There is nothing better than a cup of black tea brewed with Palestinian wild sage for an afternoon break! Sipping tea with Abu Saleh under the shade of his olive tree, one can understand in a deep way what it means to be a fair trade farmer and the significance of being a mindful consumer. A member of the Palestine Fair Trade Association (PFTA), Abu Saleh is one of over 1,000 farmers who produce organic certified olive oil for Canaan Fair Trade. His co-op in the village of Al ‘Araqa is one of forty-nine co-ops which comprise the PFTA and work closely with Canaan Fair Trade to find markets for their products. Through this partnership between socially responsible organic olive growers and a socially responsible business represented in Canaan Fair Trade (and downstream partners in Europe and the U.S.), as well as a strong base of conscientious consumers, farmers like Abu Saleh are finding hope in the midst of harsh economic and political realities. Um Hamza is a Canaan Fair Trade producer and a single mother who struggled financially. She says that “with the situation being so hard, I almost lost hope in ever being able to market my olive oil. When Canaan Fair Trade approached me, I asked my brother to help me buy more land, and I planted two acres of olive trees. Now I feel at ease, and I know that every year someone will come and buy all my crops, and that gives me so much emotional and economic stability.”

The role that companies like Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps play in the lives of people like Um Hamza and Abu Saleh is not a small one. As Canaan Fair Trade’s largest single buyer, Dr. Bronner’s sources more than 95% of their olive oil from Palestinian fair trade farmers through Canaan Fair Trade. With Canaan Fair Trade’s exports averaging 400 metric tons of olive oil per year at a value of $4 million per year, hope for a viable local Palestinian economy is sprouting.

Canaan Fair Trade’s notable success in specialty food stores, local co-ops and organic shops (such as Whole Foods) has also had a tremendous cross-cultural impact, since for Palestinian farmers the fair trade movement has given them more than just the obvious financial gains. At the same time that Canaan Fair Trade has doubled the price of their olive oil, changing the lives of over a thousand families, it has also built new bridges between different communities that have been separated by political conflicts and cultural stereotypes. As members of the global green movement, Palestinian farmers are finding their place again in the world, not as “unknown” and marginalized people but as active members of a worldwide network of sustainable development practitioners that is building relationships between people working towards an environmentally sound, economically viable and socially just world. Fair Trade in Palestine in particular has had an immense impact on how people view the West. While most Palestinians are restricted from traveling, their spirits have reached beyond their olive groves into esteemed grocery stores across Europe and the United States and through people who come to visit them.

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“My work in olive oil has introduced me to so many people from around the world, and I have learned new things. For example, before a man from Germany visited me, I did not know that growing potatoes close to my olive trees is not a good idea. Now I know a new fact, and with each visitor I have a new idea.” Looking at his daughters as he speaks, Abu Saleh says, “There is a difference between an awake person and a person who is closed. An awake person can learn from other people and other cultures, and he can live in dignity because he can work and survive.” But Abu Saleh’s appreciation for openness and cultural exchange does not stop at the thrill of receiving guests. He hopes that one day he can visit others around the world the same way people freely come to visit him, because he recognizes that there are so many people like him around the world who are left unknown. He continues, “Before we started selling our olive oil, I felt that the outside world used to think Palestine is a land without a people, but now when they eat my oil they know that we are here.”

Even as global events and political realities are creating false separations between people, the fair trade and green movements are bringing people back together by highlighting the importance of our environment in preserving our humanity and our connectedness as citizens of one planet. This is why, in a consumer-focused world, which particular bottle of olive oil, cup of coffee or beauty product you buy makes a world of difference, not only in the lives of the producers, but also in the bigger scheme of things where the choice to buy fair trade becomes a decision to learn about someone else somewhere else whom you may have never thought of before. People like Abu Saleh may not be world travelers, but their work in the fair trade movement and in their lands has given them wisdom to teach us. In the words of Abu Saleh, “We make the world beautiful or ugly depending on how we treat each other and the land we live in.”

Canaan Fair Trade is certified by IMO’s “Fair for Life” and Transfair USA, and is a member of the Fair Trade Federation.