

# Culture Report

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A scene at a Haifa restaurant during the Third Arab Food Festival

## News that's fit to consume

A-Sham, the Third Arab Food Festival, offers a delicious mix **By Paul Alster**

**IT WON'T** grab any headlines because no one died. There was no violence, no threats, no tension. No "us and them."

If you're choosing to read on, then maybe you're one of the growing band of people who are fed up of always hearing negative

news about the Jewish-Arab status quo in Israel. That's not to say that much of the reporting isn't justified; sadly, it is. I know, because I spent four years until 2016 working as a regional reporter for a major international news network and followed the

day-to-day travails of the peoples of this region. Along with a number of other journalists, I received personal death threats from Hamas for my troubles, so I can hardly be accused of viewing the situation through rose-tinted glasses.

But if you had been in downtown Haifa on any one of the three days of A-Sham, the Third Arab Food Festival between 13-15 December, you would have seen for yourself just what a successfully integrated Jewish-Arab society looks like. Haifa is the shining example that the media, generally, chooses to avoid talking about.

Those citing “Apartheid Israel” would have choked on pluralistic atmosphere and fabulous food offered at dozens of different locations, as well as numerous street vendors, food workshops, lectures, and live music that brought this area of Haifa’s city center to a near standstill. They would have been forced to question their ideology that time and again singles out Israel for criticism, to the exclusion of so many other nations, who genuinely and persistently infringe on the human rights of the majority of their population.

Jews, Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs, Druze, and others poured into the Haifa in their thousands ... and I joined them on Day 2, which, it transpired, was very much the morning after the night before.

“A lot of foodies are coming from Tel Aviv,” Dr. Nof Atamna-Ismaeel, TV’s Master Chef winner, and one of the most recognizable figures in the Israeli culinary world, told *The Jerusalem Report*. She identifies herself proudly as an Israeli Arab of Palestinian origin.

“Yesterday I met so many people from Tel Aviv who just jumped on the train – it’s only an hour. For them, Haifa is like going abroad! They never thought of having a night out here, but it was amazing how many said they would come back more often. They just got started at 10 p.m. and the streets were buzzing till very late at night.

“I was walking around, feeling young again, looking at people coming to eat, listen to Arabic music, having fun. You know, a lot of times, especially in the news, when you hear the Arab language spoken it is with [a negative connotation]. You never hear Arabic in a positive way. But here, you hear Arabic in a very positive way.

“I bet that if you count the times Arabic is heard or referred to on Galei Tzahal [Israel Army radio] this week, it will have a positive context because of the Festival. But most other weeks when referring to Arabs or Arabic, the context is overwhelmingly negative.”

“This is a beautiful city. I think Haifa is the very best example of coexistence. It is

not something the people here talk about; it’s something they do. They live it here. It’s not something that is an issue because they are so used to it.”

The Festival was Nof’s brainchild. It started three years ago and has grown rapidly due to the popularity of the idea of showcasing food from around the Arab world all in one place over the course of just three days.

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Some 70 top Israeli chefs, many of them household names, were on the roster. Each one prepared an Arab signature dish that was presented at any one of 33 different eateries around the downtown area. I met Nof on the street outside venue No. 6, Ma’ayan Habira. We decided to move to venue No. 2, the Shtrudel Café, just a few hundred yards along Yafo Street in the hope it would be a little quieter, but I hadn’t reckoned on the reaction the sight of the Master Chef drew from passersby. Time and again people stopped to tell her how she was their favorite TV chef, how they adore her, and how impressed they were with the Festival.

At the Shtrudel Café itself, another famous TV chef, Hila Alpert, was presenting a dish called *harak osbau*, which literally means “burning your fingers,” due to the fact that it purports to be completely irresistible and people would burn their fingers reaching into the pan to grab a taste.

I can personally verify that had there been a pan anywhere nearby I would have risked singeing my digits to get another few mouthfuls of this really delicious Syrian standard. It was described in the Festival handbook as, “a winter dish based on lentils and pomegranates, served with fried pastry, onions and plenty of coriander and garlic, with a small portion of feta cheese.”

“The feta cheese is a twist I’ve added to the dish but it is not from the original source,” Alpert admitted to me. “Do you think it is well enough seasoned?”

Picture the scene: a top-class international chef asking a lad from Yorkshire (who grew up on fish ‘n chips) to critique such a subtle, yet stunning Middle Eastern dish that had already disappeared from sight within moments of arriving at the table.

“This is just amazing,” says Nof, rolling her eyes backwards in a state of near ecstasy. “Wow! This is even tastier than the original. This is an ancient Syrian dish eaten by poor people using lentils and fried dough. There is no meat, indeed it is vegan [if you leave out Hila’s addition of the cheese]. When you only have a few dried goods in your pantry you can still make this. Essentially, it’s just based on flour and lentils.”

I wondered how Nof would define the A-Sham or Levantine cuisine?

“I believe all the cuisine here from Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Israel have the same cuisine, so they should be named the Levantine cuisine.

