THE REAL COLD-PRESS OLIVE OIL

Posted on May 7, 2011 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

Vahe H. Apelian, 7 May 2011

The shelves of the grocery stores are full of “virgin” or “extra virgin” olive oil. Most, if not all of these bottles claim that their content is the result of olives subjected to “cold press” and are bottled after collecting the oil from its “first pass”. I have bought and tasted many in colored fancy bottles. Transparent bottles alter its taste due to oxidation. However, I have yet to come across to one that tasted nearly like the olive oil I tasted in my childhood that came from Nofer’s Mangana, in Keurkune, Kessab. The olive oil was stored then in tin cans that were also the standard containers for storing molasses and for fetching water from the village’s spring on the back of the family’s donkey. I am not sure if mangana is a Turkish word. It may be. However, much like many other Turkish words it has become part and parcel of Kesbenok, the mostly Armenian derived dialect of Kessab. Nofer’s Mangana remains a cherished legacy of a long bygone way of life in Keurkune.

Vahe H. Apelian, 7 May 2011

The shelves of the grocery stores are full of “virgin” or “extra virgin” olive oil. Most, if not all of these bottles claim that their content is the result of olives subjected to “cold press” and are bottled after collecting the oil from its “first pass”. I have bought and tasted many in colored fancy bottles. Transparent bottles alter its taste due to oxidation. However, I have yet to come across to one that tasted nearly like the olive oil I tasted in my childhood that came from Nofer’s Mangana, in Keurkune, Kessab. The olive oil was stored then in tin cans that were also the standard containers for storing molasses and for fetching water from the village’s spring on the back of the family’s donkey. I am not sure if mangana is a Turkish word. It may be. However, much like many other Turkish words it has become part and parcel of Kesbenok, the mostly Armenian derived dialect of Kessab. Nofer’s Mangana remains a cherished legacy of a long bygone way of life in Keurkune.

Nofer Apelian established in Keurkune the first and only olive oil press in greater Kessab at a time when sheer human muscle drove the industry. The cold press consisted of a long and large wooden column that rotated on its longitudinal axis, one end of which was at ground level and the other at the ceiling of the two-story building. Nofer, in fact, had removed the ceiling of a room in their house and converted it into the two-story high olive oil press. Their house and consequently the press stood in the center of the village, right across my maternal grandmother’s ancestral house.
If I remember correctly the number, there were three wooden handles that were fastened into this wooden column. Able-bodied young men pressed the wooden handles against their chests, grabbed the handles from underneath with their arms and pushed the column rotating it on its long axis. As the column rotated a thick rope started coiling on it as it lifted a horizontal wooden platform against the stationary one. In between the two platforms minced olives were layered between burlap bags. The harder the men pushed the more oil oozed out of the minced olives. The whole process was a test of strength under the critical eyes of us kids watching the whole process and shouting out loud who among the men were the strongest and pushed the hardest. I admit though

at times our nagging outspokenness raised the rage among some of the men who would not have hesitated to teach us a lesson or two had they been able to catch us fleeing their chase. After the last drop of oil was squeezed the men would alert each other to simultaneously let lose of the central column that now swirled back fast on its axis to release the tension it was subjected to.

That was the second and the last phase for processing the harvested and washed olives that were first crushed outside in a flat stone mortar upon which a huge round shaped stone wheel was placed. A hole was dug through this large stone along its horizontal axis. Do not ask me how and what kind of tools the villagers used to manually carve such a smooth hole through the middle of this large stone. Through this hole a long wooden handle was placed that had a hole at its far end that went over the central wooden axis in the middle of the mortar. The indispensable and man's most obedient servant ever, the donkey, did the job. Ropes from the wooden handle were attached to the donkey and the donkey thus pooled the stone wheel over the olives to mince it.

Along with the oil, the process resulted in another bi-product, the remains of the minced olives that Kessabtis used to prepare one of their tastiest bread ever, Djeftuon Heots, i.e. Djeftuon Bread. As to the word Djeftuon, it is an authentic Kesbenok word whose origin seems to have lost in obscurity. My mother, many a time, told me the story of one of the Pastors of Keurkune who, to his wonderment and puzzlement, came across a large family sitting cross-legged on the floor around a table. Each member of the family held a loaf of bread under their arm, repeatedly cut morsels out of it and dipped it into a singe bowl placed in the center of the ground table and savored it with a mouth watering voraciousness. It turns out that the family had placed pomegranate molasses in olive oil in the bowl and dipping into it. For those who have tasted the pomegranate molasses made in Kessab can only appreciate the exquisite taste of these two in a bowl when tasted with freshly prepared bread in the family oven.

Those who saw Godfather III may remember the scene when an aging Mafiosi meets a professional assassin to have Don Corleone done with it. Before going into the details of the macabre plan, he dips into olive oil and tastes it and utters-"only in Sicily". However, as far as I am concerned, it was only the olive oil from the mangana Nofer Apelian set up in Keurkune in an era long by gone now from our midst. Keurkune has also changed to have any resemblance of the way it was then. Not only my taste buds, but my whole being longs for that real cold press olive oil taste and the way of life that went along with it in the tranquility of the once exclusively Armenian enclave called Keurkune.