

The golden touch

By Sabina Llewellyn-Davies



Lebanon's olive oil is one of the country's most coveted treasures

Lebanon's countryside is steeped in olive groves. The roads winding through mountain villages, from north to south, lead through expansive, far-stretching groves where olive trees have been growing in the wild for centuries. Remains of ancient stone presses have been found here dating back to the Hellenistic period, evidence that the Levant pioneered olive oil production. These natural monuments, from ancient colossi to younger striplings, are crucial to the rural way of life and closely tied to the cycles of

cultivation. Some years the trees carry a full load of olives and other years they just refuse to bear.

For Youssef Fares the olive harvest begins at the end of October. His family has cultivated olive trees in Baino, Akkar, for decades, and trees on his land date back 1,000 years. "The old stone mills here used to be pulled by donkeys," says Fares, who is considered a pioneer for introducing new cultivation and pressing techniques to increase the production and the quality of Baino's olive oil.

Fares believes that his oil is unique, not only in taste but also in quality, due to his modern pressing traditions, organic cultivation methods and the unpolluted environment. His Zejd brand of organic extra virgin olive oil has already won several awards for quality and packaging.

Baino is well worth a visit, especially during the olive harvest season. After navigating the chaotic road leading to the village of Halba, driving through the Akkar region up to Baino is idyllic and comparable to touring Tuscany's olive region. The village is also home to Lebanon's first olive oil boutique, founded by Fares and housed in the family's old stone shed. It showcases ancient tools as well as olive oil, olives and soaps.

Across the country, in Lebanon's deep south, olive cultivation is also strongly rooted, and the yield has provided families with income for centuries. Kamel Morkos was born in Deir Mimas, a southern village close to the Israeli border, the youngest of six children. He grew up in humble circumstances, with his family struggling to survive on the fruits of their land, all of them sleeping and living in just one room. Against all odds Morkos went on to earn a PhD in civil engineering and founded Retouche, a company specializing in shop fittings, in Dubai during the '70s. Most Lebanese are unwilling to invest in the land due to a lack of security in the region, but Morkos has planted over 1,000 olive trees in Deir Mimas over the past decade.

The olive harvest has always been a real family affair for Morkos. His father would beat the tree with a long stick to shake the olives to the ground, and the women and children would collect them. The olives were then packed into cloth bags, stacked on donkeys and taken to the stone press. Today, Deir Mimas has three modern mills to press quality oil. And, as in the rest of the country, the yield from his olive trees varies from year to year. "Fifteen kilos of oil per tree means a good year, but in 2012 the olive yield was much lower, just 10 kilos," says Morkos. "Sixty kilos of olives will make 15 kilos of olive oil."

Morkos and his wife Mona established the Aghsan association, which sells the village's olives, oil and soaps as well as pickles, jams, herbs and syrups, to provide employment and income for the villagers. "I love the land here," says Morkos. "The olives are our past and future in this country."