

The Village of Deir Ballout



A WOMAN'S WORLD!

A meeting point between the northern part of Palestine and the Jordan Valley, Deir Ballout is located in the district of Salfit about 20 kilometers west of Salfit city. Out of a population of 4200 people, 80% depend on agriculture with over 15000 dunoms dedicated to olive trees and drupe fruits, and 3000 dunoms used to plant winter crops such as wheat, lentils, barley, and rain-fed vegetables. Deir Ballout is also the home of Palestine Fair Trade's 20-member olive cooperative that produces around 50 tons of olive oil annually as well as the highly organized women cooperative whose members produce about 10 tons of Canaan Fair Trade's delicious Maftoul.

In this village that embodies a unique kind of beauty and hard working spirit women are the primary actors in the agricultural field. From growing the native varieties of white cucumber, *Fakus*, okra, garlic, and onions to maintaining and managing the olive harvest activities, women in Dier Ballout are in charge! With a remarkable number of women with registered landownership, almost everyone in Deir Ballout, including the men, affirm that women are running the agricultural sector while raising their children and taking care of their families. According to Kiram, a 33-year-old woman and mother of eight, she wakes at *dew time* in the early morning and goes to *El Marj*, the plain. She says, "I don't just love the land, the work in agriculture also gives me a flexible schedule and I am my own boss. I can work in the field and

then go back home and prepare breakfast for my kids before they go to school. Men in the village only work with us in olive harvest season but when it comes to planting vegetables it is only *el falahat*, (the women farmers) who plant beans and peas and other kinds of greens and vegetables.” Like many women in Dier Ballout Kiram dries and freezes some produce for winter to sell in seasons when there is little production. “This year was a good season for fava beans. I planted 3 kilos and produced 160. We only plow and add natural fertilizer and as for water, we depend on rain from God, and this year the rain fall was very good.” Like in many villages in Palestine, fava beans are loved by most everyone especially when prepared as a *Rabi’eyeh*, (*spring dish*) which is a meal made with chicken, fresh yogurt, and delicious large kidney shaped green beans cut up and served with hot rice.



Sara showing women how she makes her Maftoul

A RECEPROCAL RELATIIONSHIP

While women in Dier Ballout are proud of their leadership role in the community most of them say that they suffer from having to carry the brunt of a conflict that has left most of the men in the village no choice but to work in difficult jobs in Israeli settlement sweatshop as carpenters and textile workers. According to Um Hikmat, “agricultural work is good but it is not enough to sustain a modern day family with all the demands in life. Men do what they can to support their families. Many even work in settlements that have taken up their own lands because factory work gives them some income. Not a good income but an income nonetheless.” There is,

without a doubt, an unsettling feeling as you come into Deir Ballout that is surrounded by 3 major Israeli settlements that engulf the small village. This is why Um Hikmat says the work of the Palestine Fair Trade association, of which she is an active member, has been very important in the village. “With fair prices for our olive oil more people are starting to go back to the land because when Canaan Fair Trade came the revenue from olive oil got better. So many leave the textile work in the factories during the harvest season and they work in their land. It is a short month and it is tiring but it gives good yield that allows breathing space for people.” The same kind of change occurred when the women started making the organic Maftoul. The summer months of Maftoul rolling season are very important for the women in Deir Ballout. It is also the season right before schools start back up after the summer holidays and families need the extra income to buy school supplies and other essentials for the academic year. It is no doubt that Palestine Fair Trade Association’s work in Deir Ballout has made an impact, equally however the excellence of the work of the women in this community has also made a noteworthy contribution to Canaan Fair Trade and other women cooperatives in northern villages. As one of the best Maftoul making cooperatives women in Deir Ballout have helped conduct several Maftoul rolling trainings inviting other cooperative members to come and learn their methods. Gathering around a lunch spread that looks more like a feast with big bowls of freshly made Maftoul cooked with chick peas and onions, and plates of lip smacking pickled *Fakus*, women in Deir Ballout welcome their guests as they discuss old and new ways to improve their work and their income.



Women lunch and Maftoul training day with Fakus and delicious Maftoul dishes



THE DIWAN: THE BITTER AND THE SWEET

This sense of comradery extends beyond the women circles of Deir Ballout. While the village is relatively big with close proximity to a major city, Ramallah, people in Dier Ballout maintain a close social network that makes it possible for them to face their daily challenges and to enjoy each other and their families. In the old Diwan (guest house) tradition each family in Deir Ballout has its own center or Diwan where people gather to celebrate their weddings and mourn their dead. As well, it is a place where visitors are welcomed in the village. These Diwan houses are all built from donations made by individuals in each family. They are an important representation of the collective responsibility people feel towards their families. Most people cherish their family's Diwan because they say it is the place where the family shares "the bitter and the sweet moments of life."



Um Hikmat spreading onions in her backyard



Wedding preparations in the Musa family Diwan

And perhaps 'bitter and sweet' is also a good metaphor one can use to describe this heart warming place as a village so beautiful and so rich in its people and agricultural heritage and at the same time going through major challenges to retain its original character. But the good news is none of the bitter has been able to take enough roots to take away the sweetness that overwhelms the attitudes and foods of this lively community.

