

STRIKING GOLD AMID THE GREEN



To enter Deir Mimas, you must take a winding and steep road richly lined with olive trees that extends for miles. Famous for olive oil production (dating back to 5,000 B.C.), this charming village in the south of Lebanon is marked by a rugged and natural beauty. Its lush terrain, which covers 12 square kilometers, overlooks the Litani River and Beaufort Castle to the west and the snow-capped summits of Mount Hermon to the east.

Deir Mimas takes its name from the monastery of Saint Mema, which was built around 1404 A.D. The monastery fell into decay and was restored a number of times over the centuries, but in 2006 (during the July 2006 War) it was badly damaged. With financing from Qatar, the monastery was rebuilt and replaced with a much larger construction.

YEARS OF NEGLECT

The rich potential of Deir Mimas's 130,000 olive trees was virtually unused for around 24 years, during the time when the village and the district of Marjayoun, in which it is located, were occupied by Israel. Cut off from the rest of Lebanon and the outside world, olive oil production slowed dramatically. In May 2000, when Israel withdrew, Deir Mimas was a shell of its former self, and its infrastructure was in ruins after years of neglect. Furthermore, almost half of the population had emigrated – in particular to Toronto in Canada and Lansing in Michigan in the United States.

REVIVING THE OLIVE OIL INDUSTRY

However, the outward-bound people of Deir Mimas have maintained an enduring attachment to their land and an unwavering desire to revive and revitalize their village, even though their travels have taken them as far from home as North and South America, Arabia, and Australia. Today, Deir Mimas has a population of 500 (which doubles to 1,000 in the summer), and many of the locals have tried to revive its olive oil legacy. A century ago people from all over the country would come specifically to Deir Mimas to buy the finest olive oil. Today, things are drastically different, but the desire to make fine and pure olive oil still lives on. Currently three olive oil presses provide their services to olive farmers from Deir Mimas and surrounding villages. One of them is a state-of-the-art olive press imported from Italy, which is managed by two organic oil farmers, Anne Fawaz and Anwar Nakfour.



Anne Fawaz exports most of her olive oil to Austria and Germany. Unlike most mass-produced olive oil in Lebanon, her organic oil, under the name "Miriam's Gold," is meticulously filtered and uses only very green olives, thus giving her oil an aromatic and clean taste and a long shelf life of two years. Most commercially produced supermarket olive oil is unfiltered and dense (using only ripe olives), which means that its quality decreases faster.

Thanks to Anne and many others like her with passion and dedication to producing the best quality olive oil, Deir Mimas should hopefully one day be renowned again for making the best *zayt baladi* in Lebanon.

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Pictures and data on Deir Mimas (Lebanon) – courtesy of Mona and Kamel Morcos