Resistance Is Fertile!

Article in Gastronomica · November 2014
DOI: 10.1525/gfc.2014.14.4.69

1 author:

Anne MENELEY Guest Editors
Trent University

22 PUBLICATIONS  153 CITATIONS

All content following this page was uploaded by Anne MENELEY Guest Editors on 17 November 2015.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file. All in-text references underlined in blue are added to the original document and are linked to publications on ResearchGate, letting you access and read them immediately.
 Resistance Is Fertile!

Anne Meneley, Trent University

Abstract: This article deals with two nonviolent resistance movements in the contemporary West Bank, where the “local” itself is under constant threat of encroachment by Israeli infrastructures of control, co-option, and containment. Resistance is fertile in two ways: one, people have proposed that nonviolent resistance is the productive (fertile) way to oppose the Israeli occupation, and two, nonviolent resistance is fertile in the sense of using local resources (land, water, plants) to produce local food and drink. The first example is Taybeh beer, the first Palestinian microbrewed beer, and the second is Sharaka, a community-supported agriculture group in the West Bank, which supports “reinvention” in the sense of rediscovering local Palestinian foods and making them available to consumers. Both movements assert their opposition to the occupation: Taybeh invites consumers to “taste the revolution” in their beer, while Sharaka invites consumers to seek out the local “halali” taste of Palestinian products instead of Israeli-produced food products. The article investigates the important differences between the two in terms of their orientation toward international (Taybeh) or local markets and audiences (Sharaka). The two also differ crucially in their attitude toward effective resistance: through developing Palestinian firms within a neoliberal economy or in striving for an independent Palestinian agriculture in opposition to dependence on Israeli food products. Further, the two differ on practices of boycott. Sharaka supports the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement whereas Taybeh actively seeks Israeli markets for its beer.

Keywords: Palestine, resistance, Taybeh beer, Sharaka Community Supported Agriculture, local food movements.

The practices of everyday commensality—producing, provisioning, and consuming food and drink in the West Bank of Palestine—are radically affected by the Israeli occupation. I discuss two very different Palestinian initiatives that envision production and consumption of food and drink as a nonviolent means of resisting the occupation: a craft beer called Taybeh brewed in the predominantly Christian Taybeh village close to Ramallah, and a local agriculture movement based in the Ramallah district known as Sharaka (“partnership” in Arabic). Theories of resistance in anthropology, from James Scott’s (1985) conception of resistance tactics as “weapons of the weak” to Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1990) idea of resistance as a “diagnostic of power,” still resonate in Palestine as the Palestinians are so clearly in a position of gross inequality in relation to their Israeli occupiers, whose power is hardly disguised enough to need a diagnostic. I have found Julia Elyachar’s discussion of how agency is embedded in infrastructure and infrastructure is implicated in resistance activities insightful. This is particularly salient given the peculiar status of infrastructure in the West Bank where, instead of facilitating connectivity, infrastructure is designed to impede and exclude flows—in this case, commodities of sustenance (Elyachar 2014: 460). I am primarily concerned with both Christian and Muslim Palestinians in the West Bank; while I did not have the opportunity to travel to Gaza, conditions in Gaza, including the shocking 2014 Israeli military offensive, affect political sentiments and actions in the West Bank, including resistance practices involving food, a topic I will return to briefly in the postscript of this article.

Local food and drink production and consumption have become sites of “agro-resistance.” Vivien Sansour, a journalist and activist, describes 78-year-old Abu Adnan as one of Palestine’s farmer revolutionaries, who “understand on an experiential level that healing for us as a community suffering from oppression and occupation requires the restoration of our sense of self—a self that is defiant but not defined by its oppressor” (Sansour 2010: 2). Dinaa Hadid cites a Palestinian farmer who, like Abu Adnan, envisions agricultural practice itself as a fertile resistance: “I don’t throw rocks,” says farmer Khader, referring to young men who frequently hurl stones during demonstrations. He pointed to his rock-built terraces. “I use them to build our future” (Hadid 2012: 3). I borrow my title from that of a recent article published in Al-Jazeera, “Resistance Is Fertile: Palestine’s Eco-War” (Brownsell 2011), itself a spinoff from the classic line by the Borg in Star Trek: The Next Generation, “Resistance is futile.” Describing Palestinian...
“guerilla gardeners of the occupied West Bank,” the author quotes Baha Hilo, then of the Joint Advocacy Initiative, responsible for planting olive trees on land that is in danger of being confiscated: “We’re not a militia, our weapons are our pickaxes and shovels, our hands and our olive trees” (ibid.: 3). Baha Hilo was my guide during my five years as an intermittent “guerilla gardener” myself, as we picked olives on Palestinian land threatened by Israeli military or settlers. Here, I examine how guerrilla gardeners are part of contemporary Palestine agricultural movements and, moreover, are deployed as a new form of nonviolent resistance to the Israeli occupation.

