

A Tale of Two Itineraries: The Production, Consumption and Circulation of Tuscan and Palestinian Olive Oil.

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It struck me as I was sitting down to write this paper, that it was perhaps a rather ambitious title that I had proposed. A little context is in order. I came to do field research on extra virgin olive oil in Palestine through a rather circuitous route. My original field research was in the Middle East, in Yemen, on women's sociability and consumption practices. Casting about for a second project, I began to get interested in the possibilities of taking a commodity as a kind of narrative hook (inspired in part by Sid Mintz' study of sugar). Deciding on olive oil, I began to study the global flow of olive oil to North America as mediated by the global flow of tourists to Tuscany (Meneley 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008).

Although this might seem counterintuitive, I missed working in the Middle East and wanted to go back to there, but my interest in olive oil had not abated, which meant that I could not go back to my previous field site, Yemen, where olives are not grown, nor olive oil consumed. In the course of researching on the web for quite another paper, on olive oil in the monotheistic religious traditions, I came across a great many references to Palestinian olives: the uprooting of Palestinian olive trees, olive branches as symbols of peace, olive picking as a moment of international solidarity, and fair trade olive oil. I was intrigued, as I was looking for another case with which to contrast the stunning success (some would say undeserved hegemony) of Italian oil. My previous research over the last six years with Tuscan and Umbrian olive oil producers and marketers

provides a background for my current research on Palestinian olive oil (apologies for the rather lopsided trajectories!). The Palestinian material is based on my ongoing research: ethnographic interviews with British and Canadian purveyors of Palestinian olive oil, and with Palestinians olive oil professionals (farmers, chemists, agronomists, and marketers) who were remarkably generous with their time and often very funny in spite of the frustrating and sometimes frightening conditions under which they are forced to work. ¹

The production of a commodity cannot be understood separately from the development of markets, circulation and its ultimate consumption, as Marx points out in the *Grundrisse*, a point developed in case studies by Mintz (1985) and Roseberry (1996). I look here at how social imaginaries of places, medico-scientific imaginaries, and imaginaries of ethical consumerism mediate the flow of food commodities.

Distinctions of place are becoming increasingly significant in marketing olive oil. Both Tuscany and the site of my previous research, the Middle East, are places that are prominently imagined, in North America, through a discourse comprised of a complex set of media. While working in, and writing about the Middle East, the political power of such imaginings can never be ignored. Reversing Said's exposition of Orientalism, whereby the Middle East is imagined as a dangerous space, Tuscany is popularly imagined as a desirable space, an imagining with perhaps equal power, although with less alarming implications. Tuscany itself has become commodified through a process referred to by Leitch as "Tuscanopia," "in which Tuscan peasant cuisines, house renovation projects and picturesque rurality, all seem to have become key fantasy spaces of modern urban alienation" (2002:3). The movement of people and oil to and from Tuscany, as I suggested elsewhere (2004), is facilitated by this "reverse Orientalism"

whereby Tuscany is imagined as a beautiful, be-shuttered and terracotta-tiled, sexy-siesta kind of place where the only crises that occur are those of food and drink. This perception of Tuscany appears in gourmet wine and foodie magazines, in films and the myriad memoirs of “buying and renovating a house in Tuscany” a genre of which *Under the Tuscan Sun* is probably the most famous, joining what some have called “house porn” with “food porn”. These memoirs inevitably record a sensual encounter with the local olive oil, as the foreigners dip their bread, their vegetables and finally their fingers in the oil, moaning in culinary delight (Meneley 2005).

Olive oil is a sexy fat these days, a highly unusual status for a fat in these fat phobic days and one could not possibly imagine a sexy encounter with other fats, say margarines: one isn't likely to dip one's finger in trans-fats and moan with pleasure. Olive oil is also widely touted as a healthy fat, described as the linchpin of what has become known as the heart-friendly “Mediterranean Diet” (Meneley 2007). There have been many moments in the global circulation of olive oil, after all, it is one of the most ancient of commodities, but of late it has undoubtedly received a boost from these medico-scientific discourses which every day seem to discover new healing properties; the latest is that extra-virgin olive oil contains properties similar to that of ibuprofen! While the promoting of its healthful qualities has undoubtedly provided a boon for olive oil producers everywhere by expanding the market for olive oil, particularly in North America and Northern Europe, this fact alone does not explain why olive oil from particular places travels in very particular ways.

Both Tuscan and Palestinian producers of extra-virgin olive oil seek to overcome the alienation of the producer from the consumer. Particularly, the Tuscan marketing

from consortium's of single elite estates use genealogical metaphors to embed the "noble lineage" of the producers in the product of "noble oil" [*olio nobile*]; for instance, in the promotion of oil from the Marchesi Antinori, Frescobaldi, and Francesca de Medici the cachet of aristocratic descent is stressed (see Meneley 2004). Often producers noted on their labels that their olives are "hand-picked," stressing their distance from industrial produced oils like Bertolli and Colavita brands, who buy and blend oil from all over the place to produce oil that tastes the same from year to year. Another guarantor of distinctiveness is the establishments of DOP (Denominazione d'Origine Protetta), which is a way of guaranteeing the links between place and distinctive tastes, for instance, the regions of Lucca, Terre di Siena, and Chianti Classico.

