



Shakshuka. In the dishes preserved and passed down over generations lies the secret of cultural continuity. Credit: ANDREW SCRIVANI / NYT

How Shakshuka and Other Middle Eastern Dishes Turned Into Iconic 'Jewish Food'

Taking what Jews and Arabs have cooked for generations and attaching the label 'Israeli' to it is culinary injustice

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A certain childhood memory remains vivid for Nof Atamna-Ismaeel. “I went with my parents to visit a friend of my father’s from work. A Jewish family. His mother made stuffed grape leaves. I was sure they were Arab just because of the grape leaves,” said Dr. Atamna-Ismaeel, a microbiologist and past winner of the Israeli reality TV show “MasterChef,” in a recent interview with the *Israel Hayom* daily. As a young girl, Atamna-Ismaeel associated stuffed grape leaves with the Arab cuisine she knew from the central Arab Israeli town of Baka al-Garbiyeh, where she grew up. The action of rolling the leaves gave the dish its name: Jews from the Balkans called it sarmale or sarmalute, in Romanian; Jews from the rest of the Ottoman Empire called the dish dolma or dolmas (in Turkish) and dawali (in Arabic). As with many of the dishes Jews and Arabs from the region inherited from earlier generations, stuffed grape leaves are a “living” repository of stories, languages, geographies and origin awareness piled one atop the other.

Food—its manner of preparation and consumption, and its place in a culture and language—has become the most significant, albeit the most overlooked point of encounter between Jewish Arab culture and Palestinian Arab culture. In addition to the cuisines of the Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Iran and Iraq, Mizrahi food in Israel also contains references to elements of Palestinian, Ottoman and Arab culinary cultures. Until recently, the term “Mizrahi food” was an Israeli cultural signifier of a kind of food that was popular and inexpensive—food that came in large quantities, had no refinement to it, and used a lot of oil and paprika. It was also thought of as the food identified with big family celebrations and so on. But can the term “Mizrahi food” also lay claim to a culinary sphere that is separate from that which is identified with the cultural spaces in which the Mizrahi communities existed?

Mizrahi food celebrates mixture. Palestinian hummus has collided with Yemenite malawah and Kurdish kubbeh. Moroccan fish is eaten in a Palestinian pita with Shami (Syrian) tahini on the side. Unlike other branches of Mizrahi culture, Mizrahi food underwent a process of acceptance, appropriation and nationalization. In the past, because of its low cost and popular association with home cooking, or as typical street food, Mizrahi food was associated with the weaker segments of Jewish society in Israel, as reflected in cinema and literature. Even today, Mizrahi food is still thought of as home cooking, as food that is functional and satisfying—but it is also the food of the non-Mizrahi “other,” when they celebrate.

The appropriation process occurred in tandem with worldwide changes in the 1980s and connected to the rise of the “Mediterranean diet” as a lifestyle. The culture of olive oil, fresh tomatoes and garlic was marketed as both tasty and healthful. At the start of this process in Israel, trendsetters, virtually all of whom were Ashkenazim (that is, of European descent), still referred to this as “Italian food” and local restaurants served pasta and more pasta. In time, the arbiters of taste had to acknowledge that the culinary culture in their immediate surroundings—Palestinian Arab food and Mizrahi food—was based on the same preferred ingredients. Mizrahi food, which only a few years earlier was still an object of scorn, was already melded with Palestinian cuisine, some elements of which had already been nationalized, and was quickly “recruited” for purposes of Israeli propaganda. Images of Israeli “chumminess” were now revised via the ritual of eating Palestinian hummus, and political questions about [appropriation and assimilation of Palestinian food](#) began to buzz in the liberal sphere.

At first the talk about Palestinian food became a cultural bon ton in trendy Tel Aviv. Gradually, Mizrahi food began to enjoy a similar reputation. It’s easy to miss the idea at the basis of the appropriation criticism by asserting that many Mizrahim not only see themselves as part of Israeli culture, but as among its most prominent creators. What should one make of the present situation, in which Mizrahi food has gone from being an object of derision to being on the menus of the most fashionable cafes? How did the [shakshuka](#) – just as spicy and oily as ever—go from being a Tunisian Jewish food to [a hallowed staple of the Israeli breakfast](#)? How should one

respond to the ironic turn in which the dishes of Mizrahi Jews have lately, especially in North America, become almost synonymous with “Jewish food”?



