

Rafram Chaddad was born in 1976 on the island of Djerba, Tunisia. His grandfather was head of the island's Jewish community, one which in Tunisia as a whole has now greatly diminished, becoming almost inexistent, even in its capital, Tunis, a city once alive with Jewish culture. In 1978 the family decided to leave the country, relocating to Jerusalem, where Rafram was raised. After finishing his art studies, he went on to live between different parts of Europe and Israel, finally opting to return to Tunisia in 2015.

Rafram is hard to define. On the one hand, he's a multidisciplinary artist, often working with sculpture, installation, and video; a storyteller who draws from his family's rich history. On the other, he's a self-taught food expert, one with a particular interest in the Jewish-Arab cuisine of North Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, and importantly the historical circulation of recipes and food culture throughout these neighbouring regions. Through his culinary research, he aims to strip recipes of nationalist sentiment, mapping their journeys and modifications through regions and time, and returning them to the

# RAFRAM CHADDAD

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people, cities, markets, and streets that created them. In 2010, on a research trip to Libya, where he was documenting places of Jewish cultural significance, Rafram was kidnapped by the Libyan secret police, and was held for six months in Tripoli's infamous Abu Salim prison, where he was tortured and kept in solitary confinement. Recently, from his rooftop apartment on an intensely hot afternoon in the neighbourhood of Le Kram, a fisherman's village on the outskirts of Tunis, full of decadent colonial architecture painted in a blinding white with electric blue detailing, he tells me about his life-changing experience. It's an improbable tale of escape, involving private jets, an Austrian millionaire named Martin Schlaff, and the son of the Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi. Ten years later and still a self-proclaimed optimist, Rafram seems to be remarkably at ease with what happened to him. Over a plate of homemade *marmouma*, and with Algerian-born French singer Lili Boniche playing in the background, he tells me how he has devoted his artistic practice to living well, and slowing down his life in order to revel in the everyday; in eating, sharing, and creating.

apartamento - Le Kram, Tunis



What you're smelling now is the neighbours preparing something called *mechouia*, which is made with roasted peppers. Very nice.

How is it made?

They roast the peppers, add olive oil, some roasted tomato, and crushed caraway seeds. Sometimes they add capers or tuna or eggs on top. It's the most popular entrée here.

A kind of antipasto?

We call it *kemia*. I have one you can try, it's a *kemia* called *marmouma*, which is like tomato confit. It's a few days old but that's OK, it's a confit. Here, it's good with bread. We can make the pasta with the capers now, if you like?

*On our way to meet Rafram, Adrià and I pass through the Italian island of Pantelleria, whose name come from the Arabic 'Bint al-Riyah', meaning 'Daughter of the Winds'. It's only 46km from Tunisia. Still, we had to fly to Palermo and then Rome in order to catch a flight to Tunis—there are no longer any direct flights or ferries connecting the two places. We bring with us a recipe from the island: a simple pasta dish with capers, lemon zest, and olive oil, a gesture that turns out to be fitting.*

So it's equal amounts of capers and lemon zest. That's it?

Yeah, like a handful of the two, and olive oil. OK, I'll do it like that, but I've only got limes, it's very hard to find lemons right now.

*Rafram adds a few personal touches to the dish: slow-cooked garlic, sardines, parsley, and a local bottarga he gets from his bottarga guy.*

Earlier you were telling me about the book you're working on.

Yes. I never thought I'd write a book about food. The most annoying thing that people usually ask me is if I'm going to do a book. That and if I'm going to open a restaurant, but that really has nothing to do with me or my life.

But even so you've decided to do a book?

A cookbook, actually. I'm really excited about it.

What's the focus?

I've wanted to do something about North African cuisine for years, something intelligent. It's connected to the politics of Israel, where

I grew up. Israel has appropriated different types of food with Arabic roots, mostly Palestinian cuisine and Jewish-Arab cuisine, like the *shakshouka*, for example—which is something people don't talk about a lot. One of my best friends in Tel Aviv is an amazing cook. His family is originally from southeast Turkey, close to Gaziantep and Aleppo. Three years ago I took him there and he discovered the food he had always made at home, but in a restaurant in Turkey, and he was like, 'Wow'.