First, the Local

Both of these movements—Taybeh craft beer and Sharaka—have in common a claim to be “local.” Although the term “local” may sound familiar to food activists in North America and Europe, it has different connotations in occupied Palestine, as one might imagine. A number of themes in current Palestinian discourses about food resonate with those circulating in (middle-class) Western discourses, especially the notion that local, organic, seasonal, GMO-free, “slow” food purchased from farmers one knows is inherently superior to industrially produced, artificial, anonymous food. Don Nonini forwards a strong critique of the local food movement in the United States, suggesting that it is part of a white “ethnoracial majority” who are part of a “global cosmopolitan elite” (Nonini 2013: 274). Brad Weiss, in contrast, has a more nuanced notion of the local. He discusses how the local food movement in North Carolina is inspired by a desire to counter industrial food production, involving “efforts to combat the dire social inequities of environmental, human and animal degradation at the hands of industrialization” (Weiss 2011: 140). Weiss notes the ways in which a sense of the local is created in North Carolina craft pig production with various practices related to the rearing, production, sharing, and selling of porcine products. He also notes that the people coming to North Carolina to work in the high tech industries “take root” through a commitment to local food (Weiss 2012: 616). In Palestine, however, the question is not how individuals take root, but how they resist being uprooted in a contemporary colonial context. The literature on food and colonialism is vast, but I will draw on one example by Susanne Freidberg (2008), who describes how agricultural production is affected by colonial regimes (she uses the examples of the French in Burkina Faso and the British in Zambia), and how postcolonial relationships are inflected by concerns about food safety within the European markets. Palestine, however, has yet to face the dilemmas posed by postcolonialism, since it remains under the colonial occupation of Israel. When it comes to Palestine, the issue is more about having one’s “local” disappear before one’s eyes. In the words of Sari Hanafi (2009), what is going on in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank is “spaciocide” as the infrastructures of occupation—the Separation Barrier, the bypass roads, military outposts, checkpoints, and illegal Israeli settlements—continue, on a daily basis, to commandeer Palestinian land, including some of the most treasured agricultural land.

The Separation Barrier runs through several villages, thereby disrupting people’s sense of “the local” and the physical space of the local itself. As is so heartbreakingly presented in the 2009 documentary film Budrus, villagers may be separated from their own agricultural lands, and in some cases, villages themselves are split in two. Checkpoints and curfews impede the transfer of time-sensitive agricultural goods. Since the Oslo Accords in 1993, Israeli incursions into West Bank territory have escalated, land has been confiscated for settlements, and settlers destroy Palestinian olive groves almost daily. Israeli industrial food products flood the West Bank markets, as do their agricultural products. Much of the latter is produced in the West Bank on Palestinian lands, particularly in the fertile Jordan Valley, which is under Israeli control. At least twenty-two illegal settlements have been built there, many of them large-scale industrial agricultural farms exploiting the water resources and fertile soil and displacing the indigenous Palestinian communities (Haddad, Erakat, and Suba 2013). Many Palestinians, displaced from their own land, have become day laborers on these agricultural settlements, which are heavily subsidized by the Israeli government and produce products that are cheaper than those produced in other parts of the West Bank.

Another enduring problem is that the Palestinian Authority does not have control over the import and export of food products (Mansour 2012a) —Israel determines what product and in what quantities the PA can import or export. Neoliberal economic theories, accelerating since the 1993 Oslo Accords, have been particularly destructive in Palestine (see LeVine 2009), a place whose legal status remains uncertain. Conventional economic theories are applied to the occupied territories in expectation that Palestinian businesses will thrive by specializing in the production of goods in which they have a competitive productive advantage. According to Samer Abdelnour and Alaa Tartir, the main goal of a people under occupation should be to free their land, not to compete with free nations using economic indicators without concern for political context (Abdelnour and Tartir 2012: 2). These are the conditions under which the Taybeh Brewing Company and the guerrilla gardeners labor.
Taybeh Beer

In a recent interview, Nadim Khoury, founder of the Taybeh Brewing Company, describes the meaning of his beer:

“This is peaceful resistance actually,” Nadim says, after a momentary silence, and looks at me as I raise my eyebrows.

“No, it is. Making beer and making business and being here. We still don’t have a country, but we have a beer, and I’m proud of that” (Crowcroft 2013).

