

The Village of Burqin



A SPIRITUAL DESTINATION

Spread across vegetable plains and olive hills, the village of Burqin is located only 5 km west of the city of Jenin. In comparison to other villages in the area, Burqin is considered a big village with a population of 6000 people and a municipality that governs a little over 19,000 Dunoms. With a 45 -member PFTA cooperative Burqin's produces over 80 tons of olive oil per year. Known as *Arous Falastin* or Palestine's Bride, Burqin has historical significance in the Christian tradition as the village where Jesus is said to have performed the miracle of curing the lepers. The Greek Orthodox church of St. George in the heart of the village is considered to be the third oldest church in the world. It was built over the cave where the

miracle is said to have happened when infected people were quarantined and given food through a hole in the roof. Today, the church serves as a place of worship for both Christians and Muslims alike. With 12 Christian families living with a majority Muslim population like "brothers and sisters" in Burqin, the village serves as a role model for diversity. People in Burqin pride themselves that they don't simply tolerate each other's differences but they celebrate them. With great enthusiasm, Um Mohammed, explains that her brother, although a Muslim, was baptized in St. George. "My mother wanted him to live because she had lost many children before so she baptized him in the church and so my brother has a godfather and a godmother. We believe that *Saydna Issa* (our profit Jesus) indeed passed through our village and cured people and in



the end we are all Palestinians with the same ancestry.”



Um Khaled Praying By Sheikh Saleh's Gravesite

St. George is not the only holy place in Burqin, on top of the mountain behind the village center is the gravesite of a Muslim spiritual leader named Sheikh Saleh. According to the elders, he was a spiritual man whose faithfulness made people go up to him and ask him to pray for rain in dry seasons. Until today, some people still go up to his gravesite to picnic and pray adding the more to the multiplicity of the place and its community.

DIVERSITY AT ITS BEST

Welcoming diversity is probably Burqin's most prominent feature. When asked what is the most unique thing about their village, most residents responded with no uncertain terms that it is the willingness to integrate and welcome strangers or *El Ghoraba*. With Canaan Fair Trade's facility in the heart of Burqin's largest olive groves, people from all over the world have been experiencing the warm welcome of this picturesque village that brings together so many diverging elements in perfect harmony. From narrow streets and wide plains to tradition and modernity representing not only the spirit of a place whose people embrace pluralism in the most spontaneous of ways but also a community whose values are deep rooted in gratitude.

Since 2008 when Canaan Fair Trade factory was built across from Araba valley more internationals have frequented the village to learn about Palestinian olive

oil production in its ancient and modern contexts of state of the art olive press and old Canaanite ruins of onsite pressing. Canaan's special blend of the Estate olive oil in fact comes from Burqin from a piece of land called *Al-Bayada* that is famous for its flavorful olive fruit that is harvested and pressed immediately at Canaan's facility. Burqin coop produces 10 tons of the Estate olive oil, which has been receiving international acclaim for being collected from trees that are hundreds of years old. This makes the people in the village very proud. Um Khaled was born and raised in Burqin. She has worked in the plains for the majority of her life. From picking cucumbers to harvesting wheat, she says, "Canaan introduced us to other cultures. People who come learn about what we have. We have Zataar, olives, wheat, and many more things. As we share the wealth of our village with the world through the presence of this company in our neighborhood we also get the chance to improve ourselves not just financially but also in ways that even our schools sometimes fail to do. When you walk into the company, you feel like it is your home and it is very organized. It serves as an example for the significance of people's commitment. People who smoke may throw their cigarette buds in the streets but if they are in the *Sharikah* (company) they smoke outside and they put out their cigarettes in ashtrays. This is all because we feel part of it. I feel it's my company. It is not for foreigners and it was created by someone from here and not a stranger. This is of utmost importance because Canaan became a major landmark for Burqin. You cannot mention our village and not mention Canaan Fair Trade at the same time."