From that trip, an image of what happened to Jews that had left the region for Jerusalem began to emerge, and I realised that through food I could tell the story of Jewish people with an Arab background, together with non-Jewish Arabs. And I could expand the idea into this thing about the exchange of food in the region. If you start with the Ottoman Empire, then you can go from Thessaloniki to Istanbul, from Aleppo to Jerusalem, then to Cairo, and all the way back to Tunis. Along the way you'll find many recipes and places related to food that have been affecting and have been affected by this circulation. It also breaks down this whole country thing, it strips national sentiment away from food and brings it back to the people and the regions. This book is about three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa—and the food that has been exchanged between them.

How will you document it all?

I'll go on a journey that avoids countries. All they do is separate; they don't have anything to do with the actual food. I'll go back to a theoretical year, like 100 years ago, and map the recipes that today star all over the world, now that food has become so fashionable everywhere you go. The aim is to collect roughly 100 recipes, and we'll have portraits of the people who make the food, the craftspeople, the people on the street, in the markets. There will be no studio shooting, only real life. We'll capture the food, the ingredients, the processes. It won't be divided into chapters, like 'sweets' and then 'vegetables', it'll be all mixed together. The book's not about countries, but cities and streets.

Creatively speaking, do you think it's good for you to be based in Tunisia?

Not really, because it's hard to work here; it's too comfortable. I want to stay in the house forever. I could stay here for a week without stepping outside. For me, to work is to leave





the house. When you live in Europe or somewhere like that you make more art automatically because of everyone around you. Here you have your thoughts and things, it's OK, but if you manage to survive by what you do, you don't want more than that. The rent is low. It's crazy to compare here with New York, but it's really the other extreme. There you need to work a lot, sell a lot, to sustain your life.

You've worked a bit with the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija in the past, on food-related installations. Are you going to do anything more with him? We don't have anything planned now; we don't live in the same place, but when we meet up things happen.

Would you consider cooking as part of your artistic practice?

I try to separate food from my art practice. For me it's a different thing. It's more practical. Art is more about asking questions. At the same time, food is a very interesting cultural act that can enter into artistic practice. I happen to be a food expert. It just happened. I was curious, year after year. It relates to me wanting to live a good life. I don't want to work in a crazy world where I have to make money and establish a restaurant. Although food is more limited than many other things, because you have lots of rules. There are rules about tomatoes, about olive oil. But if you can learn those rules, then you can go really deep into



He has places all over, right?

He has studios in Hong Kong, Berlin, and Chiang Mai. And in New York of course. That's the thing: once you are in the middle of the art scene things happen so fast, because people have this passion to produce art. I don't have that passion so much; my passion is to live. They have a passion to make more shows, and when you're around they just put you in. When I lived in Germany, every two weeks there was something. I don't miss it, but it's amazing how it changes—if you're in the middle of the scene or if you're in the middle of life. Rirkrit's a good example, because of course he's invited to millions of things every day, so every time I meet him things happen.

the whole thing. You can make the perfect whatever: tiramisu, tomato sauce, pasta. It's easy if you understand what's behind it.

Is it really all about rules?

It's half rules, half emotions. And memory. If you understand the story behind something, you can make it. That's what happened to me. Fifteen years ago, I didn't know how to cook. Then I started travelling, I'd see something good, I'd start looking into the ingredients. You begin to discover these insights about food, and you begin to compare them. In the way that music meets art, architecture meets art, food also meets art. But art for me has no rules, nothing definitive. It never tells you what



to do. It's the opposite; you're doing your thing, it's about you, and that's it. Food is an excuse to interact. This is the most important thing: interaction. And of course now because of capitalism the whole culinary scene has become a huge thing all around the world, which is strange to me because food was always there. People were eating lunch and dinner; if you don't, you die. When money is involved people start to invent titles, to try and create this other food culture, which is celebrity culture. Chefs become stars, and for the sake of prestige capitalism, they then say they are artists.

Do you travel a lot?