Nadim Khoury is one of the many Palestinian entrepreneurs who saw an opportunity to return to his homeland after the Oslo Accords in 1993. The “peace” part of the accordshas not borne fruit, nor has the establishment of a Palestinian state come about, but Oslo did allow Khoury to establish the first Palestinian microbrewery (and the first in the Middle East) in 1994. Khoury had studied craft brewery in Boston before returning to Palestine to make it his permanent residence. Taybeh beer is interesting in its claim to represent Palestinian authenticity and locality. The notion of craft beer production is a foreign one, and while there was local wine production in the areas around Bethlehem (the Cremisian Monastery in Bayt Jala has produced communion wine for centuries, and the anise-flavored arak of Bethlehem is famed), microbrewed beer was not a central element of the Palestinian repertoire. The following excerpt from the official Taybeh website outlines Khoury’s approach to brewing beer, highlighting the “naturalness” of Taybeh beer and its lack of preservatives. The beer is described as “hand crafted with state of the art equipment,” as organic and prepared in small batches, all of which emphasize its distance from industrially produced beer:

Taybeh (tai-bey) in Arabic means “delicious.” Our Taybeh beer is handcrafted in small batches in German traditional style using a top fermenting yeast and cold lagering. This process creates a distinctively flavored beer with a clean, crisp taste. Taybeh Golden Beer — brewed with only the finest natural ingredients: malted barley, hops, pure water, and yeast — is the fresh, flavorful alternative to imported beers. Cheers!

The Taybeh Beer Company’s website indicates the strong influence of famous European beer nations such as Belgium, the Czech Republic, and Germany. The company has even imported European ingredients including hops and barley, although in the past barley was a staple crop in Palestine.

The only ingredient that guarantees “Palestinianess” is the “natural spring water” from the Ein Samia spring. This is an important point, as water in Palestine is now under serious threat, with Israelis controlling 80 percent of the water in the West Bank, and springs, like olive trees, are very much a target of Israeli settler colonialism. Manning (2012: 223), speaking of Georgian beer production, has an interesting analysis of how European beer technology insures “quality” of production, but marketing authentic Georgianess focuses on two elements: the “ethnographic” tradition of Georgia’s mountain peoples, and Georgian “nature” in the form of the mountain spring water that has been renowned for centuries. In the case of Palestine, the Ein Samia water is the guarantor of Palestinian authenticity while the European ingredients and techniques are the guarantors of quality. In Taybeh’s promotional material, it is not ethnography that is drawn upon but discourses about resources in Palestinian nationalism; water is as much of a concern as land. Customers are urged to “Drink Palestinian” in order to “Taste the Revolution,” linking beer consumption to a wider political project of freeing Palestine from the Israeli occupation.

Taybeh provides a craft alternative to cheaper, mass-produced Israeli beer such as Maccabee and Goldstar: Taybeh’s producers not only introduce a higher-quality craft product, but highlight its Palestinianess as a selling point versus the industrial beer of the occupier. This fact was persuasive to many of the “guerrilla gardener” olive picking volunteers in the West Bank, who often enjoyed drinking a cool and tasty Palestinian beer after the hot and dusty work of olive picking on endangered Palestinian land.

Food and drink in Palestine, as elsewhere, are associated with particular forms of sociality; beer production and consumption was not a central element of the traditional Palestinian repertoire, and the sociality that attends it now is a foreign one. In 2005, the Khoury family introduced the Taybeh Oktoberfest, a festival that has been held on the first week of October ever since. The two-day festival features all of Taybeh’s beers, including their nonalcoholic and dark beers, local food, and all manner of locally produced Palestinian products, including Taybeh olive oil and honey. The Oktoberfest also features local Palestinian bands as well as bands from abroad: Bavaria, Italy, and Brazil, among others. The festival was popular with the Israeli left, who come in droves. It is also an event that has garnered much international attention because it is a celebratory event with drinking as a central ritual, seeming to contradict imaginaries of Palestine as a joyless place characterized only by misery and violence. In 2012, a record number of 16,000 people visited Taybeh. But by 2013, trouble was brewing from within the local: the new local council in Taybeh protested the disruption the festival caused to the everyday life of villagers, and demanded a large fee and share of the beer revenues in exchange for approval to host the Oktoberfest. An agreement was not reached and the festival was moved to the Movenpick Hotel in Ramallah (Gilbert 2013). All of this speaks to recent local discord about the Taybeh beer factory and its place in the local economy.
and society. Some protested the public drunkenness, saying that it offends the Muslim population which surrounds the Christian village of Taybeh. In response, Khoury notes that Taybeh also offers a nonalcoholic beer for the nondrinkers of Palestine, including pious Muslims. Those villagers opposed to Taybeh say that the company provides little employment beyond the Khoury family and no social benefit to the community. The Khourys counter that the Oktoberfest provided an opportunity for local people to sell their food, handicrafts, and agricultural products to visitors. They also argue that they supported farmers, especially during the difficult years of the Second Intifada, by using their expertise and connections to export Taybeh olive oil abroad.