It should be noted that such imaginings of Tuscany involve some historical erasures. Most Italians did not consume a nutritionally adequate diet in the 19th and early 20th century, according to food historian Carol Helstosky (2004:1). The current touting olive oil as an essential element of Tuscan *cucina povera*, the cooking of the poor, which is so fashionable these days, erases the history of the *mezzadria* system, where the sharecroppers [*contadini*] lived a life which was hardly enviable. Leitch notes the transformation of *lardo* [pork fat] in Carrara, from the poor man's cheap, high caloric lunch meat, necessary for the hard labour in the marble quarries, has now become an elite food served by restaurateurs and celebrity chefs such as Mario Batali, and championed by the Slow Food movement.²

Nonetheless, the desirability of Tuscany as a popular tourist and cultural destination persists in North Atlantic imaginaries. Contemporary olive oil circulation is crucially linked to highlighting *place* of production, and the circulation of Tuscan olive

oil is not only helped by imaginings of it as a desirable place, but it is also a *legal* place within Italy and within the economically and politically powerful European Union. In addition, Italian olive oil in general has managed to monopolize the world market on olive oil markets (Rosenblum 1997). Even the Spaniards, the world's largest olive oil producer, cannot compete with the Italians for marketing.³ In contrast, Palestine is a kind of non-place, legally, which poses particular problems for circulation of its food commodities. Obviously, a place that is not internationally recognized as a state faces particular problems when trying to export its goods. One can argue that the context of the production of Palestinian olive oil, specifically the properties, both material and symbolic, of such a hotly contested place, deeply affects the trajectories of its circulation, as I argue below. I am particularly concerned here to show how the contemporary marketing of Palestinian olive oil tries to refigure imaginings of Palestine as a dangerous place full of dangerous people; if the Middle East in general is perceived as the opposite of "civilization" in the punditry of the likes of Samuel Huntington, then Palestine is particularly stigmatized as a place of lawless violence in mainstream discourse in Europe and North America. What contemporary marketers of Palestinian olive oil do is highlight the danger that Palestinian olive oil farmers are *subject to* when they try to produce their oil.

A little background is necessary to understand why Palestinian olive oil began to be destined for North American, European, Australian, and Japanese markets in the post-Oslo period (post 1993), given that in prior periods, their external markets were mostly Middle Eastern. Historian Beshara Doumani describes the vibrant trade in olive oil and olive oil soap from emanating from Nablus in 17-19th centuries. One of the largest olive

oil producing areas in Palestine, Nablus at that time was integrated into vibrant trade networks with Jaffa, Beirut and Damascus, in stark contrast to its current isolation. After what Israelis call the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948, Palestinians refer to as al-Nakba [the catastrophe], Palestinians were forced to flee their homes and lands, either for refugee camps or other countries. Earlier, the discovery of petroleum in Kuwait coincided with the expulsion of Palestinians by Israelis: “Kuwait’s discovery of oil coincided with the Palestinian dispersion in 1948-49: labourers, teachers, and civil servants sought jobs in underdeveloped Kuwait and helped to create the bureaucratic underpinnings of the new state” (Lesch 1991a:42-43).

Ghassan Kanafani, a famous Palestinian novelist, writes of the hazards of the desperate journey from Palestine to Kuwait at this time, complete with vivid descriptions of corrupt smugglers who profited from the plight of the Palestinians, and of the imaginings of the Palestinians of Kuwait as a promised land of petroleum derived riches waiting to be earned. Kanafani is only one of the dozens (or more) Palestinian authors who extol the importance of olive trees for Palestinians. One of the characters in *Men in the Sun*, Abu Qais, imagines that Kuwait is full of trees, only to be disabused by Saad, his friend returning from Kuwait with “sacks of money”, that there were no [olive] trees in Kuwait. Abu Qais was yearning for his olive trees confiscated by the Israelis which he described as “Ten trees with twisted trunks that brought down olives and goodness every spring.” (1999:21).

While olive trees were not to be found in Kuwait, as Palestinians followed the jobs made available by the development of crude oil, they brought their olive oil with them. Since Proust, the smell and taste of food have been noted as powerful mnemonic

devices, and in the case of Palestinians exiled from their former villages or homelands, food, particularly the distinctive taste of Palestinian olive oil, remains beloved by expatriate Palestinians in Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, prized as a gift from the homeland (Amal Al-Ras personal communication, Lila Abu-Lughod, personal communication, Ben-Ze'ev 2004, Bornstein 2002: 114, McDonald 2006:139). This practice allows a connection of what one might call “secondary commensality” (cf. Serematakis 1994), maintaining kin ties over space which may be small in terms of distance, but difficult to traverse due to restrictions on travel.

Kuwait’s oil revenue which allowed Palestinians to earn far more than they could elsewhere and the remittances sent back to Palestine had an enormous effect on local olive oil production. The following discussion of the effect of migration to and expulsion from the Gulf on olive oil production in Palestine is based on a series of conversations I had with olive producers, including Abdullah, in Salfit, between Ramallah and Nablus. Palestinian sociologist Salim Tamari had noted that in 1981, “Migration of young men to the Gulf and the Americas ... have led to widespread neglect of the olive crop” (1981:52). But remittances from the Gulf also helped families stay on their land, even if they could not manage to fully work it (1981:54, fn. 17), often changing production practices so that women ended up doing the olive labour previously defined as “male” like picking olives from the top of the trees and ploughing the ground under the trees (1981:51). As Abdullah pointed out, because local prestige continues to be based on landownership, those who had migrated for work still tried to hold onto their land, as “he sold his olive trees” is a dismissive phrase said of a shameful man.⁴ In the early 1980s, organizations like the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Cooperative (PARC) had been set

up to facilitate the revivification of Palestinian agriculture. The focus on reviving agriculture and expanding the amount of land cultivated has much to do with the fact that the Israelis appropriate land that they deem to be neglected. The Palestinian need to demonstrate land as productive and cared for has become increasingly urgent as Israeli confiscation of land has only increased since then, with the illegal settlements in the West Bank, the building of highways exclusively for settler use, and of course, the Apartheid Wall.⁵ Abdullah, with PARC's support had been inspired to start an olive cooperative in Qira (Salfit) in 1986. The reason he did so then was not out of romanticism for a long lost agrarian past, but because he simply had no work. Abdullah collected the olives for landowners absent in the Gulf, pressed them, and gave them half of the oil and sold the rest. Until 1990, this enterprise was economically successful and satisfying for him and his fellow villagers. All that changed with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. With the expulsion of Palestinians from Kuwait, the Palestinians in Salfit not only lost the remittance income which supported the local economy, but also a prominent market niche for their olive oil. According to a news report cited in Schoenfeld "much of the increased crop – perhaps as much as half the olive oil produced – was going unsold. After the first Gulf War, a number of Arab countries stopped importing Palestinian products" (2005:101) because Palestinian leadership sided with Iraq.⁶ In Palestine in 2008, I asked an olive oil professional, high up in one of Palestine's largest agricultural NGOs, PARC (Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee), if they sold any olive oil to Kuwait any more. He said that while they had customers in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, that they had no Kuwaiti customers, and did not want to have them. He said that because the Kuwaitis had punished the Palestinian people so harshly for the

decisions of their leaders, they did not even try to sell their olive oil there. He said, with some anger “Who built Kuwait? Who taught in its schools and universities? It was the Palestinians, and then they treated us like that!”

