

## **Olive Oil from Palestine**

### **Press conference held at the Chamber**

The Chamber hosted a press conference for a delegation of olive growers from Palestine on 9<sup>th</sup> June. They were in the country to build support among British consumers and retailers for their bottled organic olive oil, which over the last two years has been achieving increasing popularity in the UK.

The work of Zaytoun, a volunteer based promotion initiative in support of Palestinian agricultural sector, was also highlighted at the briefing. Zaytoun has been successful in introducing the quality extra virgin organic olive oil to the UK market as a fair trade product. The bottled olive oil, which retails at competitive prices, has been enjoying a wider uptake by UK consumers with a growing network of retail outlets across the UK agreeing to sell it.

The visiting Palestinian delegation had travelled to various parts of the country where they received a warm response for their call to support the cause of the Palestinian people by buying their officially certified organic product that is both delicious and healthy to eat.

On behalf of the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce, Mr Abdeslam El-Idrissi, Director of the Trades Services department, stated that the issue went to the heart of what the Chamber was all about and said that the A-BCC was ready to assist in the entry of Palestinian products into the UK market.

Atif Choudhury from Zaytoun described how the initiative had given hope to Palestinian farmers and their families who were suffering difficult conditions every day, just in order to get to work or to bring in the harvest. The annual harvest remained a key part of the social calendar for local communities and it had recently started to attract international volunteers willing to offer physical support during harvest time.

Zaytoun, founded by people sympathetic to the cause, was entirely staffed by volunteers at present, which meant that the promotion of Palestinian olive oil had to compete for market share against the professionally marketed, EU-based products from places like Greece and Spain, which were also in receipt of government support.

The Palestinian olive oil is officially registered as an organic product, which enables it to be exported to the European Union. The product is bottled in the country and transported to the UK where most of it is sold in advance through Zaytoun's network of outlets and customers. However, delays caused by customs and checkpoints reduce the shelf life of the product, one obstacle that needs to be overcome if the product is to have a real chance of developing a stronger overseas market.

Although Zaytoun promotes the product as fair trade, it is not yet part of the fair trade federation. Atif Choudhary believed that achieving fair trade registration would help the

product expand in the UK market. Zaytoun was also looking at promoting Palestinian dates, particularly for the use of British Moslems during the holy month Ramadan.

Mr Choudhary welcomed the support of the A-BCC for the attempt to reach out to more consumers in this country.

Jihad Abdo, Chairman of the Palestinian Olive Tree Association, representing farmers and farm workers, described the desperate situation in Palestine today, where half a million olive trees had been uprooted in the last few years and 76 thousand olive groves destroyed.

He outlined the aims of Al Zaytouna, an organisation established to protect and defend the rights of farmers and to bring them together in a co-operative to face the future challenges of global competition. Al Zaytouna was also examining technical issues required to improve the quality of the local olive oil. He said that Palestine's olive oil sector had not been developed over the last forty years because of the prevailing difficulties.

Tayseer Arbasi stated that despite all the problems, Palestinian farmers were determined to succeed. A true measure of their success is when their product reaches the shelves of British supermarkets and is enjoyed by the country's consumers.

The olive oil sector continues to play an important role in the Palestinian economy, he said, pointing out that today there were 100 thousand olive producing farmers. During the 60 day harvest season, the sector provided one million working days for Palestine workers.

Declaring that his people needed "trade not aid", Mr Arbasi urged everyone to buy and enjoy Palestinian olive oil.

Encouragingly, demand in the UK is rising faster than the supplies can satisfy at present. The meeting ended with a clear message, that the olive oil was a healthy option and an example of the excellent products that can come out of Palestine.