The Jaffa Orange: How Palestine's Orange Became an Israeli "Jaffa" Brand



In British supermarkets you can buy oranges labelled **"Jaffa"** that were grown in Peru or South Africa. As for Jaffa itself, the city that gave the orange its name, most of its people were expelled in 1948, the **Zionist occupation** seized their groves, and the city's name became a trademark that an Israeli board licenses to whoever pays.

This is the story of **the Jaffa orange**: a fruit developed by Palestinian farmers in the 19th century that became Palestine's most famous export and the emblem of a city once called the "Bride of the Sea," and that after the **Nakba** was turned into a symbol of a state built on the ruins of its owners.

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Orange groves around Jaffa before the Nakba. (Use a licensed archival photo or one from the Our Palestine archive.)

Shamouti: an orange developed by Jaffa's farmers

Oranges had been grown in the Levant for centuries, but **the Jaffa orange** as the world knows it was born in the mid-19th century. Palestinian farmers around Jaffa, under Ottoman rule, developed a new variety called **"Shamouti,"** which arose from a mutation on a "Baladi" orange tree, according to Wikipedia. Israeli writer **Janna Gur** credits its development to a grower named **Anton Ayub**, according to Tablet Magazine.

The Shamouti had qualities that made it ideal for export:

- **A thick, easy-to-peel skin** that protected the fruit on long sea voyages.
- **Few seeds** and a sweet taste.
- **Excellent storage**, allowing it to reach Europe in good condition.

In other words, the "Jaffa orange" is not simply an orange grown in Jaffa, but a crop variety **developed by Palestinian farmers** through their own skill and experimentation.

The golden age: from 200,000 oranges to millions of crates

With steamships cutting the journey to Europe, Jaffa orange exports took off:

Year	Jaffa orange exports
1845	About 200,000 oranges
1870	About 38 million oranges
1900	About 650,000 crates
1930s	Tens of millions of crates a year

Sources: Wikipedia, Arabi Post and Zochrot.

In 1870 a German export firm first used the name "Jaffa" as a brand, and the fruit reached global markets. Between the two world wars, citrus made up about **75% of Palestine's exports**, according to Tablet Magazine. By 1939 the groves employed more than 100,000 workers.

Who owned the groves?

The early groves were mostly owned by wealthy Palestinian merchants. With Jewish immigration under the Mandate, Zionist bodies bought many groves, until by 1928 Jews owned about half of the region's orchards, and their production overtook Arab production in 1933. But Arab production **regained the lead during the Second World War**, according to Wikipedia. Palestinian groves remained a core part of the industry right up to the eve of the Nakba.

Jaffa: a city built by the orange

In Jaffa the orange was not just a crop but the economy of a whole city. The trade linked Jaffa to the markets of Europe and the Mediterranean, and supported **banks, shipping and transport firms, and import-export businesses**, providing thousands of jobs, according to Zochrot.

Jaffa thus became the **"Bride of the Sea,"** one of Palestine's most modern and open cities before 1948: a port, printing presses, newspapers and cinemas, with groves stretching to the horizon, filling the spring air with the scent of orange blossom.


Jaffa port: where Palestinian oranges set out for the world. (Use a licensed archival photo.)

1948: groves without their owners

In the Nakba of 1948, the Israeli occupation expelled most of the people of Jaffa and its surrounding villages. After the war, the occupation state confiscated the groves of the displaced and handed them to Jewish settlers. The 1950 **Absentees' Property Law** transferred ownership of everything displaced Palestinians left behind to the state's "Custodian of Absentee Property," according to Zochrot.

Harsher still, some farmers who remained in the country became **day labourers** in the very groves their families had cultivated for generations, picking oranges from their grandparents' trees for those who had seized them.

Wikipedia notes that the citrus industry was later portrayed as a Labour Zionist project "with no Arab presence," even though many Arab groves were taken from their owners after 1948.