Much Palestinian olive oil used to be sold in Jordan (and paid for in Jordanian dinars), but Jordan has since closed its borders to Palestinian oil in order to develop its own olive oil industry. Interest in the olive oil industry revived as the wage labour opportunities in Israel declined as a result of the second intifada, and the virtual lockdowns of olive producing regions like Nablus and Jenin, resulted in a kind of “re-ruralization” of Palestine, as there were so few means of gaining income. Olive oil is relatively durable, unlike other agricultural products like the tomatoes and strawberries from Gaza, which cannot survive even short delays never mind long closures. Palestinian farmers had to look abroad for markets. Since this time, a number of organizations like UNICEF, Zatoun Canada, Zatoun UK, AFSC, to name only a few, have started to market fair trade Palestinian olive oil. While accessing these external markets entails difficulties as I note below, Palestinians view them as far preferable to selling their oil very cheaply to Israelis, who then package it as “Product of Israel”⁷ erasing not only the origin of Palestinian commodities and the Palestinian labour that produced it, but also Palestine as a place.

International Discourses of Distinction

Yet the European and North American markets also required an attention to a different kind of marker of distinction: extra-virginity. The tastes of consumers abroad

shifted production practices in Palestine, because they literally could not sell oil that was not legally classified as extra-virgin, even for the sake of solidarity. The fair trade extra-virgin Palestinian olive oil hardly resembles the thick, dark green, high acidity oil that evokes nostalgia in expat Palestinians or left-wing Israelis who view it as a culinary declaration of one's political stance (Alejandro Paz, personal communication).

When I told a Palestinian anthropologist that I wanted to study Palestinian extra-virgin olive oil, she laughed, and said that she had become accustomed to the concept of extra-virgin olive oil through her travels in Italy and southern France, but it was not an “experience near” concept for Palestinians, who refer to their oil merely as olive oil [*zayt az-zatoun*]. Whenever I give papers about this, I'm always asked “what's with that extra-virgin thing?” as the term itself, modelled “virginity” in humans, departs from this shared metaphorical space because as one Italian olive oil producer said to me “A woman is either a virgin or she is not!” Extra-virgin may evoke an ultra pure super-virgin in the imaginaries of many, but it is also a legal and bureaucratic term now. The determination of a single qualisign, “extra virgin,” has technical, scientific, and aesthetic aspects. (Following much work in semiotic anthropology, including my own (Meneley 2008), I am using the Peircean term “qualisign” to refer to the potentially meaningful (-sign) qualities (quali-) of objects.) It is a designation that is established by two tests: one chemical and one organoleptic. The chemical test determines the level of acidity in the oil; to be graded as “extra-virgin”, the oil must have less than 0.8% acidity. But as chemically treated olive oil can have a low acidity rate, the determination of “extra-virgin” also needs an organoleptic stamp of approval. A professional taster must grade it as “free of defects” as well as testifying to its positive taste qualities. Palestinian olive oil

traditionally had a much higher acidity level; although international hegemonic standards of taste prefer low acidity oil, there are several olive producing cultures that prefer higher acidity oils, like most Palestinians prefer oil with 2.5 - 4% acidity (Rosenblum 1996:64).

The term “extra-virgin” is irritating to many: to the farmers and to the fair trade dealers abroad who cannot sell their virgin olive oil. In an interview with a Canadian purveyor of Palestinian olive oil, I asked about the designation “extra-virgin”; he noted how frustrating it was that they could not sell virgin oil even though, according to the tastes of many, it is perfectly good oil, merely with a higher acidity level. He acknowledged that even though Canadian consumers were buying out of solidarity, they still wanted extra-virgin oil. So the designation of “extra-virgin” has in some sense taken on a life of its own, despite the fact that few consumers are even clear about how extra-virginity is even determined.

Foreign Interventions

The need to export olive oil to North Atlantic and Japanese external markets where consumers’ tastes are educated to appreciate this kind of extra-virgin olive oil has dramatically changed production practices in Palestine, often with the intervention of foreign experts, both French and Italian.⁸ Tuscan and Puglian olive oil experts flow into Palestine, advising Palestinian farmers how to transform their olive oil production in order to produce oil that will sell in foreign markets. I asked one NGO agronomist if these experts were volunteering their time, and he said, “No, we pay them, with grants that we get from the EU.”

In many respects, NGOs like PARC have a longer historical depth, institutional stability and much more international “trust” and funding than does the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture. One agronomist told me that their budget far exceeds that of the Ministry (he made a joke that he could get me an interview in a minute with the Minister of Agriculture because he had nothing to do!). Hammami (2006) notes that NGOs can receive foreign funds without the involvement of the Palestinian Authority or even informing them. No Palestinian olive oil sold abroad that I am aware of actually comes from the Ministry of Agriculture; it is all from NGOs or large landholders.

