

# The Village of Kufr Rai



## A FRUITY TREAT!

Only 22 kilometers southwest of the city of Jenin is the village of Kufr Rai. Famous for its delicious cherries and pomegranates, this beautiful village is one of the biggest in the area with a population over 7000 people and a 55-member Palestine Fair Trade farmer cooperative. Out of the 36,000 dunoms of farmed land in Kufr Rai, 12,000 are dedicated to olive trees producing around 400 tons of olive oil a year. Notorious for being the cherry village, farmers in Kufr Rai call this fruit tree, *the lazy farmer's tree* because according to them it is the tree that requires the least amount of work while producing good yield that is financially profitable. Green and red cherries are staple snack items in the typical home in Kufr Rai

and according to cherry grower, Amar, one can pick cherries for a whole month and sell them both when they are still green as well as when they are red and sweet which makes cherry season one of the best in the year. Coming into Kufr Rai one immediately starts to notice the numerous *baladi* cherry fields. The *Baladi* tree, which means heirloom in Arabic, are the best tasting fruits. "There are new kinds available now for farmers and they make bigger fruits that look better but when you taste them they do not taste as good and their quality is not that great. The trees we have in Kufr Rai are mostly *Baladi* and the ones I have were planted by my father and grandfather." Referring to a common Arabic saying, *El Ain Elly Btoul*, the eye is the one who eats, Amar explains that just because a fruit looks big and colorful does not mean it tastes good. Indeed, these *Baladi* varieties



are smaller in size and much tastier with a potent flavor that leaves those who eat them longing for more. In its mission to share the delicacies of the land of milk and honey, Canaan Fair Trade has recently developed a new line of local jam recipes that are now available for the international market using only the best of cherries from villages such as Kufr Rai.



*Kufr Rai Pomegranates*

Tasty cherries are not the only scrumptious fruits that Kufr Rai is infamous for, old and newly planted pomegranate terraces are another staple of this fruit village. Spread across different pieces of land, one can take pleasure in tasting three main varieties of the red fruit. *Ras El Baghel* (Mule's head), *Baladi*, and a sweet kind called *Wonderful*; with each kind one gets a slightly unique taste that makes the mouth water for more fruit and a whole lot of pomegranate juice. Visiting Palestine in general and Kufr Rai in particular during the summer months of August and September one should be prepared for several hospitable offerings of thirst quenching pomegranate

juice and delicious red pebbles served in small bowls as a mid afternoon snack.

## CALLING THE RAIN

The generosity of the people of Kufr Rai does not stop at cherry and pomegranate offerings, even though their village is relatively large people still maintain a warm familial feeling where they welcome visitors and neighbors with open arms and elaborate meals to express their hospitality. This sense of familiarity among people is also maintained by the tradition of living in what is called in Palestine, *El Hosh*, or the neighborhood. Each cluster of homes has a name usually referring to one of the bigger families in the area such as *Hosh Al El Sheikh*. As in most villages pieces of land and different hills in the village also have names. Usually these names reflect a unique landmark or quality about the land such as a pronounced fig tree or a special terrace such as *Batn El Ballad*, the belly of the town, referring to an area located in the lowest part of the village. A central area in Kufr Rai is the ancient hilltop where very old homes are still standing; the oldest one of them is the home of *El Nabi Hatim*, the prophet Hatim, a spiritual man who was referred to as *El Sheikh* and/or the prophet. According to Inshirah, a story teller and a resident of Kufr Rai for over 85 years, people in the village would gather in the center where his home was and would march in the streets praying for rain in drought years. "People would carry large green and red flags. Each flag is about 3 meters long and 1 meter and a half wide. We would sing and call for the rain while drumming with brass cymbals and empty pots. Every time, right after this celebration it would rain. If it did not rain that evening it would rain the next morning because people prayed from their hearts."

## INDEPENDENT WOMEN

Inshirah does not only remember days of calling for the rain she also recalls the time when she says women were stronger and more independent. "We used to be very independent and able because we had to make everything with our own hands. We worked side by side with men. Today women have it harder I think because it is true that they have many modern machines at home that make their lives easier but many of them end up depending on the men for their



livelihoods because the jobs which were traditionally for women such as baking bread are now done by machines that men operate.” Wearing a traditional Palestinian dress and a belt that she calls *Sfefeh*, Inshirah recounts the village history and many other mythical stories that make her a famous woman today. “The national television came to our village to record me tell old stories and they did a whole program where I told the story of *Shatir Hasan*.” Telling stories is another old tradition that Inshirah says kept people gathered together and gave women a stronger sense of solidarity. “We did not have televisions or even a radio when I was growing up so the women of the village would gather in the evenings and one woman would tell a story and we would all eagerly listen and discuss.” Handing her cup of coffee to her daughter Um Mohammed, Inshirah says that despite all the changes she is hopeful for the future because she knows at least her daughter is carrying on with old traditions that she taught her. Indeed, Um Mohammed is keeping alive many of the beautiful home traditions from her mother. Joining her at the rooftop of her home, she spreads pieces of carob to dry in the sun in preparation to make condensed carob molasses that is believed to be excellent for the health. Pointing to the carob tree in her yard she does not need to emphasize that the aroma of her carob being cooked can fill the whole *Hosh* because even as it is in its dry state it already infused the entire stairway in her home as well as her kitchen and living room.

## A SWEETER LIFE

Aside from a rich agricultural heritage, Kufr Rai enjoys a very interesting architectural style. Many of the homes were built in the 1950s when men who were referred to as *El Daqiqa* chiseled the building blocks on the building site. This profession still exists today on a smaller scale where these artisans would decorate the outer stones of the houses. Big arches, long driveways, and stone porches that have colorful hand painted tiles add to the charm of their homes making an afternoon visit difficult to cut short. Discussing the changes that occurred since Kufr Rai cooperative became a part of the Palestine Fair Trade Association, many farmers say that they love when internationals come from all over the world to experience olive picking and share their lives. Many feel that the benefits of fair trade did not just save

them from big traders who took advantage of them; it also created a platform for them to speak about their village and their lives. “Many foreigners before they come here, maybe they think we come from the Stone Age but then they come here and they see that we are just like them. This is the beauty of being part of a fair trade community. Canaan connected us to the consumers directly without taking advantage of us. We feel we are being honored for our hard work and we also learn so much about the world and how others around the world live and farm.”

Without a doubt people who visit Kufr Rai experience something very special. This is why Amar says, “they keep coming back”. It is indeed the relationships that sprouted from fair trade that are creating common grounds making it possible to learn about each other and other places where sharing cherries and pomegranates make life just a little bit sweeter.



*Um Mohammed's Carob*



*Inshirah Telling The Story Of Shatir Hasan*

