



Al Baraka is the first commercial date farm company in Jordan and have maintained their status as the largest producer of dates

Sweet Taste of Success

No investor would have ever wagered on date farming in Jordan. Gulf countries did that; after all, they had the right environment and perfected the science and trade of date farming. But one Jordanian businessman tried and he's been thriving ever since. Two decades after ignoring the naysayers, the founder of the Al Baraka Farms is still in business and growing his export markets fast. By bucking conventional wisdom, Al Baraka has rewritten the rules, creating an entirely new export crop in Jordan. **By Razan Nasser**



IN THE CENTRAL VEGETABLE MARKET in Paris, people were gathered around her, pointing and laughing. It was not a good day for Nadine Al Naber, a day she will never forget. Yet there is no bitterness in her voice as she tells the story, only a half hidden smirk telling she proved them wrong.

And prove them wrong she did, when in 1989 her father Salim Odeh Al Naber decided to establish a palm tree plantation in Jordan to produce and export dates. It was considered at best a risky investment at the time, one so absurd that Paris' vegetable wholesalers laughed at the mere idea of it, even with the product in front of their eyes. The local market was very small and Jordan was not known for growing palm trees in the first place.

What began as an experimental farm with 2000 imported tissue cultured trees grew into ten plantations with 30,000 trees producing 2200 tons of dates annually under the "Al Baraka Farms" brand, supplying both local and international markets in Europe, Canada, America,

Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

According to Salim, in the beginning he believed there was zero risk involved in launching this business. A man described by his daughters, Nadine and Yasmine, as a genuine entrepreneur with a keen eye for business, he used to re-export dates from Iraq along side his family's company Naber & Co, which specialized in cargo, freight and customs clearance. In 1989, as the situation in Iraq began to degenerate, a new source of dates was in need; it was then that ingenuity stuck.

"There was no risk since the market for dates was already there, the weather and soil in Jordan is ideal for growing palm trees and Jordan's central location kept freight costs low, unlike South African dates for example. It was ideal," Salim explains.

Even so, establishing the Jordanian date business proved to be a challenge. At the beginning, people were skeptical even about the basic feasibility of growing dates in Jordan, explains Nadine, who has worked with her brother and

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sister alongside their father in building Al Baraka Farms. "The first season bearing fruit came six years after planting and produced exceptional fruit, yet people were still doubtful, especially in the Gulf where they were known for date production and had a hard time grasping the idea of importing dates from Jordan."

Al Baraka slowly gained the confidence of the international markets before entering the local market. "People in Jordan didn't eat dates much, mostly only in Ramadan. Once we saw people importing dates from Saudi Arabia, we offered our product locally," explains Yasmine, Salim's other daughter.

Al Baraka Farms sells to wholesalers

all over the world, targeting their product towards ethnic communities in France, UK and Italy to Malaysia, Kenya, Canada, the US and so on. "We did not try to market it as an exotic delicacy; instead, our markets were countries with large Muslim populations, people who know dates, love dates, miss dates... we provide them. It's a cultural food that carries a social and religious significance; Bedouins carry them in their pockets. Our culture values dates greatly," adds Yasmine.

Agriculture has been criticized in the Jordanian press as a waste of water, a precious resource which we are better off locating in other areas. A point Al Baraka Farms disproves with: "I guess this applies to small farmers who are not educated about what to grow. They plant tomatoes and bananas, which consume too much water and are then sold for less than their box costs. Agriculture has a future if it is well-studied and applied as a planned project on a large scale," explains Nadine.

This corporate approach to agriculture establishes well-planned operations that can exploit the existing potential of developing economies of scale. One such strategy was to extend the harvest season for dates from one month to four by spreading the plantations across the different climate zones in Jordan. Another wise operational move involved establishing packing houses at the plantation sites, which helped maintain freshness by decreasing the time it took the dates to reach customers abroad, as it is transported directly from the farms to the port rather than going through a central packing house. Al Baraka has saved up to 40 percent of its machine costs by designing and building their own machines under the guidance of Salim, who has experience in machinery from their other business.

Currently, Al Baraka's product range includes different varieties of fresh dates, dried dates and date paste (*ajweh*). Al Baraka has also extended its brand to include other side-products, such as pickled vine leaves and date-pollen water, which is said to relax the stomach. The company will also be marketing fresh fish, which is raised in tanks at their farms, and the byproducts of which are used for fertilization, maintaining an organic approach to agriculture with minimal chemicals involved.





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Another evolving branch of their work is planting date palm farms for commissioners. Each palm tree produces several offshoots a year; the offshoots that are not replanted on the farms are used to create new farms for investors in Jordan and abroad, or are bartered with neighboring farmers for a percentage of their produce. This might be considered as breeding competition, though Yasmine and Nadine see it differently, that if their company doesn't supply the offshoots to the competition, someone else is bound to, so they might as well make a profit out of it.

Al Baraka is the first commercial date farm company in Jordan and have maintained their status as the largest producer of dates, with the second largest farm estimated to be half their size and their market share surpasses 40 percent. Their growth rate during the past couple of years ranged between 10 and 15 percent and is expected to continue at this rate. Within three years, their plan is to increase production from 2200 tons to 4000.

"This sort of business relies mostly on capital investments (land, machines, etc). We've been fortunate to have had these assets for a long time and so increasing production is not expensive. To invest

now in land and capitals would be too costly, which is something we were bound to face eventually," explains Nadine.

One year ago, Al Baraka piloted a new product in Jordan: delicacy dates. This happened when Al Baraka stopped looking at dates as a regular supermarket fruit and realized its greater potential as base ingredient for value-added food delicacy. Experimentation began with dipping dried dates in chocolates, stuffing them with nuts and covering them with coconut and spices. The company established its unique retail outlets on Mecca Street and in Madaba to sell the newly branded food delicacies.

These new delicacies are now positioned parallel to chocolate: ideal for a gift food basket and perfect for serving guests as well as a local corporate gift item; they even started marketing them as Christmas gifts. Consumer response has been very positive, and in the market testing phase, the issues of quality, consistency and shelf-life were analyzed and addressed. Now, Al Baraka believes the rest of the world is ready for their gourmet dates.

The company is currently in negotiations with various retailers in the UK to

sell these delicacies, along with their other date

products under the Al Baraka Farms brand name, rather than through wholesalers as generic products. This is a big step for the Jordanian company, as it moves away from their niche market and into global markets.

"We are currently working on developing our marketing strategy and packaging, which we hope will be both simple and striking. Each year, we have been focusing on different areas of our business, mostly involving our product. Now that we have achieved a strong product that we are confident with, combined with an increased marketing spending, hopefully it will be a big year for Al Baraka," says Yasmine.

Even with great strides accomplished, Yasmine is realizing that there's plenty of room for improvement to succeed in the tougher global market. "Better brand coordination, stronger image and higher visibility are at the top of the list for the coming year," she admits. ♡