Weizman writes of how in the post Oslo period, the Palestinian assumption of some measure of political authority meant that the Palestinian economy and its labour force have been entirely subject to Israeli “security concerns” (2007: 156).⁹ Therefore, he argues, the international community, by reframing the situation of Palestinians as a “humanitarian crisis” both relieved Israel of the responsibility of managing the collapse or strangulation of the Palestinian economy generated by the military restrictions on movement over land and off loaded it to the international community. This is evident in the everyday life of the Palestinian olive oil producer. The US funds one olive oil mill; the EU another, but everyone knows that both of these political actors, officially, back Israel and its policies. I spoke with Hamid, who is driving force behind the renewed Salfit olive cooperative of 45 farmers, whose goal is to improve all aspects of the olive production modes in order to be able to consistently produce extra-virgin oil for the foreign market. This required a change in production practices: the Palestinians tend to store olives in plastic bags and sacks, and not mill them for 2-4 days, which means they heat up and the acidity level of the oil goes up, meaning that it can’t be classified as

extra-virgin. Hamid noted, ironically, that this project of “improvement of the lot of Palestinian olive farmers” had been funded by the US Department of Agriculture, who were buying slatted boxes for storing olives, stainless steel tanks for storing the olive oil (olive oil is very sensitive to heat, light and odour and if it is not properly stored, it spoils very quickly); organizing seminars on how and when to harvest in order to insure the highest possible quality oil; and training experts to be able to fix the olive mills. As we walked to the mill, he noted a highway that the Israelis had bombed with bombs given to them by the US, laughing about the irony of the US then rebuilding the road that they had helped to destroy. This conversation was just one of many where Palestinian olive oil professionals showed a great deal of discursive consciousness about who is paying for and who is facilitating their continued oppression.

All of these production strategies [aside from the bombing and rebuilding of the highway] were familiar to me from my fieldwork on Italian olive oil, but when Hamid told me that he promoted having all the farmers press their olives together each day instead of pressing only their own every four days, I had to ask if that were not problematic, since every single olive oil producer I have ever spoken with has always asserted two things: 1) that their olive oil was the best in the world and 2) that their oil could be tainted by exposure to other people’s “bad olives”. Hamid laughed in recognition, saying that it was the hardest thing that was to overcome each one’s idea that his own land, trees, and olives are the best. He quoted a proverb “The monkey in the eye of his mother is a gazelle” to express this sentiment. I asked another question, this time about *miraath*, inheritance, which in Islamic law divides the land (or olive trees) into fractions, with brothers receiving an equal share and sisters half of that share, a practice

which often either fragments the land or requires some kind of communal decision making process. He then rolled his eyes and said that that often posed difficult problems because, citing another proverb “the fingers are not the same” meaning that the children in the same family might have quite different opinions about whether to join the collective or not. He said his first and hardest achievement was to convince farmers to press their olives collectively in order to produce extra-virgin olive oil acceptable for the export market.

In order to certify an oil as extra-virgin, one needs an organoleptic taste test – done by official tasters. Until a few years ago, this technique of “boutique agriculture” was virtually unknown in Palestine. In 2005, a prestigious French professional olive oil taster, Jean Marie Baldessari gave Qira (Salfit) coop’s olive oil a very high grade on the organoleptic test, which is based on color, aroma, and taste. This test is heavily steeped in discourses of distinction, modelled on wine tasting (see Silverstein 2007). This positive review about the aesthetic quality of the Qira olive oil was instrumental in the collective’s distribution center in Ramallah, Az-Zaytoona, getting a lucrative Swiss grant. Part of this grant was used to hold a training session in 2006 for a group of 15 olive oil cooperative representatives from across Palestine, said French olive oil expert presiding, in order to teach them how to taste and grade extra-virgin olive oil according to internationally recognized organoleptic standards. In an interview in 2008, with one of the men who had received a certificate to be an official olive oil taster, I asked how the Israeli control had affected what was supposed to be a Palestine-wide olive oil tasting board. He said that they had ended up having three tasting boards, one for the north, around Jenin, one for the central area, around Ramallah, and one for the south, the

Bethlehem, Bayt Jala region, because of the difficulties of travel imposed by Israeli military restrictions.

Projected plans include trying to establish a DOP in the Qira region. This I found fascinating in a number of ways: it is primarily a European strategy for a “branding” of a particular region of land, varietal (type of grape or olive, for instance) and production process. French champagne is probably the most famous example; other sparkling wines are produced elsewhere, but they cannot legally label them as “champagne”. In the case of Palestinian olive oil, the DOP suggestion is an ingenious idea to employ European discourses of distinction to, in effect, stake a claim to land. Despite the fact that it is *already* their land, Palestinians have seen so much of their land disappear, of late, behind the Separation Wall, which is widely acknowledged to be a blatant land grab, or to Israeli settlements, ever expanding into to the West Bank. This goal, understandably, has yet to be realized. But signs of external recognition like this one, are incredibly important for Palestinian olive oil producers. One representative of PARC could hardly contain his delight when telling me that one of their organic olive oils had won the prestigious Puglian BIOL prize for organic oils.

Fair Trade

The marketing of Palestinian olive oil not only highlights the standard qualisigns of distinction like extra-virginity, but also the troubled and troubling conditions of production which are specific to Palestine. Analytically, it is misleading to shove Palestine into the “Global South” discourse which permeates fair trade discourse, nor is one that the Palestinians seem to want to enter into, as they highlight the specificity of

their own particular situation.¹⁰ I am reminded of the old Soviet joke “The only thing worse than be exploited by capitalism is not being exploited by capitalism”. Olive oil producers in Palestine are increasingly looking to gain fair trade certification, not stopping at emphasizing their own pain and suffering, but also their efforts to guarantee that Palestinian farmers will receive a fair price for their olive oil. Fridell (2007) notes that the claims of the fair trade movement, namely that the idea of “ethical consumerism” challenges the commodification of goods and the capitalist imperatives of competition and profit maximization. I heard little expressed interests in overcoming capitalism from Palestinian farmers, but rather the desire to participate in it as a means of supporting their families. A grade of extra-virgin also ensures that an oil can be sold at a higher price, which has an important pragmatic effect for Palestinian farmers with few wage labour opportunities after the Separation Wall.

What I will note here is only the most obvious and immediate consequences of the transformation of the Palestinian olive oil industry and its marketing strategy, a flattening out of regional distinctions (Bayt Jala versus Nablusi olive oil, for instance) in favour of “Palestinian” olive oil and a concomitant genericizing of the “Palestinian farmer”; an erasure of class distinctions (not all Palestinian olive oil farmers are equal in terms of land and trees); and an erasure of the political conflicts among Palestinian olive oil producers about the role of the NGOs and the complaints about the ineffectual Palestinian Authority with respect to having a national plan to revive the Palestinian olive oil industry.¹¹ A grade of extra-virgin also ensures that an oil can be sold at a higher price, which has an important pragmatic effect for Palestinian farmers with few wage labour opportunities after the Separation Wall.