Khoury is not only interested in internal markets for his beer; Taybeh is exported to Japan and Belgium. The company had been in conversation with the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (Nadim Khoury, personal communication, November 2007), but it has not appeared in Ontario stores.

The brewery in Palestine is as active as it can be, depending on the political circumstances, but Khoury is very proud that it was the first Palestinian product to be franchised in 1997, as it is also brewed and bottled in Germany, which helps to circumvent the difficulties of exporting under the Israeli-imposed constraints on beer produced in Palestine. Although it is a product that explicitly evokes Palestinian nationalism in its promotional material, the Taybeh Beer Company does not recognize the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement designed to put pressure on Israel to agree to a just peace. Taybeh is kosher certified and is sold in some establishments in Israel; my impression was that the cafes and restaurants where it was sold were relatively left-leaning. Yet Taybeh products are as vulnerable as any to the infrastructural impediments imposed by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

If it is held up at border checkpoints, unpasteurized beer, like olive oil (Meneley 2008, 2011), can be ruined by exposure to sun. Khoury is quoted as saying: “If [our beer] gets too warm at the checkpoint, a second fermentation starts and it goes cloudy. We have to throw it away” (Philips 2001: 1). However, for Israeli beer blogger Doug Greener (Israel Brews and Views), it is the Khoury family’s mention of politics that “clouds” their beer. He asserts that they should not mention Israeli infrastructures of control:

The Khoury family has chosen confrontation over fermentation. Although the Taybeh website is free of politics (except for the press clippings), the Khourys never miss an opportunity to attack Israel, the “occupation,” the “settlers” around Taybeh. If their company isn’t growing fast enough, its [sic] the fault of the Israeli security checks and bureaucracy. If shipping their export beer takes too long, it’s because Israel discriminates against them. “Anti-Israel” has become as much a part of the Taybeh Beer brand as the “pure brewing” and “building Palestine” narratives (Greener 2013).

Few in the West Bank would agree with Greener’s assertion that Israel’s infrastructural stranglehold over the West Bank does not have profound negative effects on perishable food items.

Yet despite the claim that one can “taste the revolution” in Taybeh beer, the Taybeh Brewing Company, and Khoury himself, do seem to fall into the category that Dana (2014) describes as “returnee capitalists,” who are willing to normalize economic relationships with Israel before any political settlement has been reached about land, water, and the right of Palestinian refugees to return. Former Taybeh enthusiasts in Ramallah who were anxious to support local production have stopped consuming it, because they do not consider Taybeh’s strategy of economic normalization with Israel as leading to a fertile resistance to its occupation of the West Bank.
The Sharaka Movement

While the craft beer of Taybeh has no precedent in Palestinian life, the Taybeh Beer Company has certainly brought Palestine much international attention due to its counterintuitive presence and its borrowing of the German tradition of Oktoberfest as its attendant cosmopolitan sociality. In contrast, consider the Sharaka agricultural initiative, as described in their 2013 Annual Report:

Conceived in 2009, Sharaka is a volunteer initiative working to preserve our Palestinian agricultural heritage and bring Palestinian consumers and producers together to celebrate our seasonal harvests. We are not an NGO. We are a group of concerned Palestinian volunteers attempting to support local producers and raise awareness among our fellow Palestinians. We envision a food sovereign Palestine where Palestinians produce a sufficient food supply using traditional, seasonal, and environmentally sound farming techniques (uploaded to Sharaka’s Facebook page, February 6, 2013).

The photo adorning the Sharaka—Community Supported Agriculture’s public group Facebook page features a representation of the Palestinian flag made of olives, yogurt, parsley, and tomatoes.

