

# Nus Ijbail Village



## A RESTING PLACE

Located in the district of Nablus, Nus Ijbail is the home of 450 people who farm in 977.5 Dunoms. This small village has one of the first established PFTA cooperatives that started with only five farmers. Today there are 18 members in the Nus Ijbail cooperative producing around 15 tons of olive oil each year.

*The Resting Place* is not Nus Ijbail's official name but many who experience the cool waters of St. George's spring at the entrance of this heart-capturing village would say that a moment under the green dome built on top of its spring is worth a hundred hours of sleep. Many suggest that Nus Ijbail derives its name from

being a place *in the middle* (fi el Nus) where travelers and traders who journeyed from Jerusalem to Lebanon stopped to rest because it was exactly midway. *Nus*, which means middle or half in colloquial Arabic, and *Jbail* which means mountain suggest that perhaps the name is also derived from its location exactly in the heart of two mountains.

But ninety year old, Abu Nassar tells a different story; "Nus Ijbail was in fact called Jbail before a major earthquake hit the village years ago destroying half of its homes. After that people started to call it half mountain or Nus Ijbail." While others say that the name is originally Greek meaning *half sun* because during winter the sun is only seen in the morning and is hidden for the rest of the afternoon behind the mountains. But despite any half stories about this



unparalleled village there is nothing half about its full spirit and wholehearted community. Located in the Northeastern part of the Nablus district, Nus Ijbail is still maintaining some of the most beautiful agricultural and communal traditions while benefiting from modern day technologies.

## A RETURN HOME

With a population less than 500 people, Nus Ijbail never left the memory of so many that have left it in the beginning of the century. Today, Nus Ijbail is almost a place of pilgrimage for the children of those who emigrated in the forties and fifties and never returned. Their kids come as adults looking for their roots and they are often amazed to find that, while small, Nus Ijbail is still insisting on life. Um Nassar, (Abu Nassar's wife) is 85 years old, she says "many people return here to look for their ancestors and I tell them about their relatives. I have seen many young people cry when they find out that we know their parents or grandparents. They like to visit our home because it is old and because many have heard of it as the home of *El Khoury* (the priest) in reference to Daoud El Khoury, a spiritual guide who lived downstairs and performed mass upstairs."

Nassar makes colorful pinwheels that he places on the old window sills and gives them as gifts to the kids in the village. As he hands a boy a blue pinwheel he points out to the pine tree in his backyard. "I planted this tree 30 years ago. Look how tall it is now! The reason that Nus Ijbail is still full of life is because people here have been committed to each other. They have helped each other and planted together. I am very old but I am also very happy and I know that no matter what I need everyone in the village is ready to help at anytime."



*Um Nassar telling the story of people who return*



*"God is Love" On Top of the Nassar's Door. Their home was built in 1911.*



*Abu Nassar's Pinwheel*

## OTHER HOLY THINGS

Perhaps not a church anymore but walking into their drive way under grape vines one can still experience the awe of something holy. With only the twigs of pomegranate trees and old magazine paper, Abu





*Um Khader making Kulaj.*

## A HEALING NUT!

Walking in the curvy streets of Nus Ijbail in late July or early August one should be prepared to intake a good portion of freshly cracked almonds. Famous for fruit trees especially local varieties of sweet green plums called *Jaraniq* and *Baladi* almonds; people in Nus Ijbail believe that almonds have significant healing qualities. According to Um Khader, “ten almonds a day are better than a quarter kilo of meat”. This is why she does not miss a day of almond picking. Every morning Um Khader wakes up before dawn to go collect almonds from the mountain where her son Khader planted over a thousand trees that he got through the Trees for Life program of the Palestine Fair Trade Association. “This morning we picked two bushels of almonds. We peel off the dry

green skin and lay them in the sun to dry for three to four days. After that we either crack them and eat them or store them for the rest of the year. I know I can buy inexpensive ready almonds from the market in Nablus but why would I do that! I prefer to work hard and eat flavorful almonds.” An exquisite chef, Um Khader certainly uses almonds in most of her meals. Biting into the fresh raw nut she just cracked, she says, “I put almonds on rice, I use it when I make sweets, and I just eat it like this.” One of Nus Ijbail’s most loved recipes is Um Khader’s *Kulaj*, a sweet dessert that is made from paper thin bread rolled with almonds and sugar and baked with fresh butter. One cannot feel guilty eating these delicious almond fingers as they are made with the healthiest and freshest ingredients in Nus Ijbail.