Blood, Sweat and Tears

In an interview with me in 2006, a Palestinian olive oil producer, holding aloft a bottle of Holy Land Olive Oil, said, “This is very expensive oil. Expensive because a farmer risked being shot by a settler to pick his olives. Expensive because the farmer may have been kept from his land by the Separation Wall. Expensive because of what we had to go through to export it.” In promoting Palestinian olive oil, marketers¹² highlight how the labour of olive picking is made even more difficult by the continuing Israeli occupation of the West Bank. The circulation of Palestinian olive oil depends tracing the oil back to the conditions of production: the metaphoric congealing of emotion in Palestinian olive oil. The fear and uncertainty, the suffering and hope, of the Palestinian farmer are stressed in hopes of evoking another embodied emotional state – empathy -- in the consumer. As Bornstein (2007) notes for ISM volunteers, there is an attempt to reshape and reorient the emotions of activists/consumers to engender feelings of anger and empathy for the harsh conditions that the Palestinians endure. Palestinian olive oil producers emphasize that the high price of their oil is not only its higher expense because of the difficulties of transport, but also because of the difficulties, emotionally and physically, of production. These experiences are highlighted to consumers, who show their solidarity and sympathy by purchasing Palestinian olive oil.

“Blood, sweat and tears” are concretized metonyms of these harsh conditions of production. The particular circumstances of the production of Palestinian olive oil are first conveyed to the consumer by the text on the label, for they cannot be tasted in the oil

itself.¹³ The packaging on Holy Land Olive Oil¹⁴ features a quote from the famous and recently deceased and much lamented Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, saying “If the Olive trees knew the hands that had planted them, their oil would have become tears”. The label tells us that this oil “highlights the Palestinian deeply held emotional connection to olive trees and the land.” This statement indexes the fact that while the olive tree itself has been widely touted as a symbol of peace, as Rosenblum (1997) notes, in the context of Palestine-Israel, it could be said to be as much a symbol of enduring conflict, as the Israeli uprooting of Palestinian olive trees and Palestinian campaigns to replant olive trees are highly visible and evocative symbols of attempts to insure dispossession or to assert possession. On Holy Land Olive Oil’s label, the trees from which the oil is produced are said to give “this oil a unique link to the ancient Mediterranean and its history.” The label notes that the oil is extra-virgin, cold pressed, that the olives are not treated with chemicals or pesticides, and that they were hand picked by Palestinians. The label notes that the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee, a long standing NGO which also markets the oil on behalf of the Palestinian farmer, is working toward achieving organic certification. After noting that the product is fair trade, the label ends by asserting that the oil contains “no genetically modified products.” The particular suffering of Palestinian labourers which is congealed in the oil is highlighted on the label along with other, international qualisigns of distinction like “extra-virgin,” “organic” and *not* “genetically modified.” The bottle and the label are not merely functional, but deliberately styled to be both elegant and educational, for the connoisseur who is both health conscious and endowed with a social conscience. It displays an attempt to link an “affect of solidarity” with aesthetic “discourses of

distinction.” Palestinian blood, sweat and tears are welded to more typical qualisigns of historical and regional distinction like “Mediterranean” and to fashionable “artisanal” modes of harvesting, like hand-picking organically grown olives.

So much the consumer can glean from reading labels and promotional material, but the journey of the olive backwards from the consumer toward the producer is a long and convoluted one. Palestinian olive oil circulates in the interstices of gift and commodity exchange. It *is* a commodity, but its circulation crucially depends on revealing the embodied conditions of its production to consumers abroad. The construction of the Separation Wall has meant that much Palestinian agricultural land has been enclosed on the Israeli side of the Wall, often separating Palestinian farmers from their land.¹⁵ Attention is also drawn to the danger farmers must face if their land is close to hostile Israeli settlers¹⁶ who have illegally confiscated Palestinian land; they often shoot at or set their dogs on Palestinian farmers as they try to harvest their olives, making what is already hard labour fraught with danger. Palestinian friends have told me that in the past the olive harvest was a time of both communal hard work and celebration, with extended families bringing food and drums to their olive fields, sometimes sleeping there until the harvest was done. Now it is a time of tension and fear; gone is the “communitas” of harvest as olives are picked as swiftly as possible. Those Palestinians who have land that is close to a settlement, an Israeli army outpost, a bypass road,¹⁷ or any other space or structure that the army or the settlers deem to require a “security zone” will only be allowed partial and unpredictable access to their own olive groves. Often permission to access the land is only granted to the immediate family, who cannot provide enough labour to pick the olives in a timely fashion.¹⁸ Of late, groups of

international volunteers have come to Palestine to help pick the olives of those farmers so endangered, and convey the conditions of the Palestinian olive farmer to those at home. Several of these volunteers, myself included, have become involved in some way in promoting or circulating Palestinian olive oil.¹⁹ Israeli academic David Shulman's moving memoir talks of his time olive picking with the Israeli peace group Tay`yush (2007:177-182); Rabbis for Human Rights also organize olive picking parties to prevent (or try to) settlers from forcing Palestinian farmers from their olive groves at gunpoint.

All olive oil producers need to find markets for their oil in a timely fashion; although olive oil is more durable than fruits or vegetables, it should be consumed within a year or two of its production. It is also very sensitive to heat, light, and air; if exposed to these elements, its quality decreases rapidly. The Israeli occupation makes for considerable difficulties of circulation of Palestinian olive oil: Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to a complicated system of permits and checkpoints that restrict the movement of olive oil as well as Palestinian bodies. Therefore, exporting olive oil out of the West Bank requires a complex mobilization of networks of people, both costly and time consuming. Circulation is therefore unpredictable, especially because the Palestinians control neither airport nor seaport, nor in any meaningful sense, their own highways which aside from the huge and unsightly permanent checkpoints (called "terminals") are also punctuated by the oxymoronic "flying checkpoints" which can appear anywhere on Palestinian highways, causing unforeseen delays. The oil must go through an Israeli port (usually Haifa or Ashdod) to reach North American and European consumers and it is therefore subject to the vagaries of Israeli permission to export. All of this infrastructure of control produces what Raymond Williams (1977) has called a

