

# Couscous Day Newsletter

December.2022



*A delegation of 44 pilgrims from the U.S visited the Women Gathering for Couscous Production in Jericho Governorate in Palestine.*



"The pilgrimage was hosted by the Office of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) for the Catholic Diocese of Belleville, Illinois. Through CRS' encouragement in previous years, Catholics in the Belleville Diocese had been encouraged to purchase fair trade products from Al-Reef's U.S. partner, Equal Exchange."

- Cheryl Sommer, Catholic Relief Services Diocesan Animator



## *A visit previously planned since 2019*

Due to the limitations of the Covid-19 pandemic, the visit was postponed until 7<sup>th</sup>.December.2022. The arrangements and coordination of the visit were put in cooperation between Susan Sklar from *Equal Exchange* in the U.S, Cheryl Sommer and Al-Reef.



Visiting Jericho has been on the schedule of the pilgrim's visit to Palestine since 2019, and accordingly, Al-Reef arranged a day at the Women Gathering for Couscous Production so that the group can see the process of producing couscous and have a traditional Palestinian couscous meal prepared by the women of the cooperative. As well as buying Al-Reef's product from a booth put in place by Al-Reef's team.

***Al-Reef for Investment and Agricultural Marketing***, a Palestinian private shareholder limited company that was established in 1993 in an attempt to provide promotional, marketing, and manufacturing services for Palestinian agricultural products. It is owned by the Agricultural Development Association (PARC) and the Arab Agronomists Association (AAA).

Being a member of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO), Al-Reef adopts the principles of fair trade. Accordingly, it aims at organizing the efforts of Palestinian agricultural cooperatives and farmers to improve their social and economic situation through developing their production capacity and improving the quality of their products.

***Equal Exchange***, a Fair Trade organization in the U.S and a pioneer in selling fairly traded products sourced from small-scale farmers all over the world. It has been contributing for many years to supporting Palestinian farmers by marketing their products of olive oil and medjoul dates and fostering a long-term partnership with Al-Reef.



## *Learning about Al-Reef and the cooperatives*

**The Agricultural Development Association (PARC)**, a Palestinian non-governmental organization established in 1983 and a pioneer in national development that strives to develop the Palestinian agricultural sector, strengthen the resilience of farmers on their lands and support the marginalized groups and small-scale farmers.

**PARC** established Al-Reef in 1993 as its marketing arm, and both of them cooperate in field activities which mostly focus on pre-harvest operations which **PARC** mainly conducts by their technical staff of agricultural engineers.

The delegation of pilgrims was welcomed by Saleem Abu Ghazaleh, Al-Reef's General Director, and the members of the gathering.

The group learned about the establishment of the Palestinian Agricultural Development Association (PARC) in 1983 as a developmental and voluntary organization to serve Palestinian farmers during the absence of a Palestinian entity that offers agricultural services. In addition to learning about the establishment of Al-Reef through PARC in 1993 for the purpose of supporting farmers and cooperatives in developing and marketing their products in local and international markets.



The presentation also shed light on the formation of the Women Gathering for Couscous Production which started as an initiative by a group of women in Jericho. This gathering is currently registering as a cooperative which consists of 30 women of various age groups who produce couscous (maftoul) in the traditional Palestinian way, therefore preserving this tradition and keeping it alive among younger generations.



Cheryl Sommer and Saleem Abu Ghazalah

The group also got to hear about the challenges and struggles that the Palestinian farmers constantly face due to the practices of the Israeli occupation; particularly the confiscation of land and water resources, restriction of movement between governorates and all the widespread checkpoints across Palestine.



### *Connection Across Cultures and Religions*

Throughout learning about Al-Reef, the pilgrims found connection between the Catholic Social Teaching and Al-Reef's approach, work and principles. The Catholic Relief Services Diocesan Animator, Cheryl Sommer mentioned in her message after the visit that Saleem's presentation fit in perfectly with the Catholic Social Teaching that she shared on the bus with the pilgrims before they had arrived;

"I shared three brief points:

1. From Pope Paul VI in 1967 that people should be able to be "artisans of their own destiny."
2. From Pope John Paul II in 1981 that there is dignity in work and through our work we are cocreators with God.
3. From Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 that we should be building economic structures of justice. " – Cheryl Sommer

### *A Tour Around the Women Gathering for Couscous Production*

After the presentation, the group learned about the wheat mill which was recently installed at the gathering with the generous contribution of Al-Reef's partner Oxfam Fair Trade in Belgium who imports organic couscous within the framework of capacity building. Using this mill will contribute to the sustainability of the gathering and will provide the women members with additional financial income. It will also be available for the local community in Jericho and anyone who would like to mill their wheat for suitable prices.

The group also watched the process of producing couscous in the traditional Palestinian way as Saleem Abu Ghazalah explained to them the details of the production line in terms of manufacturing and packaging.



*The organic wheat* used to produce couscous is imported from Al-Zababdeh village in Jenin Governorate. It is grown by the farmer Yousef Fayyad who showed interest in converting to organic farming in 2016. Therefore, he coordinated with the Company of Organic Agriculture in Palestine (COAP) with the help of PARC and he eventually obtained the organic certificate for wheat. The imported organic wheat gets quality tested at Al-Reef's laboratory as well as certified Palestinian and Italian laboratories. After the results turn out to be good, the process of milling the wheat starts in order to start producing couscous.



Both the organic wheat and the Women Gathering are organically certified by the Company of Organic Agriculture in Palestine (COAP) which constitutes a prominent step towards healthier and safer agricultural and production practices, and an improvement of the Palestinian products' quality and capacity to be marketed in various international markets.

The couscous product is exported to Swedish, Italian, French, Spanish and Belgian markets. It is also sold in local Palestinian market.





Al-Reef's Couscous Pack



Oxfam Fair Trade's Organic Couscous Pack (Belgium)



Ideas' Couscous Pack (Spain)



Altromercato's Couscous Pack (Italy)



## Traditional Palestinian Couscous Meal



The delegation finally sat around the table and had a delightful traditional Palestinian couscous meal which consisted of the main dish (couscous, vegetables and chicken) along with vegetables soup, soft drinks, and some medjoul dates after the meal as a snack.

In the wonderful message sent by Cheryl Sommer after the visit, she commented: "While we had mostly gourmet meals prepared by professional chefs throughout our pilgrimage, people in the group commented that the meal that you provided for us was the best of all! Not only was the food delicious but it was a meal shared in relationship and that makes all the difference!"

### *The preparation of the meal*

The traditional Palestinian way of cooking this meal started with cutting a variety of vegetables (pumpkin, zucchini, carrots, potatoes and onions) and boiling them in a pot. Chicken is boiled in a separate pot, and the chicken broth is used to boil the couscous with some chopped onions, spices and olive oil. The boiled chicken is then spiced and roasted in the oven. After everything is cooked, couscous is put in a big tray topped by the boiled vegetables, hummus and roasted chicken.





On the side, Al-Reef's team prepared a booth that displayed a variety of Al-Reef's products of olive oil, medjoul dates, couscous, spiced thyme (za'atar), freekeh (Green roasted wheat), olive oil soap and almonds, so that the pilgrims could buy as they'd want.

Since it would be inconvenient to carry olive oil bottles with them on their way back to the U.S, many of the pilgrims ordered olive oil bottles online through Equal Exchange and have started receiving their orders recently, therefore achieving a prominent goal of the visit which is to promote products made by Palestinian farmers and cooperatives which helps to strengthen and spread the Palestinian narrative of struggles and injustice.



*Equal Exchange Private Labels  
for Organic Extra Virgin Olive  
Oil and Medjoul Dates*

