

The Village of Rameh



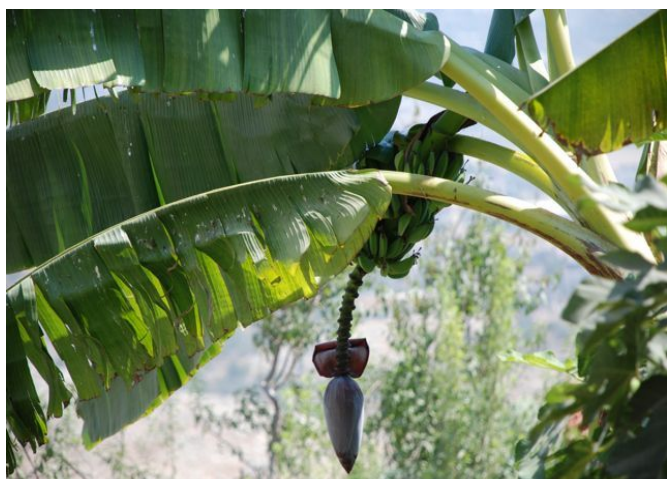
A SUSTAINABLE STYLE

The village of Al-Rameh, also known as *the Lebanon of Palestine*, is located 20 kilo meters southwest of the city of Jenin. While the population of Al-Rameh does not exceed 1200 people, the 15 members of the PFTA cooperative produce an estimate of 10 tons of olive oil annually. Spread over 4,768 dunoms of hills and valleys, Al-Rameh’s agricultural outputs include a colorful array of crops from wheat, barley, white corn, okra, eggplants, olives and yes- bananas! Instinctively, farmers in Al-Rameh are participating in preserving one of the most important pillars of sustainable agriculture; a tradition of crop diversification that allows them to protect themselves from crop failure and dependency on a fast growing

agro-business industry. Aside from abundant fruits and grains, Al-Rameh is mostly known for its livestock and poultry with over 5000 sheep and over 20,000 chickens raised by different households. A new university graduate, Fida Hadareyeh, says that this is the reason people in Al-Rameh are mostly optimistic and relaxed, “maybe we are not rich but there are only 3 families that don’t own their own sheep. No body lives in a rented home. Everyone owns their land and they depend on their own work as farmers to live.” This life style of self-reliance is something of utmost value to most people in Al-Rameh and they make it work by what Fida calls “the value of sticking together”. Driving up the uneven pavement to the top of the mountain where this breezy village sits one can understand this sense of cooperation and stick togetherness in the dynamics of



people riding the public bus from Jenin to Al-Rameh. There are mainly two drivers from the village and everyone knows them by name. Smells of freshly picked zataar, guava, and summer tomatoes infuse the moving vehicle as it makes its rounds at stops where each person has some errand to run or a bag to drop for a neighbor or a store in the city or the village. It is on a bus to Al-Rameh that one might consider what the word public transportation could possibly mean; a public bus so convenient and friendly it feels more like a family van. Grabbing a bag of tomatoes to take down the street for delivery, Abu Fadi explains that the spirit of cooperation is what keeps his village a safe and comfortable place to live.



Bananas in Al-Rameh

EL QIRDA

Like most villages in Palestine the energy of brotherhood and sisterhood is demonstrated in basic daily activities. 65 year old, Um Walid says that, “Before people could afford to buy so many sheep, we used to practice *Qirda* (borrowing). If I wanted to make cheese for example and I did not have enough milk I would borrow milk from our neighbors so to have enough and then the next week I would bring them the same amount of milk from my sheep so they can make cheese.” Borrowing milk is perhaps no longer necessary but people in Al-Rameh still practice courteous forms of exchange in their every day lives. From lentils to fresh Taboun bread made on hot stones women send each other different food gifts all the time. The tradition is that when you return the plate you received a food gift in you must send it back filled with something else. If you have a fig tree you

would send a basket of figs and then your neighbor would return the basket full of whatever fruit or vegetable or baked goods they may have. Although spontaneous, this tradition guarantees that everyone gets a taste of everything in season. You don’t have to own a fig tree in Al-Rameh to taste fresh figs in August. You can be sure someone in the village will send you a basket or two.

The streets in Al-Rameh are very quiet, especially around noontime when families gather for the mid-day meal, unless you stop by Abu Wail’s home where the sounds of fluttering leaves and the pigeons in his yard ignite all your senses as he enthusiastically tell stories about Al-Rameh and declares that, “we have the best olive oil.” As in most villages people in Al-Rameh take special pride in their olive oil. “Our climate is perfect for the olive tree this is why our olive oil is very good. We also produce cheese and it is also excellent but that is mostly because we are honest with what we make. I am proud of this and I am proud to say that I would vouch for anyone in my village that they always offer people the purest of what they harvest.”



Abu Wail and his doves and pigeons

THE BLESSINGS IN THE SOIL

One of the most organized cooperatives in PFTA, Al-Rameh’s farmers elect their representative to the Palestine Fair Trade Association general assembly by consensus and they take the principles of fair trade very seriously because they understand that it is one of the things that has been helping them sustain their lives in a way that does not compromise their values



nor their traditional agricultural practices. Speaking of the Trees for Life program, Abu Fadi says, “It is wonderful that people we do not even know in the west support us in planting trees. This changes how we view things, and I imagine when they buy our oil it changes how they view us.” But if you were to ask most people in Al-Rameh about their biggest challenges they will tell you that it is climate change and the lack of access to water. According to Fida, “we only get water four days a week and we have to spare as much of it as possible. This is a result of a political reality and when you combine it with a changing climate it becomes extra difficult for our community.” Most farmers describe this impact on their lands as “the loss of the blessing in the soil”. These poetic expressions are based in a rooted spirituality that people in Palestine have had with their environment for hundreds of years and in Al-Rameh people’s expressions highlight this living history. Agricultural poetry and song have a special place in the hearts of many but especially the older folks who remember the days when women and men working in the fields sang for each other. 85 year old, Um Atif still sings many of these oral treasures. “My husband used to serenade me during olive harvest season. We would be climbing the trees and picking and singing songs to each other. There was so much love. Women who picked olives from the ground had to respond with specific versus to men who were picking from the branches.”

With her now fragile voice she sings, “*ya dayti ya dayti el laqata ya gharqa bilzeit o el riqqa*” which translates to, *my hands my picking hands, drowned in olive oil and riqqa*. This song refers to a popular dish women made during the olive season called *Rqaq O Adas*. Riqqa is dough made from wheat, flattened, folded, and then cut into strips similar to homemade pasta. This pasta is added to sautéed onions and lentils and then left to simmer making a hearty meal that is perfect for keeping good energy during long days of work. And according to Um Atif it is a good way to bring people together because “everyone loves *El Riqqa!*” Um Atif’s daughter in law, Um Mohammed, says that many people stopped making the dough from scratch and started buying ready made pastas, which she says “you can never know what its made of or where” but that does not worry her because while she continues to make her own bread and her own pastas she feels that a shift maybe happening in the world. “God has the power to

change everything in one second. This is why I have hope in the future. In one second maybe God will inspire people to go back to their origins so we not only know good food again but also human mercy on the land and on each other.” This sense of hope may seem naïve to some but in Al-Rameh people carry this hopeful attitude with humility and a sense of determination. As young Fida says, “We can’t say that we don’t have problems and difficulties in Al-Rameh but we also have faith that is deep in the heart and that affirms that *Ma fi Shideh Bidoum*, no hardship is everlasting.”



Um Mohammed making her homemade Taboun bread



Um Atif singing an old serenade

