



Bonnie Stewart and Marvin Spira participated in a conference among Arabs and Israelis in Tiberias, Israel, on dates, olives and tomatoes.

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Men in Grocery Stores: A Step to Peace?

By Don Harrison

The photograph (at right) that Bonnie Stewart brought back from Tiberias, Israel, shows a group of men clustered around a produce display busily taking notes.



It shows history in the making, she says. And, no, Stewart was not making a wisecrack about men *finally* doing the family grocery shopping.

Stewart is the executive director of the Hansen Institute for World Peace, which is operated under the auspices of the San Diego State University Research Foundation.

The men in the photograph were participants in a three-day meeting earlier this month co-sponsored by the Hansen Institute and the Peres Center for Peace, bringing together officials from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Egypt to discuss possible joint marketing of three important agricultural products common to all four nations: olives, tomatoes and dates.

Under the guidance of Marvin Spira, a San Diegan with vast experience in food marketing, the conference's participants went to the Israeli supermarket to do some basic research on the three product lines.

While this was hardly a revelation, it was the other side of the ledger for many of the conference attendees, whose own areas of expertise were in production rather than marketing. These were people who were experts in such matters as increasing the yield, improving irrigation, fighting the beatles and the flies, and increasing productivity in the greenhouses and in the fields.

At the Supermarket

At the supermarket in Tiberias, the officials — some of them government officials, others academics — noted that "there was very little tomato juice and the arrangement on the shelves, instead of being in one location where you have all the various [canned] tomato products, or all the juices, it was scattered around. So the suggestion was that such products were not very important items for the Israeli market," Stewart related.

On the other hand, this particular supermarket "had a large representation of olive oil, both imported and domestic," she said. "But among the things we were looking for were specialty olive oils.

"In our markets we have olive oils with different types of flavoring, like basil, olive oil for cooking, baking, olive oils for salads," Stewart said. "So we were trying to assess the range of olive oils; I think it was much more limited at the supermarket that they went to."

Spira later explained that the idea of the exercise was for the Arabs and Israelis to "see what was on the shelves and to figure 'where they could place a product that was somewhat different, new and innovative to compete with what was on the shelf. What would they have to do to compete with all the products? Tomato juice, for example: maybe a brand fortified with vitamins?"

"I asked to talk with the store manager and had him describe what he was looking for, what kinds of products he felt were needed — they enjoyed it," Spira said after the multinational teams completed their store surveys.

Spira said the small supermarket in Tiberias was a good place to perform the exercise because it was one in a chain of stores, all of which have similar product configurations.

On another field trip, the Arab and Israeli professionals, along with students from the different countries, went to a specialty date store "maybe the size of a 7-Eleven, where they had 30 to 40 different date products," he said. "They had other things as well, but primarily dates. At the end of the tour there, I gave a lecture about innovation, market entry and so on. The store owner was there — I saw her in the corner — and I invited her in front of the group and she corroborated what we were saying."

Learning Together

The reasons that the Peres Peace Center and Hansen Foundation for World Peace are interested in such projects is that in the process of learning together, the Arabs and the Israelis form friendships transcending some of the political differences among their countries, according to Stewart.

"It is one thing to e-mail or phone each other; it is a whole other level to actually meet together, to go into a food market together, to do a hands-on activity or to go on the bus together," Stewart said. "That is where a lot of work is done in networking. You sit on the bus together and in the seat next to you is maybe a Palestinian or an Israeli, or you are walking through the groves and you are sharing information. It is a difficult thing to measure, but it is the process of relationship building, building trust and you can't get that until you've met face-to-face."

"One fellow, who is the president of the Palestinian Olive Board, mentioned that one aspect of this process is that most of the people involved were professionals, with families and children, and so what was accomplished there, when they went back to their countries, would be told to their neighbors and to their families, and would have an impact in a positive way."

More to be Done

There are many steps to be completed, and much more research needs to be done, before the four countries could start marketing their products jointly, Spira said. But he added that he would not be surprised if a product, emphasizing its own peace benefit, were brought to market within three years.

"Why don't we create an olive oil from Israel and Palestine, blend them and sell it for peace?" Spira asked. "It would illustrate the fact that they are doing something together that necessitates cooperation and takes effort. The same thing is true with dates or tomatoes or anything. We could do a branding."

As an American Jew, Spira said he is thrilled by this unfolding peace process. Having attended a previous meeting with many of the same people in Cairo, he was greeted as an old friend upon his arrival in Tiberias.

"We saw each other and we embraced and kissed on both cheeks — a Palestinian who is the head of an agricultural department, together with a man from Egypt," he said. "This is what it is all about. It is a wonderful project. I got into it to see if I could do something. I am hooked!"

Harrison is the editor and publisher of San Diego Jewish World. This story was originally published on Dec. 14, 2007 in the [San Diego Jewish World](#).



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