In Tunisia, yes, but I cannot go to neighbouring countries. You know I was in prison in Libya? I was wanted by Interpol for two years, so I cannot go there. I can't go to Algeria for the same reason, because I might pop up on some list and could run into trouble. But the neighbourhood to the north, like Palermo, for example, of course. I consider this to be part of my neighbourhood as well. It's only 100km from here. Algeria is 600km away. I want to break these rules that say there's Africa and there's Europe, that say Malta is Europe and Tunisia isn't, despite the fact that Malta is south of Tunisia.

I wasn't sure if you'd want to talk about Libya.

There are many interviews, but they're all horrible. There was one for an online magazine called *Tablet*, saying that in prison I saved myself because of the food or something.

Because you would talk to the prison guards about traditional Libyan recipes.

This was nothing. I didn't fucking survive Abu Salim prison because I loved the couscous! The writer connected it to some theme she had going on. Now her article is the second article that comes up if you Google my name. There's my website, which doesn't work, and then this. I don't want people to see me as the guy that managed to survive Libyan prison because of the food.

It sucks.

It'd be interesting to make a movie about it.

About prison?

About the dreams.

What do you mean?

I survived those six crazy months because of

my dreams. All you could do was dream, about girls, life, places. I was really happy there, in my head. It really affected me, this dream thing. I discovered that I could live my life outside, but actually I was just dreaming in prison.

How did it work?

I would wake up every morning and start dreaming. And even though I saw the prison cell in front of me it was like a dream. It was very powerful. And nobody interrupted it because I was completely isolated. I'd dream I was on the sea in Algeria, palm trees all around me. My uncle had told me about this drinking game they used to have there, before it was an Islamic country. Everyone would drink *boukha*, which is fig grappa. Whoever could stay on their chair the longest could take the money on the table. I could drink a lot without falling off. Finally I won, and I got up to take the money. Then I started to fall, and I'd wake up in prison. I'd stand up again and this time I'd be in Paris with somebody I like, and we'd go for something to eat. I'd dream about my father, who reminded me not to fall asleep; if I fell asleep, I went back to prison.

You could make yourself believe that it was the other way around. Were you on your own the whole time?

Yes, I didn't even have a toilet, I had to shit on the floor. It was horrible, but if I'd had people around me I couldn't have lived in this dream thing. The movie would be about the dreams, not about prison, because prison was not happening. It's like life is not happening unless you dream. On the one hand it's the worst thing that can happen to a person—of course dying is better than torture—but still, it was OK. The idea would be to make a very colourful movie about a very grey time. Rirkrit suggested that Jack Black could play me.

Would there be flashbacks of real prison?

There would be nothing about the prison, because there was nothing there. Prison is a cube. What happened there was inside my head.

When you got out, you flew to—

I didn't get out; it was an escape. I escaped to Vienna.

What was Martin Schlaff's role?

It was his private jet. He's this multimillionaire, ex-Stasi guy. Crazy stuff. Assad,





Gaddafi, Avigdor Lieberman in Israel—all over the world shady people like these guys are his friends. Anyway, his birthday is on August 7—August 8 was my escape—and every year he celebrates his birthday in Sardinia. The son of Gaddafi, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, is one of his friends. And he was at the party in Sardinia.

When were you in prison?

In 2010. From February to August.

How did you know Saif?

My cousin knew him very well. When I was in prison he tried to secure my release several times. The thing is, nobody knew that I was in prison except for him; it was not in the media.

Imperia who for some reason had written to me saying that she was going to come to save me with the Italian army. They were on my email of course and that's the only thing they found.

They could turn it into something.

For them it was proof that I was an Italian spy. So the trial was scheduled for August 10, and August 7 was the birthday. Saif told Martin, 'Listen, there's a Jewish guy that's been arrested in Libya, we have to get him out of there before he goes to trial. You must help me. It's risky, but I need you to come with me from Sardinia to Tripoli. All you'll need to do is wait a few hours in this army airbase. I'll give the prison guards instructions to bring him to you for in-



He tried to make deals but without success. I thought that nobody knew I was in there, because as far as I was concerned, if Saif knew about it he could have me released at the wave of his hand. I mean, he was number two in Libya. I thought I was going to be there forever, and it was OK, at least the dreams were good. But then Saif was supposed to go to Martin's birthday party. Saif knew that I had to get out before I went to trial, because it was going to be a public trial, and I was going to be sentenced to death as an Italian spy.

