrop of political change and ever-shifting restrictions of Israeli occupation that impact patients and staff alike.

Keywords:

Jerusalem; occupied Palestinian territory; ophthalmology; hospitals; health care; Ottoman Palestine; British Mandate; charity; fundraising.

A Beacon of Hope: 140 Years of Eye Care in the Holy Land, by Matthew Glozier, Ian Howie-Willis, and John Pearn (Canberra, London, and Jerusalem: St. John's Ambulance Australia for St. John International and the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group, 2022). 630 pages. £36 paperback.



Published to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital, this exhaustive six-hundred-page study of the hospital's history highlights the many complications of providing health care against a backdrop of political instability and Israeli military occupation, and the enduring resolve of caregivers to treat their patients in the most trying of circumstances. Written by three Australian historians – Matthew Glozier, Ian Howie-Willis, and John Pearn – *A Beacon of Hope: 140 Years of Eye Care in the Holy Land* offers insight into the challenges and practicalities of organizing and delivering high quality health care provision as a charitable organization that continues to offer its services free of charge to the population of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza.

Drawing primarily upon the hospital's annual reports held at the London archives of the Most Venerable Order of St. John, *A Beacon of Hope*

undertakes a chronological exploration of the establishment and development of the order's work as a provider of ophthalmic treatment in the Holy Land, detailing the changing nature of optic ailments and the medical treatments available to correct them, and the importance of its priories around the world in raising funds. Yet the hospital's establishment is not the main point of departure. The first two chapters provide useful context around the significance of blindness in biblical tradition, the development of ophthalmology as a branch of medical science, and the relationship of the modern order with the medieval-era Knights Hospitaller and its Muristan hospital in the Old City of Jerusalem. Indeed, the hospital's links with the Musristan would see two clinics established close to the original site: the first operating between 1949 and 1960 and the second opening in 2016.

All of these factors would crystallize in the vision of British politician Sir Edmund Lechmere, secretary-general of the order and a key figure in the establishment of the hospital in 1882. A frequent traveler to the Holy Land, Lechmere was motivated by the stark necessity for ophthalmic treatment in Palestine given the high rates of severe eye infections among the local population, the need for the Order of St. John to have a charitable mission and a foothold in the area, and national pride considering the presence of hospitals run by other nationalities in Jerusalem (37–39). It is at such moments that the narrow focus of the book would benefit from a wider analysis – in this instance, further consideration of European involvement in Jerusalem and the Holy Land – although such an oversight is understandable given the nature of the text as a commemoration of the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital. Nevertheless, the authors are aware that in order to understand the different challenges the hospital faces, one must be familiar with the changing political landscape of Palestine, which is cogently distilled at the start of each new epoch: Ottoman, British, Jordanian, and Israeli control.

In marrying this context with a detailed examination of the hospital's records, revealing snapshots emerge of everyday life for Jerusalemites over the last 140 years. Given the continued existence of widespread misconceptions about the assumed religious nature of the conflict between Palestine and Israel, it is noteworthy (yet hardly surprising) that in its nascent years the hospital's clientele was a microcosm of late Ottoman Jerusalem. Between July 1888 and December 1889, 62 percent of patients were described as "Arab and Fellaheen," and 34 percent as Jews. The remaining 4 percent of patients were made up of Greeks, Russians, Armenians, and Turks, among others. By 1905, Jewish patients would account for three-quarters of all attendees, partly because the population of Jerusalem had become predominantly Jewish at this time, while the "Arabs and country folk" often had further to travel and fell afoul of the hospital's policy to open the doors at 7:00 am, only to close them once they had reached their capacity for outpatients. These demographics eventually altered with the opening of further hospitals in Jerusalem throughout the 1910s, including a German eye hospital for Jews (74–79). Yet the expansion of health care in Jerusalem was not the only factor that had an impact on the hospital and its patients. It soon becomes clear that external events have often impeded the hospital's work in administering treatment to the sick and needy.

The ability of the hospital and its employees to adapt to changing and challenging circumstances is a core thread of *A Beacon of Hope*, with the practical implications of this shifting context on the provision of health care in Jerusalem adeptly chronicled. Political change would impact not only the treatments available but also where they were administered. These fluctuations meant that the hospital has occupied three principal sites within Jerusalem: south of Jaffa Gate on the Bethlehem Road between 1883 and 1948; within the walls of the Old City between 1948 and 1960 following the Arab-Israeli War and the Nakba; and in Shaykh Jarrah where a new purpose-built hospital was established. Restrictions placed by successive Israeli governments on freedom of movement within the occupied Palestinian territories meant that patients increasingly struggled to access the hospital, leading to the introduction in 1980 of a more decentralized model with mobile outreach clinics operating across the West Bank. The program was extended to Gaza in 2017. Three satellite hospitals were also opened: in Gaza in 1992, in Hebron in the southern West Bank in 2005, and in ʻAnabta in the northern West Bank in 2007, extending the outreach of the hospital still further.

A Beacon of Hope makes clear that at various points in the hospital's history its ability to provide treatment has been under threat for three reasons: as a result of the political environment both domestically and abroad, as a result of funding issues, and due to conflict. All three factors have now coalesced at once. My reading of this book has coincided with Israel's continued assault on Gaza since October 2023, and the subsequent devastation of the region's health infrastructure. For six months, the St. John's Eye Hospital ceased to operate in Gaza, with its staff being displaced to Rafah and Dayr al-Balah alongside the 1.2 million Palestinians currently sheltering there. However, as so often recounted in this book, the hospital has endeavored to find a way to provide health care to those most in need. As of 20 April 2024, three workstations have been set up in the south and middle of the Gaza Strip with the assistance of UK Med, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and the United Nations, providing Gazans with access to vision screening, comprehensive eye examinations, treatment of eye infections, inflammations and chronic diseases, and the suturing and dressing of wounds. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, the main hospital at Shaykh Jarrah and its satellites continue to provide health care, albeit at a reduced capacity, in the face of increased Israeli restrictions that impact staff and patients alike.[1] The clinical excellence, tenacious spirit, and humanitarian ethos of the hospital's work over the past 140 years captured in *A Beacon of Hope* looks set to enable it to continue to help future generations of Palestinians.