Chef Nof Atamna-Ismaeel. Credit: Rami Shilush

Entering into a discussion of Mizrahi food by considering the question of the appropriation of Palestinian Arab food also means recognizing the deep historic connections between these cuisines. As with the coexistence that was part of the common musical space shared with the Muslim cultural environment, the food of the Jews of Arab countries was identical to that of their neighbors, and sometimes even more varied. Moreover, the key difference between these cuisines are a result of appropriation: While the cultural identity of the creators of Palestinian Arab food is often denied and obscured by the people serving it, eating it or writing about it, the identification of Mizrahim with the state has never been more pronounced. A Mizrahi catering hall that considers itself Israeli—that is, not just Tunisian—does not by dint of this identification make the culinary origins of the dishes it serves Israeli, just as a Japanese immigrant in New York who makes sushi in a restaurant does not make sushi American.

To pinpoint all the culinary connections between Mizrahi and Shami-Palestinian food, a more precise terminology is needed than has hitherto been employed. Alinazik, for example, a dish of lamb kebab grilled eggplant and onion over yogurt, with a clarified butter sauce—a staple of the cuisines of Gaziantep (Turkey) and Aleppo—is also included in Jewish cuisine in a kosher

version with a tomato base to replace the yogurt and butter. Similarly, Lebanese Jews, like the Mizrahi family from Sidon, typically made hummus with bulgur. So when they make hummus at the Azura restaurant in Jerusalem, which was founded by Jews with origins in the locales on the borders between Iraq and Iran, and between Syria and Turkey – that act also deeply embodies a cultural continuity with cuisines that have many ties to one another, and which existed together in the Ottoman Empire prior to the age of partition in the Middle East.

When Jews from Arab lands arrived in Israel in the 1950s, their culinary culture changed all at once. The ingredients that had been available to them along the rim of the Mediterranean, on the banks of the Tigris or on the Atlantic coast, disappeared and were replaced by mass-produced cooking oil, egg powder and even cubes of frozen fish, if they were lucky. The newcomers subordinated what they had known in their countries of origin to the constraints of the new culture. Palestinian olive oil, for example, was available to a small part of the Jewish public—members of the Ashkenazi elite who were close to the military corridors of power.

For Eastern European immigrants in Israel, Palestinian cuisine and Arab Jewish cuisine were equally alien. As noted, the Mizrahi foods, which were so heavily seasoned, contained large amounts of oil and were perceived by those of European background as unhealthy. They even became the subject of jokes. And yet Mizrahi food, or a combination of the two Arab cuisines, Mizrahi and Palestinian, satisfied the European fantasy of briefly traveling far from home, whether to Qalqilyah in the West Bank or to the Hatikva neighborhood in Tel Aviv, and enjoying a dish prepared in some exotic kitchen.

Israel is apparently the only place in the world in which food ingredients have been reduced to their national origin. Think about the culinary culture with its many influences that crystallized over centuries along the Atlantic coast of Morocco: saffron, argan oil, the flesh of goats and fish, tajine stews loaded with seasonal greens on a base of tomatoes reddened in the sun of the Western Mediterranean. Yet, when people talk about Mizrahi food, all this richness has been reduced to “Moroccan fish,” a marginal dish that is not up to bearing the burden of representing the culture from which it comes. This dish has even been paired with Aleppo food, and made with a sauce of sour cherries with dry mint and tahini; or with khachapuri (a cheese-filled bread from the Black Sea region); or with rice kubbeh from the banks of the Tigris. The distillation of all this culinary richness into “Mizrahi food” is one of the weak points of Mizrahi culture, which submitted itself to reduction.

This reduction occurred, among other places, in the “Mizrahi” restaurant, an institution that served an especially eclectic mix of Amazigh couscous from the depths of the Sahara, Iraqi kubbeh, fries with salad, Palestinian hummus and an inferior pareve version of Bavarian crème—a dessert of French origin named for the German state of Bavaria, which was “Balkanized” and “made Mizrahi.” Spiciness became a key characteristic of Maghrebi food, even though the latter wasn’t overly spicy in its original form. This culinary distortion was immortalized in a satiric scene from Boaz Davidson’s 1974 movie “Charlie and a Half.” The

mother of Gila, an Ashkenazi girl, who opposed her daughter’s marriage to Charlie (played by Yehuda Barkan), nearly dies from ingesting a spicy red mixture; her condition only worsens when she mistakenly tries to wash it down with arak instead of water.

