

Amid turmoil, Palestinian olive oil offers a new perspective

John Carney

At a time when the sometimes bloody interception by Israel of convoys trying to take goods into the Gaza Strip is making headlines, Palestinians in the more peaceful West Bank are turning their minds to getting goods out to the rest of the world.

And that includes showcasing produce such as olive oil from small family farms under the fair trade banner at the 2010 Hong Kong Food Expo with the help of Oxfam Hong Kong.

"It's economic empowerment for the farmers, but it's also an alternative presentation of Palestine," said Nasser Abufarha, founder and director of Canaan Fair Trade.

"Normally you only see Palestine through the lens of the conflict with Israel. This is a way of showing a response to Israel without violence. To show Palestinian people are still tending the land and farming... It is how many are responding to the conflict."

"This is never shown on the television news."

Based in Jenin, one of the biggest cities in the West Bank, Canaan Fair Trade sells olive oil and other delicacies produced by farmers on small holdings not larger than 10 hectares.

Normally you only see Palestine through the lens of the conflict with Israel

Canaan Fair Trade director Nasser Abufarha

They are organised in informal co-operatives and represented by the Palestine Fair Trade Association.

It supplies bulk as well as finished and packaged olive oil and other goods to Europe, North America and the Middle East. Its products are offered with a certificate of origin.

Abufarha helped organise the farmers into small co-operatives in 2004. In 2005 they founded the association, which now involves 49 co-operatives with 1,200 members, nearly 1,000 of whom are certified organic producers.

Abufarha said the farmers involved were happy that their products were attracting premium prices abroad, but just as importantly, it has given them a stronger sense of identity.

"It's like Germany has the BMW - we have great olive oil," he said.

"Palestinian people are so excited to know that these bottles of olive oil from Palestine are on United States and European shelves. It gives us an identity and shows that Palestine very much exists, no matter what others might say."

"Canaan Fair Trade is proving that we can produce goods that can compare with the likes of Tuscan and the Napa Valley, while highlighting the history and culture that we

have of producing these products in Palestine."

European regulations allow for the olive oil - the Palestinians' biggest export - to be called a product of Palestine, while in the US they are called a product of the West Bank. Its origin has generated much interest from buyers worldwide.

But is the oil being exported at the expense of the many struggling families in the West Bank? No, says Abufarha.

The oil and other products they export are a surplus, and it is the only way their business model can work successfully, he says.

"On average, we produce about 30,000 tonnes of olive oil but consume about 15,000. If we don't market it, it will drive the prices down. The blockade in Gaza is affecting us too as we also can't reach the Gaza market."

"There's a shortage of food and olive oil [there], but there's nothing we can do about it."



Canaan Fair Trade director Nasser Abufarha. Photo: David Wong