## BIO-DIVERSITY

A combination of crop rotation traditions, livestock diversity, high elevation, and the availability of fresh spring water has made it possible for producers in Nus Ijbail to continue growing organically. Although chemical fertilizers and herbicides were introduced to the village in the early seventies most farmers in Nus Ijbail continue using livestock manure, in Arabic *Zibel Arabi*, as the main natural fertilizer. While some integrated these chemical treatments in their lands, these same people are now rethinking their methods and looking at organic farmers to better their crop. Twenty nine year old Khader Khader, one of the youngest farmers in the Palestine Fair Trade Association who just came back from a tour in Germany where he visited other organic farmers and fair trade shops, says “since 2004, more and more farmers are abandoning these chemical treatments to the soil and are joining our cooperative to transform Nus Ijbail into a 100% organic village. We are proud of this and we know that it is not easy because this does not only depend on olive growers but on all producers in the village as a whole.” Khader is pleased that others in the village are joining him. Abu Hamdan has several beehives and a goat farm. He works with six women in the village to produce cheese and yogurt to sell in surrounding villages. He says that it is to his benefit that farmers go organic. “I cannot control whether the honey my bees produce is organic or not because bees can fly as far as three kilometers. The less people spray the happier my bees



are and the better the honey.” Abu Hamdan’s bee hives are located in the midst of a green pasture where wild indigenous greens such as *Irbat* grow in the spring and provide bees with a variety of pollens that make their honey unique in color and flavor. When asked about the concern over decreased bee population Abu Hamdan says, “I am happy because the method in which I make a living selling honey is a form of participation in saving our planet.”

## TAKING PART IN THE WORLD

The commitment of the community of Nus Ijbail to the environment represents a gift in a global world that is in dire need to go back to mimicking nature rather than fighting it. This dedication has rendered Nus Ijbail appreciation from locals and internationals alike. As an active member of his cooperative, Canaan Fair Trade invited Khader Khader this year to participate in a European tour to promote his olive oil and other Canaan products. To Khader this was an incredible opportunity where he got to experience the benefits of reciprocity that fair trade offers. “I left school when I was a very young boy because I could not see very well and I worked in factories in Israel for many years before I became a farmer. I never thought I would ever leave Nus Ijbail or see another world but most importantly I never expected that Europeans would care to know about my story or my work as a farmer. I used to be shy about being a farmer but after visiting so many shops and people in Germany and receiving such a warm welcome I feel so proud about what I do. If Germans come to Palestine I want to welcome them and give back in the same way.” While on his Canaan Fair Trade trip, Khader met a brass band from Holland who recently visited Palestine and were the guests of Khader in Nus Ijbail where they played music in the streets and celebrated the wedding of his cousin with the rest of the community. “It was a magical day for everyone in the village. Everyone, young and old came out to listen to the band. It was the best wedding gift I could give to my cousin for his wedding.” In February 2012, Nus Ijbail cooperative hosted a group of runners from the United States who participated in a partnership project with PFTA called Run Across Palestine. This marathon, which raised money to buy more saplings for the Trees for Life program, started south of Jerusalem and ended in the northern village of Burqin, Canaan’s headquarters. In some ways, this

project is reviving more than a producer community, it is recreating history by making Nus Ijbail once more a resting place for fair traders and those who have been traveling a long way.

Abu Fallah is one of the most active farmers in the village. An economics graduate and a source of much knowledge, he is excited about the Run Across Palestine although he says his only challenge is that he only knows one sentence in English, “help yourself with yourself.” But he thinks these few words might come in handy as he tries to describe his feeling about the importance of his village staying productive and thus independent.



*Shawqi, 7 years old, eating almonds*

It is true that the village of Nus Ijbail is small in size with limited opportunities for its youth but that is not stopping 22-year-old Ribhi from staying at home. “I worked as a truck driver all over the West Bank and I saw how people in the cities live but I am happy here.



Since I started working with Khader on the tractor, I manage my own hours. I leave the house when I want and I return when I need to. Khader depends on me and two other guys. We are the only young men left in the village but we make a great team. If it weren't for PFTA I would have to be a truck driver again and I don't like that life. I am like a fish, you take me out of Nus Ijbail, I die." Looking deeper into Ribhi's story one soon discovers that it's not just about the love of his village, it's also about another kind of love. "I am in love with a girl from our village. Maybe there are women in other places that are prettier but she is the one I want to marry." And perhaps if you stop in Nus Ijbail for a long journey's rest after this olive season, you might hear a band playing and some women dancing with Henna and flowers on their heads because this year Ribhi's father promised that this year's olive yield will be used for a wedding! And Ribhi says, "Everyone is invited!"