Italian?

Yes, they decided I was an Italian spy. They had found an email from a girl I knew who's from

terrogation, and then we will fly away'. And then he said, 'Take weapons with you, just in case there's a struggle with the prison guards, but nothing will happen because they'll be so shocked, they'll just give him away. They'll think it's part of the instructions coming from above'.

This is Saif saying this?

Yes, to Martin. So Martin gives instructions to some connection of his, who used to be part of the Viennese police, to get some weapons. He then has them driven from Vienna through the Croatian border—

The weapons?

The weapons were hidden under jet skis,





obviously they couldn't fly from Vienna with them. The pilot goes to Croatia, where they have a friend that can help them put the weapons on the plane without checks, and from there he flies to Sardinia. On the morning of August 8, Martin and Saif leave for Tripoli. They arrive, Saif gets off, summons me for interrogation—without his father's knowledge, of course. All of a sudden the prison guards get a message saying that Gaddafi's son wants to interrogate me. They were very excited, this kind of thing doesn't happen—Abu Salim is a one-way prison, a political prison, they shoot people there. So they put a sack on my head, handcuff me, beat me a little so I would be more soft, so I would give more information. Next thing I know there are many cars, red lights flashing, and in the middle of it all a private jet.

I was completely out of it and had no idea what was going on, nobody knew what was happening. Then Martin gets out of the plane and asserts his authority. He comes over, shakes my hand, and tells me in Hebrew who he is and that I should come with him into the jet. I climb into the jet, and the prison guards are just staring, they're not even thinking of shooting. This guy looks the part: suit, private jet, everything. I get on board, the door closes, and then we fly away. And that's it. There's champagne, everyone's happy, I go to the toilet, I see my face in the mirror for the first time in six months, and then Schlaff says, 'You can call your mother now, we've passed the air border, they cannot bring us back'.

It should definitely be a movie.  
This part, yes.

It's such a crazy combination of—  
Bad people, good people, and me.

Have your dreams changed since then?  
I was very optimistic there, and I'm still very optimistic. I remember very, very strongly that before prison people told me I'm too optimistic and that one day something would happen to me and I wouldn't be able to be optimistic anymore. They told me that I put too much inside and it's not healthy. I don't put anything inside! I'm adjusting to life. You live your life now, and you adjust to it now, you have no choice. I remember that after prison I just said, 'What can be worse than that?' Shit, I mean, nobody would have imagined

me, like at parties and everything, that I'd end up in handcuffs, tortured, electrified—it was completely unreal. It happened. And then I was OK. Because of this attitude, I was OK. It was not very OK, but it was OK.

Why was Gaddafi's son interested?

There are many theories. Now I'm a witness for him in The Hague. His argument is that it was a human rights action, that he went against his father to help me escape. It proves that he was not part of his father's deadly regime. I'm Jewish, I'm Israeli, I'm Tunisian, I'm everything else. He risked his career.

His everything to get you out.

I'm not sure he risked so much. His father was probably like, 'OK, it wasn't that important anyway', but he definitely risked something. So I'm on the witness list. He didn't know what was going to happen in Libya, of course.

What's happening to him now?

He's just been released from prison himself, but he's still wanted in the international courts. He wants to run to be president of Libya, but he can't run the country if he's a wanted man. So they're trying to do deals. He'll only go there if he knows he won't be convicted.

And you're happy to do it?

I have no feelings about it.

It's an amazing story.

Yeah, I know, it totally came out of the blue. My life was good before. I had my food thing going on. The funny thing is, nothing really happened. I was put in prison for six months, I escaped, and life went on.

I read that the Israeli government had reached an agreement with the Libyan government, that Israel were going to allow Libya to build homes in Palestine in exchange for your release.

That was the media. They published many things that had no connection to the truth whatsoever. There was no deal at all.