“structure of feeling” that permeates life in contemporary Palestine: one of uncertainty and unpredictability. One is never certain that one will be able to get to work, to school, or to the hospital, never mind get one’s olive oil to an Israeli port, and onto consumers abroad. One Palestinian olive oil marketer told me that since the Israelis increased their stranglehold on the West Bank, he never makes business appointments since he is never certain he will be able to keep them. As Amahl Bishara (2008: 522-523 fn 17) notes for Palestinians more generally, the cellphone has become the crucial element of technology by which olive oil professionals manage the military and bureaucratic obstacles which often hinder the arrangement of business meetings and the transfer of their oil to the port in a timely fashion. While the enormity of these “infrastructural”²⁰ obstacles struck me as impossibly frustrating, Lori Allen (2008) has recently noted that the violence of the occupation and the restrictions, alternately frightening and boring, become to seem ‘*adi*’ or “normal” for contemporary Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

As Palestinian blood, sweat and tears are conveyed to the consumer, the discourse of distinction which defines a taste for extra-virgin oil flows from the consumer to the producer. But the production of the extra-virgin olive oil that consumers’ abroad demand is very sensitive to time,²¹ and time is seemingly one of the elements of existence that the Israeli infrastructure of control serves to “steal” as Julie Peteet (2008) has recently noted. Ironically, the consumer’s desire to consume high quality extra-virgin olive oil while expressing solidarity for the oppressed farmer makes it easier for Israel to exert the “spoiler” role – taking value from the commodity – by delaying its circulation. (Olive oil left in the port in the sun will rapidly deteriorate to the point where it cannot be graded as extra-virgin anymore.)

Extra-Virgin Peace

“Hell is realizing that one did not help when one could have” James Mawsley *The Heart Must Break*

The above epigram cited at the beginning of David Shulman’s moving memoir of his peace activism was never quoted to me by those involved in importing and selling Palestinian olive oil, but it does seem to capture my sense of their ethos. I volunteer with Zatoun Canada, which is a nonprofit organization which sells fair trade olive oil in the US and Canada. There are dozens of small organizations like Zatoun: some associated with the Presbyterian or Anglican churches, Jewish peace groups and the Quakers, who all support dialogue rather than hostility.²² Olive oil’s association with peace in all three of the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) make it an apposite commodity for those who oppose the conflict which makes the production and circulation of Palestinian olive oil so difficult. Central to their activism, quiet though it is, is the consumption of Palestinian olive oil in interfaith contexts and their sale of it in church basements, community centers, local fairs and university events.

Perhaps the most prominent contemporary spokesperson for the ability of food to effect political change is the Italian founder and charismatic spokesperson for the Slow Food movement, Carlo Petrini who says:

I am convinced that food can be a form of peaceful diplomacy, saving these traditions also means to some extent opposing war.

Carlo Petrini
Slow Talk

2 August 2006

Petrini wrote these words on 2 August 2006 as the world watched the latest Israeli incursion into south Lebanon, which harmed so many more people than those they were allegedly after. Petrini speaks movingly of the small farmers, fishermen, artisans, and cooks, some 40 in all, who were supposed to attend the Slow Food Terre Madre festival in Turin that fall, from Lebanon, Palestine, and Israel. Petrini laments the fact that the small producers of unique food products are the first to suffer despite bearing no responsibility for the conflict. He makes the claim that “the simple food communities stand for peace”.²³ Although I have previously been somewhat critical of Petrini’s slow food movement, I appreciated his willingness to speak out as his criticism reached a far wider audience than an anthropologist’s ever could. Beyond rescuing and preserving food, an important element of Petrini’s Slow Food Manifesto, is the importance of convivial eating to facilitate what he calls “peaceful diplomacy.” Claudie Roden, perhaps the most famous author of Middle Eastern cookbooks, shares Petrini’s view on the peaceful power of commensality. “People relax over food and instantly create a bond together, which is why eating with one another is an important way of healing rivalries between cultures and communities.”²⁴

In the realm of Palestinian fair trade extra-virgin olive oil, discourses of connoisseurship have been welded to discourses of peace and solidarity. One pamphlet that accompanies bottles of fair trade Palestinian extra-virgin oil encourages people to hold olive oil tastings, as is evident in the following quote from the founder of the non profit olive oil marketer, Zatoun:

“We actually encourage people to meet and talk about Palestine over the olive oil and so to have a meeting in a house and do it as a tasting. You know, everybody

brings the best olive oil they know of that they can bring, and they break some bread and they taste... So the olive oil is not about, you know, crying about Palestine and what has befallen it but it's about educating ourselves and the olive oil is a means to doing that, it brings people together. So the tasting is for people to begin to just recognize and taste, and in that social activity, they begin to connect.”

Olive oil tastings have been modelled on wine tastings, and by including Palestinian olive oil in this elite register, a distinctive oil worth tasting like other distinctive oils, it is framed in an accessible way. Like the American museum and gallery displays of non-controversial “Muslim art” which as Jessica Winegar describes have sprung up as a way of proving the “humanity” of Muslims in the wake of September 11th, the gustatory appreciation of Palestinian olive oil provides a kind of “aesthetic bridge” for sympathy with the plight of the Palestinian people. The element of commensality – of consuming together – and the shared aesthetic appreciation, allows a moment for political engagement, a sentiment most forcefully expressed these days in the Slow Food philosophy.²⁵ It allows a space in which to open a discussion about the practical goals of the distribution of fair trade extra-virgin olive oil: to provide livelihood for destitute Palestinian farmers, who, especially after the separation wall, have few other income generating possibilities. This pragmatic aspect appeals to those who import the oil and to their customers. In the words of one olive oil purveyor, a Canadian born in Jerusalem of Greek Orthodox faith:

We're speaking to ourselves when we talk about peace and a roadmap and this and that but then ignore peoples' livelihoods. Peace is not possible when you rob people of their hopes and their livelihood. So every bottle of olive oil that's purchased and paid for is money that makes a family's livelihood possible and that, to me, promotes peace very clearly... I wanted the olive oil to speak for itself because this is honest, you know. I think the gifts of nature all have a healing property, ... and they work on different aspects of our physical body. But I think olive oil, of all of them, is a social healing, not just a body/physical healing, it's a social healing.

