



Israel & Middle East

Ancient Miracle, Modern Treasure

by Scott Hertzberg

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In 1979, after finishing his service in the Israel Defense Forces, Guy Rilov took over the farm his parents had abandoned when he was six. His parents had raised cattle on the sloping land near Haifa, which once was an underwater volcano. Rilov cleared the overgrown fields and, with the help of friends, planted avocados.

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Like his parents, they kept the name Makura Farm, a Turkish name that is incidentally similar

 [Guy Rilov of Makura Farm](#)

Guy Rilov of Makura Farm

to the Hebrew word for underground spring (*makor*). Today Makura is a thriving farm with nearly every arable field full of organic avocados, lemons, persimmons, lychee fruit and olives.

In late November, I visited Makura for the first time. My wife and I have imported olive oil from the farm for the past three years, and I was long overdue for a visit. Guy and his son Stav, who recently became an official managing partner, led us on a tour of the orchards.

Accompanied by three dogs, we hiked from the flat fields at the center of Makura up to some of the hillside groves. The trees in Makura's orchards (*kerem* in Hebrew), fertilized with ample compost, looked strong and unstressed. Pests are controlled with traps and other organic techniques. Some of the trees planted early on, such as the avocados, are now enormous. Older, by far, are the giant olive trees in a small grove on the road into Makura, which were planted more than a thousand years ago.

Long-term access to adequate water is a major concern at Makura, as it is for most Israeli farms. Of all of their crops, olives produce decent crops with little irrigation. Olives from trees with minimal irrigation have higher levels of antioxidants. Irrigation basically waters down the level of antioxidants. Rilov explains that in the future olive oil will not only be judged by its flavor, but also by its antioxidant levels.



From left: Guy Rilov of Makura Farm, his son Stav and Scott Hertzberg during Scott's November visit

Having a diversity of crops helps make Makura economically sustainable. Going forward, olives will play a more important part among a mix of crops since they demand less irrigation.

Olives are playing an increasingly greater role at other Israeli farms, too. A few years ago, Kibbutz Gvat together with two neighboring *kibbutzim* in the Jezreel Valley in northern Israel converted water-hungry citrus orchards into olive groves. Manager Hagai Rabin showed me around the gigantic groves of olives, pointing out traditional European varieties and three Israeli varieties, all thriving in the rich soil of the legendary valley.

The three *kibbutzim* and other olive farms in the region send their olives to a cutting-edge processing plant in nearby *moshav* (village) Agev. Adolfo Levin, an Israeli agricultural extension agent who showed me around the multi-stage machine, says it is the best in Israel. More of an extractor that uses centrifugal force rather than a press, Levin says that the

Makura Farm in northern Israel

machine “does the best job possible considering that you cannot improve the quality of the oil in the olives on the tree and can only decrease the negative impacts of the extraction process.”

At Hagor, a *moshav* in central Israel, Shamna is an olive *kerem* and press open to visitors during the harvest. On the Shabbat I visited, families crowded the shop and picnic area. The farm is popular with people who not only want a fun day at a farm, but also want to avoid the fraudulent olive oil that often shows up in Israeli stores. Harvest festivals at olive farms have become very popular in Israel. Makura had 2,000 visitors in one weekend this fall.

Olive production is expanding in Israel as the crop replaces citrus and other crops that require more water and are less lucrative for the farm. Olives are not only central to the Hanukkah story; they are an increasingly important part of modern Israeli agriculture.

Top photo: Olive trees at Makura Farm in Israel.

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