

Anza Village



THE SHATAWY AND THE SAIFY

Driving few kilometers southwest of the city of Jenin one can easily miss the innocuous sign leading to the village of Anza. With a population of 2000 people, Anza's PFTA Cooperative has the highest membership of 75 active farmers producing an estimated 60 tons of olive oil annually in 2336.5 Dunoms of land. The meandering road leading up to the center of this tucked away village welcomes visitors with parallel lines of ornamental trees locals call "Vegas". Located 450 meters above sea level, Anza is one of the most charismatic villages in Palestine with breathtaking sea views on clear days and abundant plains that surround the mountain Anza sits on in a semi-circle of green and golden colors

depending on the season. Like many small villages in Palestine people in Anza are carrying on agricultural and food traditions that are nowadays considered role models for wholesome living. Um Mohammed who is an expert in seasonal crops speaks about her life in humble terms but the information she has is invaluable to anyone interested in living an environmentally conscious life. Using the ancient knowledge of her ancestors, Um Mohammed lives by the seasons planting mostly *Baal*, which is the common word used to describe rain-fed crop. "The land should be planted 2 years *Shatawy* (winter) and one year *Saify* (summer) crops. This way the land can rest and rejuvenate itself. The *Saify* season is a good time to plant wheat because the soil is ready and we get good yield." Walking through her garden in the middle of summer one would find fresh figs, grapes,



and bushels of wheat ready to be crushed, and most importantly sesame that she and her husband, Abu Mohammed, harvest in several stages in the valley. Abu Mohammed wraps the sesame shoots in bundles and carries them on his donkey from their land at the entrance of the village all the way to their house in the very top. He carefully stacks the long stems up in the sun to dry. As he explains the hard work that goes into maintaining a field of sesame, Abu Mohammed's face lights up as he counts approximately how many sesame seeds are in each pod. "Each pod holds approximately 120 sesame seeds. Once the pod dries, it opens by itself and that is when we just shake the bundles on a piece of cloth and collect the seeds." When asked why he continues to grow sesame considering the hard work that it entails, he says, "that's what my ancestors planted and we use sesame in our food. We use sesame for Zataar. We use it to make Tahini and we make so many desserts with it. The cheap sesame in the market is questionable. This I know is 100% organically grown with these hands, my hands. I know what went into it."



Abu Mohammed stacking up sesame.

SESEAME TEA BISCUITS, *QARAQISH*

One of these delicious sesame recipes is Palestine's famous version of tea biscuits called *Qaraqish*. Prepared with wheat flour, olive oil, and good portions of sesame seeds, these crunchy cookies are everyone's favorite. What makes them crunchy? Olive oil. And Um Mohammed is proud that her *Qaraqish* are made from 100% homegrown ingredients, "our wheat, our olive oil, and our sesame." To her having food security or as she called it "everything in hands reach" is of utmost value. "I

find it so difficult, so difficult if I have to ask someone to buy me something from the market. I like our daily bread to be from our daily sweat." Even when it comes to yogurt she makes her own. "If I am cooking something and I need yogurt that day, I go and milk the sheep, I boil the milk, wait till it cools and then I add one spoon of yogurt that has the fermenting bacteria. I wrap the pot in cloth and four hours later I have delicious yogurt. It obviously takes longer than just going to the shop and grabbing a gallon of yogurt but if you taste it you will know it is not the same. If you know what real food tastes like it becomes difficult to eat what is available in the general supermarkets."



Um Mohammed and her grandson.

THE LIFE SOURCE

The motivation for people in Anza to grow organic is not necessarily a product of an environmental campaign or an attempt to connect to something that once was there. Their terrain and their living heritage make growing food for the family the most natural thing to do. Many in Anza go as far as to say that their village is "ideal" in this way because people have an awareness that "you can achieve the highest level of education but that must never mean that you should abandon your food source which is your life source." Twenty eight year old Jihan says that her father has a nice job in an office but he still keeps sheep or as locals say, *bisrah* with the sheep. *Bisrah* literally means "wanders". It is a word that describes the activity of taking ones herd out for grazing making the image of a shepherd leaning on a cane or a stick on top of a mountain one of the most common sites in Palestinian villages. As Jihan looks at her new



born, Mohammed, she explains that people in Anza may be professors in universities or bank managers but they never sever their relationship with their *food source*, the land. She joyfully asserts, “My son is already preparing to graze the sheep. He has his hat and his stick already ready!”