From a symbol of Palestine to a symbol of Israel

The orange was a symbol of Palestine before the Nakba; one 1929 proposal for a Palestinian flag even included it. After 1948 the symbol was turned around:

- In the 1950s and 1960s the orange became **an emblem of the occupation state**, and Tel Aviv was nicknamed the "Big Orange."
- Israeli citrus peaked in the early 1970s, covering more than 100,000 acres and exporting about a million tonnes of "Jaffa" oranges a year.
- Israeli writer Janna Gur called the Jaffa orange "a symbol of Jewish-Arab

collaboration," but acknowledged that after 1948 Palestinians came to see it as a symbol of their forced exile.

The fruit developed by Jaffa's farmers and exported by its merchants thus became the emblem of a state that expelled them.

"Jaffa" as a trademark: Peruvian oranges under Jaffa's name

Then came the decline. From the 1980s Israeli citrus shrank amid competition, water shortages and rising land prices, as growers sold land to developers. Groves fell from a peak of 500,000 dunams to about 180,000, according to Globes. In the 2019/2020 season only 42,000 tonnes of oranges were picked and about 2,000 tonnes exported, according to Tablet Magazine.

But the name survived, and became a commodity in its own right:

- **Who owns the name**: the "Jaffa" appellation of origin is owned by the Citrus Division of Israel's Plant Production and Marketing Board, according to World Trademark Review.
- **Licensing**: British retailer Tesco pays the Israeli board about **NIS 1 million per season** to use the "Jaffa" brand, according to Globes.
- **Oranges not from Jaffa**: citrus grown in **Peru and South Africa** is sold under this brand when Israeli fruit is out of season, according to The Jewish Chronicle.
- **Upheld on appeal**: an Israeli appeals board upheld the "Jaffa" appellation of origin even though it was used to market oranges grown in South Africa.

Consider the irony: the name "Jaffa" can be stuck on an orange from Peru, as long as the Israeli board is paid. Yet the displaced Palestinian from Jaffa, owner of the grove and the name, has no right to return to his land.

The "Jaffa" trademark: a Palestinian city's name licensed onto oranges from Peru

and South Africa.

The Land of Sad Oranges

In Palestinian memory the Jaffa orange did not remain a fruit; it became a symbol of exile. In 1958 Palestinian writer **Ghassan Kanafani**, a native of Acre, wrote his story ***The Land of Sad Oranges***, published in a collection of the same name in 1962. It follows a family driven from Jaffa to Acre and then to Lebanon, the father carrying an orange from his land, according to Arabi Post.

One of its best-known lines says that **oranges wither when the hand that waters them changes**. As if Kanafani foresaw what was to come: groves that flourished in their owners' hands withered once they were taken from them, and today little remains of them but a name for sale.

The Jaffa orange is the story of the Nakba in a single fruit: farmers who developed a variety, merchants who built a city on it, and an occupation that seized the land and then the name, turning both into a commodity. But the Palestinian who carries in memory the scent of orange blossom in Jaffa knows that a name alone cannot make the original.

Frequently asked questions about the Jaffa orange

Is the Jaffa orange Palestinian?

Yes. Palestinian farmers developed the Shamouti variety, known worldwide as the Jaffa orange, around Jaffa in the mid-19th century under Ottoman rule, about a century before Israel existed.

What is the Shamouti orange?

An orange variety that arose from a mutation on a "Baladi" orange tree near Jaffa, with a thick, easy-to-peel skin, few seeds and excellent storage, making it ideal for

export.

How large were Jaffa orange exports before the Nakba?

They grew from about 200,000 oranges in 1845 to 38 million in 1870, then to tens of millions of crates in the 1930s. Citrus made up about 75% of Palestine's exports between the two world wars.

What happened to Jaffa's groves in 1948?

Most of Jaffa's people were expelled in the Nakba, and the occupation state confiscated their groves under the Absentees' Property Law and gave them to settlers; some who remained worked as day labourers in their former groves.

Who owns the "Jaffa" trademark today?

The Citrus Division of Israel's Plant Production and Marketing Board, which licenses the name to retailers such as Tesco for about NIS 1 million per season, even on citrus grown in Peru and South Africa.

What is "The Land of Sad Oranges"?

A short story written by Ghassan Kanafani in 1958 about a Palestinian family driven from Jaffa in 1948. It became a literary symbol of the orange's link to the Nakba and exile.

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