

Om Sleiman Farm



By Aisha Mansour

Every Monday evening, shareholders convene at The Hostel in Ramallah where they find their week's share waiting for them on the kitchen counter. Their share includes organic vegetables that have been harvested just that morning at the Om Sleiman Farm in Bilin. In this week's share, members receive cabbage, broccoli, beets, onions, radishes, arugula, lettuce, and other greens. All products are organic and come straight from the farmer.

Now in its fourth season, Mohammad Abu Jayyab and Muhab Al Alami established the farm in January 2016. They worked intensively on land that needed a lot of rehabilitating, built a fence, a hoop house, and raised beds for planting. The first season was mid-June of that same year.

Abu Jayyab recalls, "The land and the farm found us," when asked why the two young farmers chose to work in Bilin.

This initiative was fated to happen. Abu Jayyab, a refugee from Gaza who was in the United States, had wanted to go back to visit his parents in Gaza. The Rafah Crossing was closed so he decided to enter Palestine through Jordan. Daily, he went to the Palestinian civil administration, *irtibat*, to request a permit to go to Gaza. And daily, he passed The Hostel in Ramallah on his way to the *irtibat*. He met Al Alami who was running The Hostel with

his brother, working to establish an economically sustainable business with values. The two quickly became friends. Abu Jayyab's stay in the West Bank was becoming longer than expected with no way and no permit to enter Gaza. And so he decided to use this time to establish the Om Sleiman Farm, a community-supported agriculture (CSA) model. Al Alami was taking his hostel guests to the weekly Bilin protests, so he had built strong relationships with the people of Bilin. When mentioning the need for land to create this initiative, Abu Ala', who had reclaimed his land after the Israeli court decision to change the route of the apartheid Wall, gave the two young farmers this piece of land to farm. Abu Jayyab and Al Alami partnered to make this dream a reality.

Abu Jayyab had trained and worked on CSA farms in the United States. He recalls going to the *hisbeh*, the





Community activities involving school children.



Aisha happy next to an olive tree.

main vegetable market in Al-Bireh, and watching large pallets of Israeli produce being delivered to the market. *There is no way to compete in this market*, he thought. The development of another model for Palestinian producers was critical. The CSA model ensures a direct relationship between the farmer and the consumer. Consumers are members or shareholders and support the small-scale farmer by paying for their share at the beginning of each season. The farmer delivers each week's harvested produce to CSA members. Both farmers and members understand and accept the inherent risk in farming.

Om Sleiman Farm's main goal included organic farming while ensuring a viable economic model for farmers. It was important to establish this farm without international donor support. Abu Jayyab recalled several examples of organic farms in Palestine, but all were established as a donor project. Their motto when establishing the Om Sleiman Farm was "Made with No Aid." This was critical, as our community could not believe in an economic model that would be viable as well as patriotic. Skepticism of such projects was high due to the impact of post-Oslo donor aid and the *NGO-ization* of Palestine. The two young farmers used their own resources – savings, tools, transportation, physical labor – to establish the farm.

In its first season, the Om Sleiman farm provided shares to eight families. And now in its fourth season, a total of fifteen families have joined. In the two years of its existence, the farm has doubled its size and capacity going from 26 raised beds to 50. They have also planted fruit trees, berries,

and perennials in an effort to increase the diversity of the shares in the future. The farm also hosts beehives, as bees are a beneficial member of the ecosystem and also produce honey. The long-term goal is to continue to provide good and clean produce to an increasing number of members, while also establishing an apprenticeship program for other Palestinians who would like to learn this model.

Abu Jayyab has since returned to the United States and continues to support Om Sleiman Farm virtually with the planning of the season harvest. Al Alami continues to work on the farm on his own and with the support of volunteers that he recruits periodically. There is a need for more CSA farms across Palestine, explains Abu Jayyab. It is a simple model with ethical principles that will contribute greatly to the Palestinian local economy.

Anyone interested in learning more can contact the farmers directly through their Facebook page, Om Sleiman Farm.



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