



End-of-Summer Delights

By Aisha Mansour



It is fall, and while the olive trees are almost at their peak for picking, the fig trees and grapevines have turned *ghabarin* (dusty), a term used to explain the end of the harvest season for these fruits. This is the time of abundance in Palestine. (Actually, all year long is the time of abundance if you know how to forage in our blessed mountains.) In August, the figs are ripe and ready to be dried for winter storage. (For details, please see TWiP's September 2015 issue.) And in September, the grapes are ready to be eaten, or pressed into juice for drinking, or fermented into vinegar or wine, or dried to become raisins. The *fellaheen* (peasants) have marked this end-of-summer harvest with the Feast Day of the Cross (*Yom al-Saleeb*). They wait until *Yom al-Saleeb* to harvest grapes and pomegranates.

With the extreme temperatures and heat these past few summers, however, it

seems that this tradition of waiting until *Yom al-Saleeb* is no longer valid. During the last couple of years, fruit has been ripening earlier and earlier in the summer. It is probably due to the continuous construction of buildings and uprooting of trees. But I digress....

Back to the grapes!

Summer's end brings an abundance of Palestinian grapes. Although it's true that there are grapes as early as April in our markets, they are Israeli produced and tend to be of a different variety. Recently, the *hisbeh* (vegetable market) cart salesmen – I have never seen a female selling produce on a cart – have begun to market these early grapes as *Rihawi*, claiming that they come from Jericho. But on my many trips to the Jordan Valley, I can't help but notice all the grapevines that grow in the Israeli agricultural colonies, and

I can't help but wonder whether those *Rihawi* grapes are really the products of the "big ag" (corporate farming) Israeli colonies. But again I digress....

Back to the grapes!

Whether you have your own grapevines or you purchase your grapes from the *fallaheen*, you can take advantage of the season's abundance to preserve a bit of sweet nourishment for the winter.

Raisins

After four years of attempts, I have finally succeeded in producing raisins to store for my winter sweet tooth. In previous years, I searched the Web looking for directions, and all explained that the process was simple. Just lay out the grapes under the sun. Simple! But it never worked for me. And then I bought some raisins from a *fallaha* (peasant woman), and I asked her how she made them. This is what she said:

- Wash the grapes to remove all dust, but keep them on their stems.
- Boil water and add some baking soda.
- Briefly dip each bunch of grapes into this hot mixture.
- Then briefly dip them into olive oil.
- Lay out the grapes on a large platter and cover with mesh cloth.
- Dry the grapes on the rooftop under the sun.

It is important to note that you must bring the grape platters inside every evening, as our evenings are full of cool moist dew that will cause the grapes to rot. Also, the grapes should be turned and flipped over periodically in order to ensure that they dry evenly. Grapes are full of juice and take much longer to dry than figs. But the results are very rewarding. I have eight jars of raisins stored for my winter eating.

Vinegar

If you have never had homemade grape vinegar, you are really missing something special. I realized this when Muhab Alami, from the Om Sleiman Farm near Ramallah, gave me a bottle of his homemade grape vinegar. It was so good that I wanted to drink it straight up. Muhab shared the process for vinegar making.

Preparation tools:

A large glass jar

Sanitized towel/cloth ("breathable")

Grapes (small grapes are best), 6 kg or more

Boiling water

Vinegar (optional)

Process:

- Sanitize the jar by pouring boiling water into it, making sure that the water touches the entire interior surface.
- Dry the jar completely.
- Wash and completely dry the grapes. (N.B.: Highly chlorinated water may kill the bacteria that is needed to start the fermentation process.)
- Remove and discard the bad/rotted grapes.
- Place the grapes by clusters in the jar.
- Cover the jar with the cloth.
- Store in a dark place.
- Shake the jar once a month.
- Keep the jar in the dark for at least three months for best results. Results can be achieved quicker (within three or four weeks) if you add old vinegar for a quick start.

Sahtain o afieh! (May it serve your good health!)