Over the years, Moroccan, Iraqi and Persian restaurants were established in Israel on the basis of the “classic” Mizrahi restaurants. Olive oil, which had meanwhile become so popular in New York and California, made a “return” to the Israeli table, even as two things were simultaneously ignored: the fact that the local land is full of olive trees, and the fact that olive oil was consumed by Mizrahim long before they came to Israel. For example, before they immigrated to Israel, the Na’aman family, owners of the Mahsanei Hashuk supermarket chain, kept a vast number of olive trees in southern Tunisia—one of the world’s leading producers of olive oil.

The global culinary transformations arrived in Israel in the 1980s, but in the absence of a binding identity for Mizrahi Jews, Mizrahi food was soon adopted as authentic Israeli food. The [“custody battles” over hummus](#), which has drawn in numerous claimants, were not repeated when it came to any discussion of Mizrahi food. Tunisian shakshuka and Iraqi kubbeh were all quickly dubbed “Israeli” and, before long, as the cooking shows and food columns gained in popularity, the new Israeli cuisine was established on the ruins of various types of Mizrahi Arab cuisine. Suddenly Persian food, in adapting itself to the Israeli palate, became mild, and even milder. Suddenly falafel was being served with gleaming white gloves, considered “clean” and healthier, and accompanied by a gluten-free pita and organic hummus. The problematic image that used to be associated with Mizrahi restaurants was quickly forgotten in favor of touting Israeli restaurants that promote “new Israeli cuisine,” a source of national pride around the world.

Who would have believed that a pan-fried green chili pepper—a mandatory item on the Shabbat table of every Maghrebi Jew, where it appears alongside a fried eggplant and a tomato salad that’s called “cooked salad,” in Maghrebi Arabic—would one day star on every plate, alongside delicate dollops of tahini and yogurt, drizzled with “local” olive oil. The concept of



A baker at a communal oven in Asilah, Morocco. Credit: INGIRO PULLAR / NYT

“localness” has become the main byword of the new Israeli cuisine, with the [Carmel Market, in Tel Aviv](#), and Mahane Yehuda, in Jerusalem, providing the new locality agent a Mizrahi backdrop, with a cookbook about it becoming a best seller in English. But the condescending concept of localness was forged at the expense of entire and distinct food cultures that were ostracized and forgotten: those of our grandmothers.

In the dishes that are preserved and passed down from generation to generation lies the secret of cultural continuity. They are the point of contact between past and present. “Dishes are always the part of immigrant cultures which survive the longest, long after clothing, music and language have been abandoned,” as British cultural anthropologist and cookbook writer Claudia Roden, daughter of a Syrian Jewish family, has written. In her exemplary books about Middle Eastern and Jewish cuisine, Roden has documented the long history of Mizrahi food. Nonetheless, Mizrahi Jewish food, which has such an incredible richness, is losing its age-old identity, which comes from many geographical sources. The Turkish börek and the Tunisian brik are, in the minds of both Israelis and American Jews, simply considered Israeli food. Essentially, the identifying labels for food items that come from the culinary sphere of Islam, from places that for the average Israeli do not presently exist, are being changed.

Part of the backdrop to the cultural context in which the appropriation is occurring is the weak image of the country of origin. Fish and chips, a classic Portuguese Jewish dish in origin, will forever be labeled as British; tortellini with pumpkin and Amaretti cookies will, for now at least, remain an Italian Jewish dish from Mantua. But shakshuka, which is consumed daily in Tunisia, is referred to by all as “Israeli,” while the cultural identity of the Tunisian community in which it was invented is erased. In today’s Tunis, the locals fondly remember the Jews and are amazed at how the Amazigh word “shakshuka” ended up in Israeli cuisine, and then in Jewish cuisine, and not for example in French cuisine, even though that culture “swallowed up” more Tunisian Jews than did Israel. Ironically, a traditional Tunisian Jewish dish is not considered sufficiently Jewish on its own. In order to obtain the “Jewish” seal, it first had to be seen as Israeli.