“In science [Nof is also a doctor of microbiology], you have certain genetic similarities between animals defining them as species, family, etcetera. In food, you don’t have this separation, but it needs to be done to understand where the kitchen comes from and how many similarities and differences there are between the Lebanese kitchen and the Syrian kitchen, for example, in order to be identified independently. It is quite complicated.”

There were many tremendously talented chefs to meet, but one in particular had a fascinating story behind his dish.

Chef Ali Khatib hails from a village called Ghajar which is right on the Israel-Lebanon border. In fact, when Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, Ghajar became notorious because the Blue Line, the demarcation point between the two nations, went straight through the middle of the village. The northern half is in Lebanon, and the southern half is in Israel, but for the last 17 years the area has been declared a closed military zone by Israel. This means that outsiders have to be granted a special permit by the military to enter the village. This bizarre situation has devastated Ghajar’s economy, which previously relied on tourists visiting shops and restaurants. Now, only the local people are free to come and go there.



**DESPITE ALL** the above, Ali Khatib is an optimistic, inspiring young man. A talented chef who learned his culinary skills from his mother, he works at the well-known Magdalena restaurant in Tiberias, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He presented a local soup called *kishek*.

"Every chef here has come with an interesting dish," explained Khatib. "If they weren't interesting and special they wouldn't be here. My dish is between 200 to 300 years old. It's a recipe that has been passed down from generation to generation, but it has always stayed the same. You must not stray from the original."

"The blending of the yoghurt with bulgar wheat is done in the way mothers or grandmothers have always done it. Hanging it through muslin cloth allowing it to become bitter, and the wheat to soak up the liquid from the yoghurt."

Khatib told how he lets the mixture dry out for a few weeks and then keeps it in a cool place for a long period so it can be used at home as a basic staple food.

"I brought this from home then added lamb, lightly fried onion, and goats cheese. Because my village is in a closed military zone nobody can freely come in. This is why it is so important for me to come out and show the world our cuisine. One day I hope to open my own restaurant here in Haifa, or in Tel Aviv. I want to present my food not just to the people of my village, but to all the people."

Close to where Khatib was serving *kishek* – they'd sold out and were preparing another batch when I got there, so that particular pleasure will have to wait for next time – the Simsim restaurant on Natanzon Street was serving a dish called *pateh shwarma*.

Grilled chicken *shwarma* was served on a bed of very crispy sliced pita bread combined with pine nuts, almonds, tomatoes, parsley, and light yoghurt. This very satisfying offering was prepared by house chef Sara (resplendent in a Santa Claus hat), in the absence of the guest chef Maher Araida, who wasn't on duty until the evening. And as a special treat, we were spoiled with one of the best *knafeh* desserts I have ever tasted. *Knafeh* is served around the Levant region and has a base of sweet cheese topped



PAUL ALSTER

Chef Sara and owner Iyas of the Simsim restaurant present 'one of the best *knafeh* desserts I ever tasted'

with fine crispy noodles soaked in syrup, then topped with chopped pistachio nuts. Hold the diet!

It was mid-afternoon and, despite approaching the point of no return my stomach and I were tempted by one more dish on the list that kept beckoning me in. At the famous Hummus Eliyahu café on Hameginim Boulevard, internationally celebrated chef Uri Buri, the Acre-based restaurateur and hotelier, had been invited to put a new twist on one of the most basic and traditional Middle Eastern fast foods. They were just about to close as I arrived, but were

persuaded to let me in to have a taste.

Adam Gilad, 26, who runs the café, personally prepared the dish as it has been taught to him by the great man himself.

"I went up to Uri Buri in Acco to learn this dish," said Gilad. "Then he came here yesterday to present it himself. It's very special."

The humus wasn't the usual smooth paste, but had been left part-blended, giving it a more crunchy, interesting texture. On top of the humus Gilad added wild sorrel and chicory, pan-fried with onions in olive oil with a little salt. This was a knockout – simple, wholesome, and very different to the usual humus offerings. But why was he closing at 4 p.m., I asked. Wasn't it a bit early?

"Because I want to get out of here and enjoy myself at the Festival, of course," he laughed.

Dr. Nof Atamna-Ismaeel would like to take the festival on the road around Europe, as well as see it grow even bigger and better in Haifa in years to come.

"As a former biologist we learn that a strong society is one based on diverse genetics. Here you have Ashkenazi food, Arabic food, food from Morocco, Iraq, Eastern Europe (although I don't like that generic term) etc. It's so diverse that there is no such thing as an 'Israeli dish.' Eventually, this mixture will infuse into one more defined cuisine that will then be Israeli cuisine and it will be new with building blocks of Moroccan, Arabic, Eastern European food, and more. This is what makes Israel such an interesting and special culinary location."

The last word though on an event that drew over 30,000 visitors goes to Ali Khatib, the chef from the closed Israeli-Lebanese border town of Ghajar.

"This festival is a wonderful idea," he told me. "It presents so many different, special foods to a wide audience, encouraging people to connect with each other through food. This is something that is so important. I honestly believe that food is the perfect way to bring Jews and Arabs together here in Israel, and around the world." ■

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