At the heart of the Sharaka initiative is the concept of baladi, the Arabic word used as a translation of the English local. However, as a concept, baladi embodies much more than “local,” connoting the intimate connection of the Palestinian people to their land and its agricultural products that sustain them and their homeland. Sharaka is thus more of an inward looking initiative, in contrast to Taybeh, which cultivates external markets and international attendees at its Oktoberfest. Baladi food invokes “authenticity” and a certain nostalgia for a life that is in danger of being lost forever. Sharaka is a nonprofit, volunteer initiative that rejects foreign aid money, opposes the neoliberal reforms of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the flooding of Palestinian food markets with Israeli products or mass-produced food products from abroad, internationally funded NGO initiatives, and fair-trade companies that focus on international markets. They are strong supporters of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which encourages Palestinians and global consumers to boycott, among other things, agricultural products raised in illegal Israeli settlements on the West Bank. As deployed here, the call for baladi products is reinventing food traditions in the sense of “rediscovering” them (Grasseni and Paxson, this volume). Sharaka not only encourages individuals making different food choices, but also creates a space where local foods, once edged out, are made available. Sharaka’s primary activities are the organization of a weekly farmers’ market in Ramallah, providing weekly baskets of fresh produce for subscribers, and the organization of underground restaurant meals. This restaurant initiative, Al Mahjoul, is promoted and described on Sharaka’s Facebook page: for a modest sum, participants enjoy a meal made of exclusively Palestinian ingredients, cooked by volunteers.

The Sharaka movement follows the idea of agriculture as resistance to the Israeli occupation, but unlike the Taybeh Beer Company, it looks inward to provide good local food for the local community. Sharaka was inspired in part by the community supported agriculture movement (CSA) in the United States, but the principles of alternative food networks take on distinctive characteristics in the Palestinian context. Aisha Mansour, Fareed Taamallah, and Carine Abu Hmeid started Sharaka in 2009 to encourage patronage of Palestinian agricultural products and farming practices. “When we refer to baladi, we are referring to our heirloom seeds that have been saved by our falaheen [peasant farmers] year after year. Unfortunately, we are losing this richness as a result of industrial GMO farming” (Aisha Mansour, personal communication, June 22, 2013). In their quest to restore baladi products to contemporary Palestinian markets, the organizers are embarking on a “reinvention of food” program, in the sense of striving to rediscover and “renew the foundation” of baladi food (Grasseni and Paxson, this volume). The Israeli occupation is ever present in discussions of baladi food, as is evident in the following blog post on seasonalpalestine from May 2013, where Mansour notes the effect on agriculture of the Israeli control of the water supply in the West Bank: “I planted tomatoes for my aunt on my first spring in Palestine. But then summer encroached, with all of its side effects including increased withholding of our water resources by the Israeli occupation.
No water to bathe, let alone to water the tomato plants. The tomatoes died.”

Sharaka supports the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement by encouraging their supporters to eat Palestinian produce from local, small-scale producers who are not funded by foreign aid agencies or supplied with GMO seeds.\(^8\)

As the blurb on Aisha’s blog, seasonal/palestinian, says: “Defy free trade. Support your health and our small-scale Palestinian producers by eating from the local and seasonal Palestinian harvest. Say no to cheap, low quality imports. And say yes to supporting a healthy community and a strong local economy.”\(^9\)

The following quote indicates how the Sharaka initiative rejects the strategies of industrial agriculture, including the use of chemical pesticides and greenhouses:

My winter garden was full of flavor. Arugula, spinach and radish for wonderful winter salads. Potatoes and broccoli for soups, stews, and stir-fries. And ground and body nutrifying fava beans (foul), chickpeas, and peas.

Palestinians have historically planted these three in the winter in order to build the soil for the summer garden. Our ancestors cared for our land, respecting its limits to ensure annual production. This is in stark contrast to the practices of some farmers today who use plastic green houses and chemical pesticides to produce the same two to three vegetables all year long, destroying their land in the process.\(^10\)

Sharaka encourages people to make their own jam and pickled vegetables, sealed with olive oil, as in traditional practice. Aisha’s point in pickling and preserving is not quite the same as the contemporary North American interest in preserving and pickling, which if political, tends to frame the practice as a resistance to industrial food production. Sharaka envisions it as a way of reviving practices of preserving Palestinian produce for the winter so as to be able to boycott Israeli produce. The spirit behind the preservation movement is to resurrect the baladi tradition of preserving spring and summer vegetables for the rainy and cold winter. But Sharaka also encourages foraging for local plants like wild cyclamen, which does not cost anything aside from time and effort.