The purchase of fair trade Palestinian olive oil has been a way for consumers abroad to show solidarity with the Palestinian *farmer* (not the Palestinian Authority) and support Palestine's struggling economy. This practical aspect came up in interviews with consumers as well, who said it made all the difference to them to have something *practical* to do to help contribute to everyday subsistence, feeling as attracted to this form of political action as they were disgusted by or alienated from the kind of political discourse which centers on violence or the threat of violence presented in the mainstream media.

Discourses of "love and peace" often appear in the promotional material of international peace/solidarity associations which market Palestinian olive oil. Another aspect of circulation of Palestinian olive oil is that its commodity status is underplayed while the discourse of the gift is foregrounded. Palestinian olive oil circulates in the interstices of gift and commodity exchange. It *is* a commodity, but its circulation crucially depends on revealing the embodied conditions of its production to consumers abroad, attempting to overcome the erasure of the connection between producer and consumer. As a Canadian olive oil seller notes:

There's an enormous amount of gift giving so people will buy a case of twelve [bottles of olive oil], they'll keep two and they'll give ten away. So it's just this kind of giving away, it's this gifting going on ... it just keeps coming back. So olive oil, there's also a spiritual quality about it...The olive oil's role is to open our hearts to the possibility of love. So it doesn't guarantee love, it just opens the heart to the possibility. And what I've noticed in the two years that I've been working with it and promoting it and as someone who can keep on talking about it, it's just the openness, it's just ... I don't have to try to sell it.

Olive oil circulates in North American circles through a peculiar combination of the promotion of peace as a vague goal and the promotion of it as a practical means of contributing to the everyday subsistence of the Palestinian farmer who must cultivate olives in a place where the normal agricultural rhythms are disrupted by what I've called elsewhere (2008) "occupation time". In some ways, I think that the nonspecificity of what exactly is meant by "peace" or "love" is crucial to creating a non threatening, but political discourse.

However, I was curious that none of the several Palestinian olive oil professionals I have spoken with has ever mentioned "peace" as a goal that might be achieved by the export of olive oil. When I was back in Palestine in November 2008, I asked one Palestinian olive oil professional point blank if he thought that the sale of Palestinian olive oil would lead to peace. He laughed in surprise and said that he did not think anything but wider scale political changes would make any difference to the overall plight of the Palestinians. He said their more modest goal was to help Palestinian farmers make ends meet. However, a Palestinian ethnohistorian to whom I posed the same question said that she approved entirely of the peace agenda of the Palestinian olive oil purveyors, because at least they are helping to communicate that Palestinians are just ordinary people trying to make a living and support their families. She said, "No one is born with a stone or a gun in their hands," noting the unfairness of the stereotype that Palestinians are "naturally" or inherently inclined to violence. She was suggesting that politically motivated emotions of sympathy and solidarity might well disrupt occupation logics, or at least lead to an "opening of the heart" to the quotidian stories of ordinary

Palestinians under a brutal and demeaning occupation, which so often seem to fall on deaf ears.

One of the first modern consumption movements was related to the abolition movement: consumers were urged to give up sugar so as not to continue the exploitation of the slaves. The slavery abolitionists talked about the “blood” in sugar which the consumers ought to boycott, to undercut the economic viability of continuing to cause pain to the slaves (Mintz 1997). In contrast, the purveyors of Palestinian olive oil highlight the pain and blood of the Palestinian farmers that is embedded in the oil, but recommend consuming it. Perhaps the difference is that for now, at least, the production of olive oil is for Palestinian farmers not only a site of personal dignity and meaningful work, allowing the generation of income to contribute to the support of their families, but also a way of staying on their land and of resisting the ever encroaching Israeli encompassment.

The commodity-like attributes of the oil like “extra-virgin” and “organic” place it in a discourse of distinction along with other high quality olive oils from all over the Mediterranean. The gift-like qualities of Palestinian olive oil, the way in which it embodies the suffering of the Palestinian people, separate it from the commodity sphere, setting up a different sphere of exchange which is palpably more “gift-like” in its attempt to overcome the anonymity and amoral aspects of contemporary commodity exchange. This attempt to relink the commodity to the moral (or immoral) conditions of production, characterized by pain and suffering, is piggybacked on the crucial dimension of consumer aesthetic appreciation of the oil and the derivation of pleasure from it. In this sense, olive oil becomes a kind of “aesthetic bridge” for a quotidian (and nonthreatening) political

engagement. What it means to consume the pain and suffering of others in a delicious bottle of olive oil deserves a paper in itself, but that is for another time.

Postscript

All eyes are now on Gaza, although Gazans are recipients of olive oil, in the form of food aid, rather than producers of it.²⁶ The recent “event” -- if one can call the bombardment of some of the poorest and most dispossessed people on the planet by the world’s 4th largest army an “event” – has overshadowed everything, even the considerable efforts of the incredibly hard working Palestinian olive oil producers and the tireless olive oil purveyors in North America, often associated with Greek Orthodox, Presbyterian, Anglican, or Jewish faith based groups committed to nonviolent, but outspoken opposition to what historian Beshara Doumani (2004:10) calls the “slow and cruelly systematic asphyxiation of an entire social formation” by Israel’s military occupation. I am reluctant to dismiss their efforts as futile, because they so clearly are attempting to create what David Harvey (2000) might call a “space of hope”. It is the networks along which fair trade Palestinian olive oil flows that were also used to mobilize the protests against the devastation of Gaza and its people. One of the managers of Zatoun was one of the seven Jewish women who managed to have a protest sitdown in the Israeli consulate during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza; another American purveyor of Palestinian olive oil through his Presbyterian church group raised \$5000 for planting olive trees. Yet another Washington based nonprofit solidarity group is donating 20% of their sales of olive oil to relief in Gaza. Still, I cannot help but wonder how many bottles

of Palestinian olive oil would have to be sold to offset the \$3 billion dollars in military aid that the US gives annually to Israel, facilitating both the occupation in the West Bank and the astoundingly brutal incursion into Gaza.

