

The golden olive oil of the Galilee

By MIRIAM KRESH

An estimated 1.5 million tourists flocked to the Galilee in 2012, many seeking to escape the heat of the central and southern regions. Cool afternoon breezes and lush greenery soothed spirits weary of summer's sere brown landscape; riverside hikes and waterfalls beckoned to the hardy. But autumn in the Galilee has its charms, too. While clouds pile up in the sky with a promise of rain to come, olives ripen on the trees and the olive harvests begin.

The Olive Branch Festival – a celebration of the olive, its oil, and the communities that live by them – takes place in October and November across the Galilee. Visitors can enjoy tours of olive oil presses, culinary workshops, oil tastings and activities centered on the olive. It's a good opportunity to visit Druse and Circassian villages, absorbing rural scenery and an exotic atmosphere that makes visitors feel like they've stepped into another country or an earlier time.

Catching the end of this year's festival, *The Jerusalem Post* traveled to the Israel Olive Oil Board at the Hananya Farm. Prof. Adi Naali, CEO, sketched a picture of the country's modern olive oil industry.

"We work to increase the yield of Israel's olive trees and to maintain the high quality of our oil. And we fight against fraud," he said. "It takes 5-6 kilos of olives to produce 1 kilo oil, so it's not a cheap product. Those bargain olive oils on the market are adulterated with other oils and artificial colors and flavors. Always check the label on the bottle of oil before you buy. You should look for cold-pressed, extra-virgin or virgin olive oil, with acidity no higher than 0.8%. Even better is 0.5% acidity."

According to Naali, "the Olive Board issues a quality seal shaped like a drop of oil. The best brands carry that logo on their labels. The customer is thus assured of an olive oil that's traceable back to the very farm where the olives grew."

We learned that olives start to ferment from the moment of harvest. To preserve the oil's healthy properties and best flavor, they must be crushed as soon as they're brought in from the orchard.

"The big oil-exporting countries – Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece – handle huge quantities of olives," noted Naali. "Some of those olives sit in piles for several days while their quality deteriorates; some olives are picked past their peak. Our production is relatively small. We can harvest everything at peak and process it immediately."

Israeli olive oils like Saba Habib's Extra Virgin Baladi Blend, the Halutza company's Extra Virgin Picual and Pereg's Leccino won the Terraolivo Gran Prestige Gold award in the 2013 competition.

And how should we store our olive oil?

"The enemies of olive oil are heat, light and air. Keep your olive oil in a glass or steel container. If you open a big container, funnel it into something smaller and seal the original container until next time."

OUR DRUSE guides, Nivin Kizil Nadane and Mufid Abu Reesh, helped us pile into jeeps. We drove through the green hills to an orchard of olive trees said to be 2,000 years old. Dry, rocky soil cultivated into ridges crunched under our feet as

we walked around the venerable trees. The sweet, cool air, the blue quiet, and the beauty of the silvery-green leaves and fruit-laden branches against the hilly scenery compelled us into silence for a few minutes. The trees' enormous hollow cores opened out to support newer growth bearing good crops. These ancient trees were planted well apart to ensure that each would receive enough rainfall and sunshine in season. They have never received a drop of water except the rain that winter skies grant them.

A stroll through an irrigated orchard brought us to where local Druse workers were harvesting olives with modern machinery. As opposed to the age-old method of beating the trees, which breaks valuable branches, these rods with rotating paddles at the ends simply knock the fruit off. Reminding us that traditional ways still rule much of the harvest, a cheerful, white-scarved grandmother sat bare-foot on a tarp spread on the ground, winnowing the leaves from freshly-picked olives with her hands.

We visited the Saba Habib olive oil factory and visitors' center at Kibbutz Parod. Saba Habib himself explained how to tell if oil is true, high-quality olive: take a pinch of it between thumb and forefinger. If the drop stays whole and doesn't burst to dribble away, it's the real thing. A variety of hand-crafted soaps and cosmetic products made from local olive oil are sold at the company store, as are the oil and olives in brine.

We also had fun in an olive-pickling workshop. Set out on tables in the garden were meat-tenderizing mallets, chopping blocks, a bucket of raw olives, plastic jars and materials for brining. Each person took a mallet and banged raw olives to open their flesh, then filled the jars with them. Our guides showed us how to make brine and pour it over the olives, seasoning them with bay leaves, lemon slices, and chilies before pouring a little oil over the whole and sealing the jars. We are to keep the olives in their brine a month, then open the jars and enjoy eating them.

A visit to the village of Peki'in was a high spot in the Galilee olive tour. We trod stone-paved streets, passing houses, each with its cord of firewood stacked against a wall and a balcony supporting yellowing grape vines. The wall around the old spring at the center of town was a good place to settle down and hear about the history of the village and its inhabitants.



A Druse woman winnows olive leaves. (Miriam Kresh)



The Israeli olive oil quality seal. (Courtesy)

We enjoyed a fabulous kosher lunch at the Diwan al-Mukhtar, a Druse heritage museum where food is served by prior arrangement. Stepping into the dimly lit area, it seems like you've stumbled into Aladdin's cave. A thousand old artifacts decorate the interior. Colorful fabrics cover all surfaces. Ceremonial robes, copper platters, scimitars, wooden spoons, woven baskets and portraits of Druse patriarchs with huge mustaches hang against the walls. Couches placed along the length of the space invite cozy meetings. Chandeliers hanging from ceiling arches, oil lamps and candles placed everywhere illuminate the chiaroscuro, while sinuous Druse melodies lull your senses.

We ate a dozen different salads, spicy kebabs in a light, crunchy shell, bulgur with chickpeas, a marvelous eggplant moussaka, and sinyah, a flavorful meatball cooked in tehina. It's worth visiting the museum and reserving a meal there.

The well-known Savta Gamila soapworks is also located in Peki'in. The founder herself spoke about her childhood foraging in nearby fields for medicinal herbs alongside her wise-woman mother, and how she created a successful international business selling soaps perfumed with those distilled herbs.

The Olive Branch Festival lasts through Hanukka. It promises to be even fuller in the fall of 2014.

For more information about the festival, go to zait.galil.gov.il (in Hebrew).

To learn more about Druse and Circassian villages: www.jabel.org.il (look for the English page).

Saba Habib olive oil factory:

www.sabahabib.com/index.asp or (04) 684-9074.

Savta Gamila's soapworks:

www.gamila.com or (04) 992-0197.

Diwan al-Mukhtar: (04) 957-1880 or 052-283-4148.