Today’s Israel is dismissive of questions of origin, ownership, belonging and history regarding communities that don’t serve its official narrative. Israel and the United States, for example, are among the few countries that are not signatories to the International Convention on the Use of Designations of Origin and Names for Cheeses, which safeguards the connection between the nomenclature cheeses and the areas in which they are produced. One of the basic principles of the classification of local food in different areas of the world has to do with the equitable relations between farmers and their land and environment. It’s not just about what kind of feed the chickens are given, but there are also ethical, historical and ecological aspects to the issue of land ownership. The unequal power relations between different socioeconomic communities in Israel are also evident in the discussion of Mizrahi food—its definition and promotion, the ability to make a living from it, and to speak on its behalf. Will the question of culinary honor also be placed at the heart of the discussion about the emergent cuisine in Israel?

In Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey or even Canada, food is also political, but in other ways. People don't get preoccupied with its national definition; they just prepare it the way they learned to from their family, their neighborhood, the environment they grew up in or lived in. The focus in Israel on the question of the national identity of a dish may well be unique. While America doesn't refer to Creole Cajun cooking or the food brought by Italian immigrants as "American" food, Israel blithely does that with Mizrahi and Palestinian cuisines. The process is somewhat parallel to the erasure of the languages of the Jews in the 1950s—Yiddish, Ladino and Arabic—whose literatures were kept out of the canon by the agents of a new language supposedly based on the Bible and not on more recent "upstart" languages. But while languages from those countries were largely ignored, the food still exists as a kind of powerful memory of the coexistence that once was.

Similarly, olive oil is not culturally admired in Israel because it has been consumed for years by Djerba Jews in Jerusalem, or by a Palestinian family in 'Ayn Karim in Jerusalem, but because it was consumed by the inhabitants of an ancient Oriental land, with a book in one hand and a sword in the other; no different from the olive growers in Israel today who conjure up biblical stories as they press the olives.



Sesame coated falafel is displayed for sale in Ramallah in the West Bank, September 2, 2019. Credit: MOHAMAD TOROKMAN/ REUTERS

As Yahil Zaban, author of the Hebrew-language *Eretz Okhelet: Al Hate'avon Hayisraeli* (English title: "A Land of Milk and Hummus: A Study of Israeli Culinary Culture"), has written, food is always more than just the sum of its ingredients. It is made of words, imagery and metaphors. Similarly, [Ronit Vered was right when she wrote](#) here earlier this month that, "It's people who insist [that food] has community, religious or national meaning, but even that changes and is shaped according to historical circumstances."

Thus we seek to place Mizrahi food within a narrative framework that serves political, social and economic interests and also as a historic resource. Those pushing the ever-growing commercial and Israeli-national culinary sphere impose their preferences on us. In such an environment, demands for culinary justice and against the imposition of narrow terminology are sarcastically derided as "culinary racial theories." But food, racism, power and justice will always be intertwined, as food historian Michael W. Twitty demonstrated in his acclaimed 2017 book *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South*. Twitty also lucidly addressed the issue of cultural appropriation. Is the demand for "culinary purity" at all reasonable in a world of migrations and exiles and occupations? Must cultures stick exclusively to their own cuisine?

And at the same time, we can ask: "Aren't chefs of Israeli-Jewish background allowed to make hummus or harissa?" Of course they are. But cultural diffusion is not the same as cultural appropriation. Diffusion is a natural process that occurs when people from different cultures live in proximity to one another and cannot help but interact. Cultural appropriation, however, hinges on exploitation, abuse, erasure, scorn and theft. And also on the willful ignoring of all of these things. Which is why "chefs of Israeli-Jewish background" need to be alert to the ways in which they are talked about or on their behalf. A Lebanese Jewish chef who lives in Israel, for instance, is also making Lebanese food when he makes [kibbeh nayyeh](#). Taking what the Jews have made for generations and attaching the label "Israeli" to it is another form of culinary injustice, and an erasure and disregarding of the ancient Jewish traditions of that food.

A few weeks ago, chef Nof Atamna-Ismaeel spoke in a way that's seldom heard about the split between Mizrahi and Palestinian food: "The separation between the Arab Jews and the Palestinian Arabs is one of the worst things that ever happened here. Everything could have been different if there were cooperation between us. The Mizrahim and we were both scorned by the elite that was dominant here and they too, like us, were forced to hide their culture. Instead of joining hands, we split into separate groups." The separation Atamna-Ismaeel spoke of, in that interview with the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, along with the general negation of the proximate past, and the denial of the Arab dimensions of the region, are what have enabled the nationalization and "conversion" of Mizrahi food in Israel (and the West in general). But this food, which Israelis like to say is "killer tasty," will remain tasteless as long as the unique combinations that lend it its flavor, identity and history continue to be denied.