Sharaka announces its events on Facebook and an email listserv. A recent posting notes that La Vie Café in Ramallah is sponsoring Palestinian dinners featuring produce from their rooftop gardens, “All our cakes are made with organic eggs from our very own chickens, which feed on the compost and fertilize the garden” (Sharaka, June 5, 2013). The emphasis is on organic, seasonal baladi produce. Perhaps the most notable contribution of the Sharaka movement is the establishment of a weekly farmers’ market, Souq Akli Baladi (My Food Is Local), in Ramallah, as the following call demonstrates: “This week at the Sharaka Akli Baladi market: grapes, cucumbers, plums, apples, faquus, arugula, mloukhia, figs, free range chicken eggs, vinegar, olive oil, taboun bread, cheese, flour, spices, herbs and vegetable plants so that you can grow your own food in whatever space that you have. Shop at the market so that you too can eat baladi, seasonal, and 100% Palestinian.”

The market features local musicians, along with the traditional taboun bread baked in a clay oven fueled by olive wood. The vegetable seedlings that they sell encourage patrons to start their own vegetable gardens in hopes of reducing local dependency on Israeli produce. Their Facebook page features fetching pictures of local produce and local producers, who are introduced by describing their troubles in holding on to their land in the face of the relentless land cooptation that attends the creeping infrastructure of the Israeli occupation:

Meet farmer Fatima who participates weekly at the Sharaka souq akli baladi. Fatima comes from Beit Nuba, a Palestinian village that was evacuated due to the aggressions of the Israeli Occupation. Most of Fatima’s farmland in Beit Nuba is behind the Israeli Apartheid Wall and she cannot access it. There is a small portion of the land on the other side of the Wall that she farms. She has also rented to dunes of land in Betunia. Fatima produces seasonal baladi vegetables such as zucchini, fresh black-eyed beans, and faquus. She often brings a specialty dish to the market for those looking for lunch. Fatima explains that souq akli baladi is a helpful initiative for small-scale farmers such as herself to sell their produce to the community. She explains that some consumers are looking for the perfectly shaped fruit or vegetable. But baladi products are healthier and tastier than the perfectly shaped items found in the mainstream market. Stop by the Saturday market to support farmers like Fatima and feed your family good, clean, and fair food (Sharaka Facebook page).

Sharaka was delighted to be the subject of an article in Brownbook, a magazine about urban lifestyles in the Middle East (based in the United Arab Emirates), noting the recognition of Palestine as a place where food politics were intricably linked to emancipatory politics (Dawson 2013).\(^11\) Sharaka’s mandate explicitly critiques the NGO model as destructive to Palestinian agriculture.\(^12\) The foreign NGOs, funded by the United States, European Union, Kuwait, Sweden, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and the World Bank, have been critiqued for encouraging dependence on foreign or Israeli inputs, like genetically modified seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers. Mansour argues:

Farmers are trained to manage their farms according to international quality management standards. And they are inspired to produce high value cash crops such as cherry tomatoes and flowers in order to earn additional income in the external market. Rather than focus on food production for subsistence, and selling the excess on the local market, the modernized Palestinian farmer produces cash crops for export, and uses the earned income to purchase food for the household. The reality is that most of these modernized Palestinian farmers find themselves in debt. Unable to export effectively under the current conditions of the Occupation as well as agribusiness intermediaries who purchase crops
from these farmers at very low prices, these farmers are unable to make ends meet. The sale of their outputs is not sufficient to meet the costs of the expensive inputs, let alone household obligations (Mansour 2012a).

Sharaka was invited to the Slow Food Terre Madre meeting Convivium in Turin in October 2012 as the “Slow Food Ramallah” chapter. The Sharaka board took some time to deliberate whether their goals were compatible with those of Slow Food; they, like many, were concerned with Slow Food’s elitist reputation. However, they eventually decided to join in order to heighten the profile of baladi Palestinian food, turning away from their inward focus. Along with Imad Asfour from Gaza, Aisha and her colleague Fareaed Tammallah were given plane tickets and a place to stay in Turin.13 The small but vibrant Slow Food Ramallah chapter was very well received at Terre Madre, and as noted above, external recognition of the existence of Palestine as a place, a locality, with distinctive food products, is very important to the members. In the words of Fareaed:

They [Italian and foreign visitors] packed the Palestinian wing asking questions about Palestine and the Palestinian people, and they admired the products of the land of Palestine. This gave us determination and will to complete our journey to protect our mother land, not through empty slogans, but through farming and production, and to hold dear the land that provides us life and food and dignity (Tammallah 2012).

Sharaka has started an organic olive oil cooperative in Qira, whose oil is sold under the auspices of Slow Food Ramallah primarily to local residents of Ramallah and its surrounding regions, one example of developing sustainable Palestinian agricultural and herding endeavors.