And what do you think about Martin?

I think some businesspeople do things because it's good for business, but maybe he just felt like he wanted to do something good. It also gives him the added bonus of having a reputation of a guy who managed to deal with one of the worst regimes in the world. Now he



has the title of saviour. But I'm just happy that I was able to be saved, I'll always be grateful.

Smuggling weapons is a big deal.

I think he knew what he was doing. And maybe he's just a good person at heart. He didn't know me, so who knows? It's good and bad. I might have been a terrible person, maybe I had killed someone. Still, he saved my life, and I think he was touched by the whole thing, it wasn't purely cynical. Of course I love him deeply for making me free again. But it was all coincidence, timing-wise and everything. People don't leave Abu Salim prison on their own two legs. On top of it I'm Jewish and Israeli, it's completely unheard of. Not when my trial is in a few days, not when the head of the prison insists on keeping me there. And in a private jet? Completely unheard of. That's why it's hard for me to relate to it. It's like it never happened. People sometimes ask me if I made it all up.

They don't believe you?

You can't make it up. I was in prison for six months. Six months thinking of the way I might get out. All crazy ideas, but none of them crazier than what actually happened. Do you know the film *Life of Brian*, by Monty Python? There's this area where they shot it, in Sousse, Tunisia, and there's this guy going to the tower and the aliens kidnap him and then they throw him back, and then he continues running from the Romans. It's like an alien thing that happened to me, because I was taken, and then I was brought back. It was like a closed circle. And it's weird. I wish I could carve it into some piece of art or something.

Make it into one thing and be like, 'This is that'.

What happened once you were flown to Israel?

They took me to the Israeli embassy in Vienna. Next thing I flew to Tel Aviv. Then Avigdor Lieberman got involved, the Israeli minister of foreign affairs at the time, a horrible person. He appears, takes a photo with me, and we go to a press conference in Tel Aviv, where he starts to thank Gaddafi, the father, for my release. He didn't know anything. I had to think very fast about how I was going to handle it. Finally I decided not to say anything. I would say, 'Thank you for coming', and leave. And that's what I did. The media was so angry with me. Israel is very monotonic. They have the Palestinian thing, but when you have Gaddafi, who is this colourful dictator, and a guy like me, an

unknown, who's been in prison for six months, private jets, torture, all this shit, and I don't say a word? It's like you're a big juicy piece of meat that just doesn't say anything. They were so frustrated that they began publishing articles against me, all about Lieberman, how he saved me. It went on like this for six months, then they left me alone. It's my greatest success.

Did your experience with the Israeli press have anything to do with you coming back to Tunisia?

It wasn't because I was fed up with the Israeli press. The thing is, living in Israel now is expensive, it's dangerous. Of course they don't feel like it's dangerous. All the secular people in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem are so happy about the fact that they are progressive, secular, they talk about it all the time. They are there because they all have money from home, that's usually the reason. They all have this kind of psychological thing. They don't want anything to change. They say they want to stop the occupation, but they won't take it to the streets. They'll promote Israel in food or in culture without even thinking how that could help maintain the situation. The food scene there has a lot to do with appropriation. Israel is maybe the only place in the world that has an obsession with nationalising its multi-immigrant kitchen. People like to talk about the vibrant gay scene in Tel Aviv—even if it's all pinkwash. Everything is amazing, everything is colourful. But three million people without rights? Sure, that's OK, we have gay rights! They are part of a military regime, whether they like it or not. I mean, at the same time, the army blackmails Palestinian gays in order to get them to cooperate.

Did you like living in Tel Aviv?

If I had had a big apartment in Tel Aviv, maybe I would have stayed, who knows? I lived there for one year because it's so comfortable. It's just that it didn't make sense to me. If you're somebody who actually can see the world in a way that is not connected to the Messiah, I can't see why you would want to stay there. You need to live your life. And it's not because of prison I think like this, it's because I really believe that you need to live your life. It's the only way to live, and people just ignore it. They go to an office, work there for 45 years, and then they get a pension. Live your life today and that's it. There's no reason why you should just give it all away.