

The Village of Al'araqa



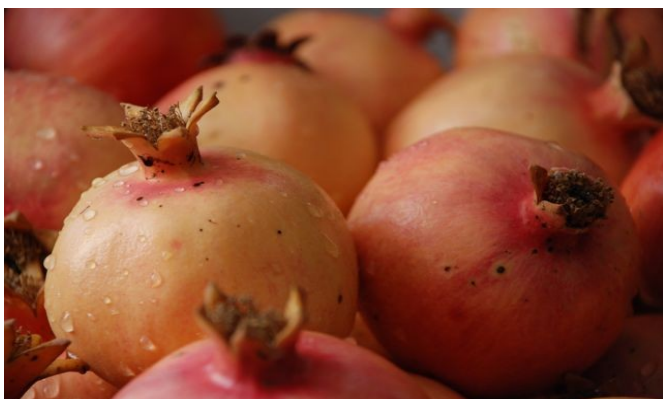
THE VILLAGE OF POMEGRANITES

The dazzling village of Alaraqa in the Jenin district sits at 250 meters above sea level. It is surrounded by mountains from all directions making it one of the most picturesque villages in the area. A population of about 1500, people almost everyone in the community say that their ancestors who first settled in its caves were shepherds who were looking for good grazing land. Out of the 5675 dunoms of its land, 1041 is dedicated to olive trees spread across *Qatayin* or terraces that belong to 18 different producer members of the Palestine Fair Trade Association. Most farmers in Alaraqa cultivate small batches of land in rugged terrain but this makes them able to sustain old agricultural practices that are ecologically

friendly.

Reaching Alaraqa requires zigzagging through uneven roads that lead up to the mountainous village center that is far away from any major highways making beekeepers able to produce pure 100% organic honey since bees can travel for at least five miles without encountering any intensive agricultural areas. From *Baladi*, home grown figs to multitudes of pomegranate trees Alaraqa is a place where indigenous varieties are still thriving and well taken care of by local producers. In the pleasant surroundings of Abu Saleh's house tens of pomegranate trees draw the pathway to his backyard where he spends the month of August hand squeezing hundreds of these red crowned fruits to sell as juice for people who pre-order it from surrounding villages. Using a knife, a manual orange juicer, and a stainless

pot he squeezes one cup at a time and adds it to the bigger pot to boil. “You have to boil the juice and strain it before bottling it so it will not retain a bitter taste.” Naming the different varieties of pomegranates in Palestine from *Baladi Lifani* to *Ras El Baghil* (mule’s head) Abu Saleh says that there is a difference between the real Baladi which has a little bit of citrus undertones and *Ras El Baghil* which is very sweet. Both however, his wife explains have tremendous health benefits such as curing ulcers and aiding the digestive system. Most importantly she says, “It is delicious.” Other than juice, Um Saleh makes pomegranate molasses that entails boiling the juice for hours until it thickens. Like many women in Alaraqa she stores it in bottles and when she wants to serve her guests something to drink she mixes a little bit of it with cold water and serves it as a refreshment. This is a way people store the juice for the whole year and Um Saleh says; “ It is better than any soft drink available in the market today!”



Baladi Pomegranates (above) Pomegranate Juice (below)

Like many farmers in Palestine, people in Alaraqa take special pride in their olive oil. Many old and young will tell you that the olive tree is beautiful not just because of how it looks or the delicious smell and taste of its olive oil but because it is a ‘generous’ tree, “we eat from it, we use its oil to heal pains in the body, we rub its oil on strained muscles, we use it for our hair, we eat black olives and green olives, we use the remains of the olives after pressing, the *Jifit*, for making fire for our Taboun ovens, we make soap, and we can carve beautiful things from its wood. How much more can a tree give” says Abu Osama. The olive tree is almost a metaphor of the spirit of people in Alaraqa. This resourceful community bases many of its traditions on cooperation with very little emphasis on consumerism and much focus on producing to share with others. Perhaps much of this is attributed to the fact that traveling to the city is not so convenient. Almost every home has an ample supply of dried beans, wheat, lentils, olives, and maftoul. In every season they cultivate crops and store grains in bottles for the winter season and they love to give some of these bottles as gifts to their guests as a demonstration of their friendship.

OLIVE HARVEST, A VILLAGE PICNIC

Visiting Alaraqa during the month of Ramadan, one should expect to drink *Sada* unsweetened coffee with delicious date stuffed cookies called *Ma’moul*. These holiday sweets are famous in all of Palestine but in Alaraqa people believe that families should make *Ma’moul* for the neighbors in honor of the spirits of their loved ones who have passed away. Um Hasan, who is in her late 70s says that, “if you don’t honor the dead then you would not know how to honor the life that you are still living. One should honor life as a gift not just a casual experience.” And what better way to honor life than enjoying the olive harvest season to the fullest! It is without a doubt a special time to visit Alaraqa during the months of October and November when everyone with their families are participating in what looks like a village picnic as they all gather in their terraces cooking food, singing, making tea on a fire, and picking olives. “We love the olive harvest season even though we work so hard but we do not get tired. And lately we have been having more foreign people come visit us in this time which makes the season even the more fun.” Sadly, in the



past few years the olive harvest season has been more challenging to over 62 farmers in the village who have been separated from their lands by the segregation wall that has eaten up a big part of Alaraqa's olive groves as well as its grazing space forcing many farmers to sell their herds. Some farmers still manage to get permits to go harvest their trees in October through organizations such as the International Red Cross but according to many this is hardly enough. "The land requires attention all year round. When we can reach our trees only a few days in a year just to collect the olives we find the trees in bad shape and we have to struggle with dry weeds and thorns that we do not have time to remove because the time we are allowed on our land is restricted by our permits and the army." One wonders in this hard image of watching farmers go on foot to their land and face harassments by soldiers why they still do it. But to most farmers they are willing to carry the olives on their backs and stand for days by the wall so to be able to go in and tend to their trees even if its just once in a few months because many of them say, "these trees are the gifts of our grandfathers and grandmothers. If we accept their loss then we also accept that we are not going to fulfill our promise as their children to be good guardians of their trees." Says Abu Saleh. It is indeed this promise that the Palestine Fair Trade Association is helping fulfill by providing farmers the Trees for Life saplings that have given much hope in a situation that has left many farmers feeling powerless over their futures. While Canaan Fair Trade cannot change political reality on the ground it has been able to play a significant role in the lives of people in Alaraqa because according to many in the village "when Canaan honors its commitment to us and buys our olive oil we start to feel revitalized." And according to Um Saleh, "its not just about the economic impact. When we see our photos in magazines for example and receive visitors here who are interested in our story our sense of perseverance is fortified." Undeniably, the spirit of perseverance is perhaps one of the strongest characteristics of this community. Whether it is working in mountainous terrains where tractors cannot reach or dealing with a harsh political reality, people in Alaraqa thrive on knowing who they are. As Abu Osama says, "we do not have anyone famous in Alaraqa nor do we have anyone very influential here but we are all powerful agents in our own lives. It is enough for me that in the morning when I wake up I can go to the highest point in the

mountain and smell the sea breeze that is bringing us the smell of the orange groves reminding us everyday that the world is still a good place to be in."



Farmers coming back from their fields behind the wall. (above) Stored lentils and Freakeh wheat (below)



Um Saleh carrying her fresh Taboun bread