Sharaka has strong links to a couple of permaculture initiatives in the West Bank, one close to Bethlehem, Bustan Qaraaqa, which teaches Palestinian and international volunteers “innovative water management and farming techniques.”
(Brownsell 2011: 5). Another permaculture farm has been established in the village of Marda, close to the huge Israeli settlement of Ariel, which is notorious for letting sewage seep down into the Palestinian lands below (Reidy 2013). Murad al-Kufash runs a permaculture farm that recently featured an appearance by Starhawk, self-proclaimed pagan and goddess, leading a two-week seminar which Aisha Mansour attended. According to Aisha, Starhawk was inspirational in her insistence on connecting the earth and its products with the social world, a theme that is central to Sharaka’s goal of reconnecting Palestinians with their land. The permaculture initiative rejects chemical fertilizer or pesticides in favor of compost and manure; Aisha’s master’s thesis, which she completed at Bethlehem University, critiques both free-trade agreements and international aid that have promoted “chemically intensive industrial-style agricultural practices” (Mansour, cited in Reidy 2013: 3).

Guerrilla Gardening and Solidarity Sipping

Sharaka can be considered “guerrilla gardening,” like olive tree planting and olive picking, in that its revolutionary strategies lie within the agricultural realm and has food sovereignty for Palestine as its goal. Al Kufash of the Marda Permaculture farm argues that food sovereignty is essential as a tactic for surviving under Israeli curfews or closures, which could happen at any moment. At Sharaka’s annual retreat, in 2014, it was decided to pursue establishing a food coop/store to ensure year-round access to baladi products. As Aisha said to me, “We plan to put an action plan together and begin working, but this is a long-term thing and might take all year to implement. In the meantime, we will continue with our other activities” (personal communication, January 25, 2014). Sharaka is inward looking, in the sense that it wants to provide high-quality baladi food for baladi people, whose diets have suffered under the occupation, and to revive what Trubek (2005) calls a “taste of place” for political ends to produce a moral and ethical food economy. It invokes a return to the land, to local seeds over GMO seeds handed out by NGOs, and to envisioning resistance as an embodied, everyday act that everyone can and should perform. Sharaka is a nonprofit organization, its members envisioning themselves as brokers between producers and consumers, and educators of a tired, numb, and disenfranchised public. Jaded about peace talks and having lost whatever little faith it had in the Palestinian Authority, Sharaka envisions reclaiming local food as a means of resistance to the Israeli occupation, and the foreign aid donors who subsidize it. Baladi invokes a world of cultural practices that are in danger of being lost, as Palestinian land is disappearing at an astonishing rate, making a local food movement here political in a way it may not be elsewhere. In contrast to Weiss’s work on the North Carolina hog producers’ “place-making strategies,” in Palestine this local movement embodies “place-preserving strategies.” While the industrialization of food products is an issue in Palestine, it is more an issue of Israeli-industrialized food produced on co-opted Palestinian land and dumped on captive Palestinian markets. The local food movement in Palestine is fueled by the concern to retain what is left of Palestinian land and support the farmers who continue to work it, as any land that appears to be abandoned is open to confiscation by the Israeli state. They strive for food sovereignty despite the absence of political sovereignty.

Nadim Khoury’s Taybeh Beer Company, in contrast, displays a completely different tactic in its cosmopolitan version of the local. Although claiming, as Sharaka does, that consuming Palestinian products produced by Palestinian family-owned businesses is a form of nonviolent resistance to the occupation, his is a corporate vision, a kind of activist-capitalism. Khoury is not producing a typical, traditional “local” product, as microbrewed beer was previously unknown in Palestine. What he did was introduce a desirable and unexpected product from a region not known for high-quality beer connoisseurship. He also introduced cosmopolitan modes of sociality in the form of the Palestinian Oktoberfest into an occupied land not imagined as a place of light-hearted revelry. These actions were highly successful in drawing attention to Palestine precisely because of the incongruous juxtaposition. Taybeh beer and the Oktoberfest proved popular with the Israeli left, but selling Palestinian beer to Israel is considered by members of Sharaka and boycott supporters to be an unfortunate economic “normalization” of the current conditions of occupation.

Postscript

Despite the Israeli infrastructures of closure that have severely restricted movement between the West Bank and Gaza since 2007, events in Gaza have a powerful haunting effect in the West Bank. The recent Israeli military onslaught in Gaza in the summer of 2014 affects food practices of individuals in the West Bank, as they read and saw images of corpses of camels and cows rotting in Gaza’s streets and destroyed food factories and water purification plants (Sherwood 2014), realizing that basic food and drinking water for Gazans were in serious danger. The attacks on Gaza served to fuel the food activism of the Ramallah consumers and store owners around

GASTRONOMICA
WINTER 2014
boycotting of Israeli food products, one of the few nonviolent means of resistance available to them. Stickers with “16%” were stuck on Israeli products in West Bank stores by volunteers. These stickers are designed to draw consumers’ attention to the fact that Israel’s 16% VAT taxes on their everyday food purchases are used to support the Israeli military, whose bombing produced such immediate food crises in Gaza.