FIGHTING CHALLENGES

One of the challenges facing farmers in Anza today is that their “*food source*” is being taken over by the tobacco industry that is renting people’s land for prices small-scale producers cannot compete with. According to Hamza, a college student, and an aspired writer, “The lands of the village are in danger. The lots that used to produce food are now producing poison for a tobacco company that can pay landowners double what farmers can pay to use the land.” In his poetic way, Hamza says, “The land is asking, why are you doing this to me.” Luckily people are becoming more aware of the damage this is causing and some are determined to fight it. Even some who smoke cigarettes say that they are willing to demonstrate their objection by quitting smoking themselves and inviting others to join. Many producers are worried about this increasing phenomenon because they say tobacco companies may spray their fields. “We do not want people whose lands are close to ours to be spraying because that will impact us. Our bee population and our lands are the subject matter here.” So far, this has not impacted organic growers in Anza but many farmers say that they must pay attention to it now before it becomes a more serious problem.

A MEETING POINT

Producers who are members of the Palestine Fair Trade Association feel most passionate about this as they are committed to maintain a pesticide free environment. “I sell my olive oil to Canaan Fair Trade and I know that there is someone out there in England or the U.S. who is going to buy my bottle of oil because it is organic. I have to be faithful. I have to honor the trust people put in me when they buy my oil. I speak to the farmers one by one because what they do in their field impacts my field.” And Abu Mohammed says that when he says organic he means organic, “I feed my sheep wheat and barley that I grow. They eat organic and I use their manure for composting, which means I complete the circle of a

100% organic product. My sheep are healthy and so is my produce and *inshallah*- God willing- my family as well.” Commenting on internationals that come to visit the area, Abu Mohammed says, “organic agriculture has come to represent a meeting point for me and people in the West. We may have not found ways to connect before but today they are looking for what I already do. This has created a major change in my life to have this meeting point with others around the world.”



Um Samid picking pomelo in her home garden.

A LITTLE HEAVEN

Olive producers are not the only active members of the Palestine Fair Trade Association in Anza. Famous for being a village that honors education for girls and young women, Anza’s women cooperative is one of the strongest in the area. Rolling Maftoul, Um Samid says, “Women in our village are more active than men. We take care of our homes, and we are productive in our fields.” Indeed Um Samid is active all day long. Whether preparing gourmet style meals for schools in nearby villages or tending to her paradise of a home-garden, Um Samid does not stop with her innovative activities and ideas. One of two women advisors to the village council she is happy to spend time in what is today Anza’s main place of gathering, *El Muntazah*, the park in Arabic. “My colleagues and I went to the village council with the idea that we need a park for children and families in the village. After some challenges the village council has managed to build this park with slides and swings and a little cafeteria serving everyone in the community.” Deena, who is a newly graduate and a new employee at Canaan Fair Trade says that going



up to *El Muntazah* in the evening is one of the most relaxing things to do for her and many of her girlfriends in the village. “The air is fresh and the view is beautiful and we can meet here, chat, and drink juice without anyone bothering us. It is very peaceful.” Standing at the edge of one of Um Samid’s terraces, it is hard to imagine a place or a scene more peaceful than her backyard. In her sustainable home garden of three terraces, Um Samid grows not just vegetables but citrus and cherry trees as well. While citrus trees are decreasing in Palestinian villages due to shortage of water Um Samid has managed to keep a few delectable citrus trees thriving. From local varieties of oranges and pomelo to small Chinese kumquat oranges, Um Samid makes being a mother, a farmer, and an active member in society seem beautiful and easy at the same time.



View of Anza from Um Samid's house.

Nineteen-year-old Khayri is especially hopeful because he says that young people are going back to the land despite all modern changes and challenges. In fact some of them have ideas on how to use new technologies to their advantage. “When we realize that we need olive oil to eat for example we understand that we have to work for it so we start to watch and learn from our parents. And now we even have great ways to raise young people’s awareness.” Khayri’s game plan: Facebook! He is starting an organic agriculture page just for young people and he is sure that once he starts posting pictures of what he does in the field others will want to follow. “You see being a farmer doesn’t mean I have to give up Facebook. I can do both help with the harvest and surf the net at the same time!”



Deena and her mother enjoying juice and a chat in.

GOOD NEWS!

Good news is always coming out of Anza. Perhaps it is the faithfulness of its people or the deep-rooted connection they have to each other and their land. Whatever it is and whatever their challenges people in this village have a positive outlook for the future.