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² See Leitch (2003) for a fascinating discussion of how the recognition of the Slow Food movement brought attention to the fact that artisanal ways of production (which Slow Food claims to champion) were not up to EU hygiene requirements. See also Cavanagh (2005) for a discussion of the transformation of *lardo* in Bergamo from a peasant food to a regional delicacy.

³ See Mueller's (2007) account of corruption and falsification in the Italian olive oil industry, which discusses how not all of the oil sold as "Italian" really is of Italian origin.

⁴ Annelies Moors makes the same argument for Jabal Nablus: "Both in a symbolic and material sense agricultural land is still valuable. It is true that landownership itself no longer conveys social status, but it has remained central in the identity and sense of belonging of the rural population, crucial for their dignity and self-respect as expressed by the saying 'the one who has no land has no honour.' Also to those working abroad land ownership is still a symbolic tie to the village. Few migrants sold their land in order to be able to migrate; it was rather their income from migration labour which made it possible for them to hold on to their land." (1996:47)

⁵ See Cohen's Politics of Planting (1993) for a detailed account of Israeli-Palestinian competition for land up until the early 1990s.

⁶ See Rashid Khalidi for an account of the "disastrous blunder" of the PLO leadership in aligning themselves with Saddam Hussein, with respect to the long term consequences for ordinary Palestinians in Palestine and the once wealthy and well established Palestinian community in Kuwait (2006: 146-147).

⁷ One Israeli, the head of a fair trade cooperative, hotly denied this charge, although several other Israelis with whom I spoke confirmed it. Avi Levi, head of Green Action, a fair trade Israeli organization which tries to help the dire state of the Palestinian economy, notes that Israeli firms bought the oil very cheaply and sold it as a profit (cited in Shupac 2008).

⁸ I address this complex topic elsewhere (Meneley 2008).

⁹ Edward Said and Raja Shehadeh, among others, noted the disastrous aspect of the Oslo accords for the Palestinian people; both of them strongly disagreed with what Arafat gave up for a modicum of political recognition.

¹⁰ "Palestine as the Global South" discourse unfortunately conforms to Israeli assertions of Palestine as inherently backward.

¹¹ These bitter complaints reflected the fact that Palestinian olive oil producers do not just sit back and "blame Israel" but critique their own leaders as well. As an outsider, I have to agree with Weizman that the current Israeli restrictions on the West Bank prevent any viable economic enterprise, the olive oil industry included.

¹² These nonprofit marketers, both Palestinian and international, are not usually professional importers, but volunteers who want to try to help the Palestinian farmers. Those that I know personally have other jobs or are retired. They tend to be faith based groups who promote interfaith dialogue; the Presbyterians, the Anglicans, the Quakers in the US; a moderate Greek Orthodox church group in Canada; and various Jewish groups in the UK, US, and Canada.

¹³ Some olive oil purveyors, like Zatoun (Canada) include a brochure which outlines in point form some of the effects of the Israeli occupation on Palestinian agricultural production.

¹⁴ I'm referring to the Holy Land Olive Oil produced by Al-Zaytoona, the marketing company for olive oil cooperatives in the Ramallah-Salfit area. The name "Holy Land Olive Oil" is used by several North American olive oil importers and Israeli marketers as well.

¹⁵ Anthropologist Jeff Halper notes that the Wall "...will de facto annex 10% of the West Bank, including some of the richest agricultural and olive-growing land" (2005:12).

¹⁶ These Israelis are also known by the less misleadingly benign term "colonists."

¹⁷ These are roads constructed for the exclusive use of illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank. Palestinians are forbidden to use them.

¹⁸ David Shulman describes the process of annexing the Palestinian agricultural lands allowing passage to the farmers only through small gates as follows: "In theory, the army intends to open the gates for these farmers to enter the no-man's-land so they can work their fields – at 10 shekels per entry, 5 shekels for a donkey. But it seems the gate will be open only for half an hour in the early morning, and half an hour again in the late afternoon. Farmers need the possibility of constant access to their fields, and the sense is that these Palestinian peasants will very rapidly be alienated from their fields" (2007:147).

¹⁹ Aside from giving talks to student groups, I have acted as an informal courier delivering cases of olive oil and olive oil soap to university fairs or to interested colleagues. All of the labour for the nonprofit organization Zatoun is volunteer; I've stuffed envelopes with informative brochures about the Palestinian situation and packed olive oil and olive soap alongside volunteers of every religious stripe.

²⁰ I use "infrastructure" in quotes to draw attention to the fact that it is backed by military force: every checkpoint, flying or permanent, is manned by armed soldiers who have been known to shoot for any deviance from the procedure of crossing the checkpoint.

²¹ Speed of picking, pressing, and shipping are essential to retaining the high quality (extra-virginity) of olive oil.

²² There are also myriad joint Israeli-Palestinian olive oil initiatives. While Israelis often used to travel into Palestinian villages to buy olive oil pre-intifada, now they do not, although some peace activists and Rabbis for Human Rights buy olive oil on the West Bank and sell it informally (usually through listserv announcements) to like minded friends.

²³ Petrini, Carlo. "Food for Peaceful Diplomacy." *Slow Talk*.

<http://www.slowfood.com/sloweb/eng/dettaglio.lasso?cod=3E6E345B18bba2A393XtI28>.

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²⁴ Claudie Roden, "Breaking Bread – The Way to Bridge Cultural Differences." Health Service Journal, 05 February 2008. <http://www.hsj.co.uk/printPage.html?pageid=575310>. Accessed on 05/05/2008.

²⁵ See Davide Panagia's "You're Eating Too Fast!" On Disequality and an Ethos of **Convivium**

²⁶ European aid organizations often buy large quantities of virgin olive oil from West Bank NGOs to donate as food aid to Gaza, helping the West Bank farmers at the same time as the Gazans. This was as of June 2008; I can only anticipate that this form of food aid is now as disrupted as other food aid.