The bombing campaign also had a personal dimension for participants of Sharaka, who were horrified to learn of the death of one of their colleagues in food activism, Imad Asfour, who had joined them at the Slow Food Terra Madre in Italy in 2012. Like most of the 2,200-plus victims of the Israeli 2014 bombing campaign, he was a civilian. The following appeared on Aisha’s Facebook page on July 31, 2014: “Imad Asfour volunteered with us at the 2012 Slow Food/Terra Madre event in Italy. He was killed by the Israeli Occupation attack on Gaza. RIP Imad.”

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Cristina Grasseni, Heather Paxson, and all of the participants in the Reinventing Food workshop for generative and generous exchanges about my paper and theirs. I thank Alejandro Paz for years of conversations about Taybeh beer and Israel/Palestine and Paul Manning for reading several drafts of this article at various last minutes. Baha Hilo and Kristel Leschert were fearless leaders of the olive picking program where I was initiated as a “guerrilla gardener.” I met Aisha Mansour on my first olive picking expedition in 2007, and have admired not only her subsequently finished, wonderful MA thesis on Palestinian agriculture from Bethlehem University, but also her tireless energy in the Sharaka movement. Every return trip to Palestine is enlivened by a visit with her. I first visited the Taybeh beer brewery with Aisha, Peter, and Ehab in 2007, after our olive picking initiation. Thanks to them and John, Jo, Lana, Mouinia, Nazaleen, and my other olive picking buddies for their conversation in the olive fields, over Taybeh beer, and over Facebook. Thanks to Vaidila Banelis for his good humor, patience, and care while this article was being written.

Notes

1. The Separation Barrier, of course, has many more implications. It has dramatically reduced wage labor opportunities for West Bank Palestinians in Israel, upon which many families had depended since Israel seized the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. Much Palestinian land has been confiscated to build the Barrier itself, which in places is 8 meters (26 feet) tall. A recent report in Al-Jazeera notes, “When complete, 85% of it will have been built inside the West Bank” (Al-Jazeera 2014). The Barrier has the effect of radically reshifting the de facto border known as the Green Line, the armistice agreement established in 1949 at the end of the hostilities.

2. The Oslo Accords were supposed to produce peace and self-determination for the Palestinian people; they did neither. They did, however, produce the Palestinian Authority, which has had subsequent control over its cities with the exception of East Jerusalem. Critics point out that this amounts to outsourcing the occupation to Palestinian police, who are largely funded by foreign donors. The Accords have not stopped Israeli forces from reoccupying West Bank cities. See Suad Amiry’s (2006) scathing account of the Israeli occupation of Ramallah in 2002.

3. Palestine was admitted as a Member State of UNESCO in 2011 and granted “Non-Member Observer State” status in the United Nations in 2012. However, it has few properties that one associates with contemporary states; for example, the Palestinians do not control an airport, a seaport, or in any meaningful sense, their own highways. Some form of peace talks have been held since 1993, but little positive progress has been made toward defining borders. Since 2003, there has been much talk of the “two-state solution,” but since Oslo, the number of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank has expanded dramatically, with the number of settlers now numbered at between 400,000 and 500,000, with the route of the Separation Barrier extending to encompass them on the Israeli side.
4. Arak is known in several countries in the Levant. It is similar to Turkish raki, French Pernod, and Greek ouzo.

5. In this respect, Taybeh operates as Tuscan wine producers, who export olive oil through their much better developed wine exporting infrastructure.

6. A Canadian company from Prince Edward Island, Diversified Metal Engineering Ltd., supplied and installed the brewing equipment. Yet the negotiations between the LCBO and the Taybeh brewery, as of 2008, broke down over “price and reliability of supply” (Ross 2008).


8. The Sharaka initiative does encourage Palestinians to eschew Israeli products in favor of slightly more expensive Palestinian agricultural products. And consumers have to make more of an effort to purchase local agricultural products, as opposed to the easily available Israeli agricultural products, which are sold at the main market in Ramallah.


11. Dawson (2013) incorrectly identifies Sharaka as a local NGO.


13. Slow Food had no budget for compensating Palestinians for their arduous and expensive travel to Jordan to catch a plane; Palestinians from the West Bank are not allowed to travel through Ben Gurion Airport, close to Tel Aviv.

REFERENCES