Men in Al Marah (Wast El Balad) Gathering



AL- MARAH

Strolling down the street from *Al Marah* (wide open space) or what is sometimes called *Wast El Balad*, Arabic for town center, one can easily meet people hanging out in late afternoon sipping tea and coffee while playing Backgammon. From elders to youngsters people in Burqin are far from shy. If you happen to walk in the village center expect invitations for something to drink and immediate icebreaking jokes from the youth who make you immediately feel at home. *Al Marah* is typically bustling with activities and the aromas coming out of Burqin's most popular eatery, *Al Anini* will surely make anyone hungry for a traditional egg omelet prepared with onions and mountain herbs.

Aside from being a friendly community, women in Burqin are well known for their specialty foods including homemade tomato past that is eaten with a little bit of olive oil and bread baked on hot stones in traditional clay ovens, *Taboun*. Um Khaled, whose son Walid works at Canaan Fair Trade, prepares her tomato past only from organic rain-fed tomatoes. "Most women in Burqin like to make their own tomato past because we like to know what we are eating. I wash the tomatoes well, I salt them and then I smash them with my hands until they become liquid. After I take out the skin I strain the juice in a big container. I cook it for hours- at least 6 to 7 hours- on high temperature and I keep stirring until the liquid becomes solid then I put it in jars and I top it with a drop of olive oil and some pepper and I store it for eating and cooking for the whole year."

THE DAYS OF THE WATERMELON

84 year old, Um Hashim remembers Burqin when its valleys were filled with *Jadou'* watermelons, a variety that is hard to find these days with the introduction of non-indigenous seedless watermelon. "People would sell watermelon not just in Palestine but all over *El Sham* (greater Syria which includes modern day Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan). We would take our kids to the *Marj* (The valley) and take little beds for them so they would sleep while we pick. We would carry the melons on our heads in *Al Qoneh* (big metal containers) and put them in trucks where the men would take them to sell in Beirut and other cities. We would often spend the night in the

field. Those were wonderful days I wish I were as strong as I was then. We used to work more but we were happier and more rested. Today people are stressed. There is so much displacement and people are finding it harder and harder to stay in *El Marj*."



Um Hisham Telling Stories of Burqin from the time she was a young girl.

Unfortunately, Um Hisham's words seem to ring true in a time when most farmers in Burqin are struggling to maintain their vegetable farms due to lack of access to water. While underground water is abundant in the area, residents of Burqin are not allowed to dig for their own water resources. A permit from Israel must be obtained before any well is dug with a limitation on the amount of water that can be pumped. Farmers in Burqin are forced to buy water by the truckloads, which is too expensive to sustain them in their fields.





Mohannad picking organic eggplants from his home garden

According to Um Hisham, Burqin has been facing many challenges since 1967 when Israel limited access to water and started introducing herbicides and pesticides that are damaging the soil. Um Khaled who has worked in the green houses in the valley of Burqin says that when farmers get these chemicals they do not get any instructions about proper use. There is no way to know how and when to use them and most importantly people do not know how harmful these chemicals are not just for the soil but for our health.” This is why she says many people are starting to go back to the traditional ways of cultivating and with Canaan Fair Trade’s commitment to organic agriculture and the environment, locals are starting to see the benefits of going back to organic growing.

BETTER SOIL FOR BETTER COMMUNITY

Mohannad Ghanim and his family grow organic lemons for Canaan Fair Trade. This year they have

transformed their lemon grove to an intercropping model where they are operating an organic olive tree nursery and a vegetable garden. The Ghanim’s are very excited about their land and they hope they will be able to sell to Canaan Fair Trade most of their produce. According to Mohannad, “there is nothing better than the taste of an eggplant or a tomato planted in my yard naturally. I can smell the tomato from a meter away and I can see a growing number of lady bugs and other species which makes me certain that we are doing something right.” Indeed, the people in Burqin are doing something right from investing in the recovery of their land to the celebration of their cultural heritage, they are determined to go beyond survival making their village a lighthouse of hope and affirmation that a good way of life is possible.



Three trees in one, a landmark of Burqin’s Al-Marah