Christopher Burnham received his PhD from the European Centre for Palestine Studies at the University of Exeter in 2022. His first book is Sir Ronald Storrs: Personality and Policy in Mandate Palestine, 1917–1926 *(Routledge, 2024).*

Endnotes

1 St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group, "Israel-Gaza Hostilities – Monthly Bulletin," online at www.stjohneyehospital.org/israel-gaza-hostilities-weekly-bulletin/ (accessed 13 May 2024).

Submissions General Guidelines
The *Jerusalem Quarterly (JQ)*

The *Jerusalem Quarterly* accepts author submissions of original contributions about Jerusalem, its social and political history, and its current realities. Occasionally personal memoirs or works of fiction are accepted. Submissions are received throughout the year; specific deadlines for special thematic issues may also be announced.

JQ sends all manuscripts to designated readers for evaluation. Authors may also specifically request that their article be peer-reviewed. Authors should allow four to eight weeks from the date of submission for a final evaluation and publication decision.

Please direct submissions or queries to the *JQ* team: jq@palestine-studies.org

General Guidelines

Material submitted to *JQ* for consideration should adhere to the following:

- **Length**: Articles for peer-reviewing should not exceed 8,000 words; essays should be between 3,500 and 5,000 words; "Letters from Jerusalem," reviews, and submissions for other sections should not exceed 3,000 words. All submissions should include an abstract of a maximum of 200 words; a list of up to 10 keywords; and a brief author's biography of a maximum of 25 words. NOTE: the above word-count limits exclude footnotes, endnotes, abstracts, keywords, and biographies.
- **Spelling**: American English according to Merriam-Webster.
- **Text style**: Refer to *Chicago Manual of Style* (CMOS) for all questions regarding punctuation, capitalization, and font style.
- **Transliteration** of names and words in Arabic, Hebrew, and Turkish should follow the style recommended by the *International Journal for Middle East Studies*, but modified for Arabic transliteration by omitting all diacritical marks except for the ʻayn (open single quotation mark) and hamza (closed single quotation mark). No right-to-left letters are allowed, except for very limited instances of crucial need.
- **Citations** should be in the form of endnotes and written in full (CMOS), as in the original source, with transliteration as needed.

- **Book reviews**: A high-resolution photo of the book cover should be included, as well as a scan of the copyrights page.
- **Visual material**: Any photos, charts, graphs, and other artwork should be of high resolution. For details, please see the section below.

Guidelines for Visual Material

The *Jerusalem Quarterly* encourages the inclusion of visual material, wherever possible, for articles, essays, and for other sections submitted for publication. Visual material can be photographs, scans, charts, diagrams, graphs, maps, artwork, and the like (hereafter called "figures").
When including any figures, please keep in mind the following guidelines:

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- **Captions**: Authors should provide full captions (including, when applicable: source, credits, dates, places, people, explanation of content, etc.).
- **Color Figures**: Thus far, *JQ* has been more inclined to publish photos in black and white mainly because of the subject matter of the articles and essays, but for some time now we have been accepting both options. Since printing in full color is more costly, we sometimes opt to publish in black and white figures submitted in color. If this is not acceptable in the case of a specific figure, we kindly ask authors to notify us in writing.

The Ibrahim Dakkak Award for Outstanding Essay on Jerusalem

The Ibrahim Dakkak Award for Outstanding Essay on Jerusalem is an annual award launched by the *Jerusalem Quarterly* in 2017 to honor the memory and work of Ibrahim Dakkak (1929–2016), Jerusalem engineer, activist, political leader, writer, and former chairman of the Advisory Board of the *Jerusalem Quarterly*.

It is awarded to an outstanding submission (in English or Arabic) that addresses either contemporary or historical issues relating to Jerusalem. A committee selected by the *Jerusalem Quarterly* determines the winning essay. The author will be awarded a prize of U.S. $1,000, and the essay will be published in the *Jerusalem Quarterly*.

Essays submitted or nominated for consideration should be based on original research and must not have been previously published or submitted for publication elsewhere. Essays should be 4,000 to 5,000 words in length (including endnotes), preceded by an abstract of no more than 200 words, and up to 10 keywords.

If the submitted or nominated essay is in Arabic, the abstract and keywords should be in English.

Preference will be given to emerging/early career researchers and students.

Please submit or nominate essays and a short bio (including current or previous affiliation with a recognized university, research institution, or non-governmental organization that conducts research) via email to **jq@palestine-studies.org**, mentioning the Award. In the case of nomination, please provide a contact email address for the nominated author.

Any images should be submitted as separate files with a resolution of 600 dpi minimum, if possible. Submitted images must have copyright clearance from owners, and have captions that are clear and accurate.

The deadline for submissions and nominations is **15 January** of each year.

Cover photo: Umm Maghareb rubbing and winnowing wheat chaff in a field in the Ramallah area of the West Bank, May 2023. Photo by Amanny Ahmad.

Back cover: Shareef Sarhan, *Jerusalem*, acrylic on canvas, 2022. This work was among twenty thousand lost following Israel's destruction of the Gaza City art space Shababeek for Contemporary Art in March 2024.