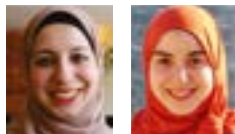


From Fresh to Frozen Made in Palestine



By Rana Salah and Aya Salah

The industry of homegrown frozen vegetables is rather small in Palestine. In fact, it is still new territory; only one company in Palestine manufactures frozen fruits and vegetables - and it has highlighted the need for this industry. The company's only competition comes from Israeli products.

In 2008, contracts were made with farmers in the areas of Tubas, Jenin, and Far'a to grow a new, special variety of potatoes that is especially suited for the making of French fries. Al-Salam Cooling, a sister company of Al-Salam Investment Group, provided them with a variety that was grown on a 50-acre plot of land. Today, this area has expanded to 2,000 acres of agricultural land that is used to grow potatoes. Once harvested, the potatoes are stored in freezers that cover an area of 3,000 square meters. Next, small quantities are taken to a factory. Each day, 10 tons of French fries are created in various shapes, ready for frying.

In the company's next phase, such vegetables as carrots, broccoli, and celery were added to the assortment. Farmers first began to plant in small areas (10 acres per vegetable type), and now have reached 500 acres per vegetable type. Some products, such as

green peas and green beans, are imported from Europe because they cannot be grown locally. Okra and *molokhiyya* are imported from Egypt.

The demand for frozen vegetables is high in Palestine, with business booming during Ramadan, when people love to buy the mixed vegetables (packages contain nine different vegetables) for soups. Other popular products include frozen peas and carrots, broccoli, strawberries, green beans, sweet corn, and peas. Moreover, the demand for frozen food has increased recently due to continuous quality improvements, as the company takes care of planting, packaging, marketing, and selling to stores. It is important to engage in aggressive marketing campaigns, and selling can be done in various ways, with customers ranging from wholesale distributors to local stores all across the West Bank and Gaza. Today, the market share for the Al-Salam brand name in the Palestinian market is about 35 percent. Some of the company's products are sold in bulk for other brand-name distributors.

Increased demand provided the incentive for Al-Salam management to investigate the need for upgrades in machinery and technology in order to be able to respond to new market trends with increased consumption of frozen vegetables and pre-prepared food. In 2014, the factory expanded its capacity from processing 100 kg to 300 kg per hour, and in 2017, from 300 kg to 3,000 kg per hour, using state-of-the-art machines and the highest German technology.



The freezing of potatoes and vegetables has created jobs. The company began with roughly 15 employees and now employs over 70 persons who work directly for Al-Salam Cooling; the company indirectly supports more than 500 families. In line with general policies in Palestine, the company cares about maintaining a female presence among its staff. As partnerships are essential to success, Al-Salam Cooling is the sole agent of New Holland Agriculture (a leading company in agricultural machinery) and provides farmers with tractors in exchange for planting potatoes and vegetables. Furthermore, the trading encourages farmers to increase the capacity of their lands in Area C, thus helping to cultivate lands that could be at risk of confiscation if left untended.

It is crucial to follow best practices in food-safety management, where the highest standard is the ISO 22000. Al-Salam Cooling is currently applying ISO 22000, and has its own private laboratory where it does microbiological, physiological, and other kinds of testing.





Another important factor is the need to preserve our environment. Conscious of the fact that factories need to decrease their negative impacts in order to be environmentally sustainable, Al-Salam Cooling uses machines that run on electricity, completely avoiding diesel fuel or petroleum products. Thus, no carbon or waste gases are released into the atmosphere. Furthermore, waste generated during the industrial processing of vegetables is re-used for other purposes.

Al-Salam Cooling is the first and only factory in the country to freeze vegetables planted on Palestinian lands, by Palestinian farmers, and sold to the Palestinian people. The company thus encourages the development of the local production wheel and aims to increase awareness among Palestinian consumers of the importance of purchasing Palestinian products. It furthermore hopes to expand and reach markets outside Palestinian borders and to raise the profile of Palestine as a viable exporter of quality products.

There is great potential for growth in the frozen-vegetable market in Palestine.



Rana Salah and Aya Salah are Palestinian-Canadian sisters. Rana holds a bachelor's degree in sociology (major) and teaching English as a second language (minor), along with a graduate certificate in business administration. She currently teaches English as a second language (ESL) in Hebron and enjoys volunteering for social initiatives. Aya has two bachelor's degrees, one in education and another in science. She currently teaches science at an elementary school and English as a second language in Hebron. She strongly supports local initiatives that empower the community.



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