

In Search Of Israeli Cuisine

A Film by Roger Sherman



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A ROGER SHERMAN FILM

IN SEARCH OF ISRAELI CUISINE

featuring Chef Michael Solomonov

A PRODUCTION OF FLORENTINE FILMS/SHERMAN PICTURES



Overview

In Search of Israeli Cuisine is a portrait of the Israeli people told through food. It puts a literal face on the culture of Israel. The film profiles chefs, home cooks, vintners, and cheese-makers drawn from the more than 100 cultures that make up Israel today - Jewish, Arab, Muslim, Christian, Druze. A rich and human story of the people emerges from their food.

Most people are surprised to learn that Israel has one of the most dynamic food scenes in the world influenced by over 100 cultures. They think Israeli cuisine is falafel and hummus, or Jewish food like brisket and blintzes. Their shock and surprise is the reason for the film: the cultural complexity is much deeper than most people understand. Indeed, the hummus is wonderful but you'd have to search to find brisket. Israeli cuisine, as viewers will quickly learn, is much more than caricature.

Through cinema verité scenes — interviews, farms, markets, restaurants, kitchens, landscapes, and history — audiences will discover that this hot, multi-cultural cuisine has developed only in the last 30 years. In that short time, Israel went from being one of the poorest countries in the world to one of the most advanced. Its sophistication mirrors the current state of the Israeli people and their food: secular, outward looking and innovative.



The chef/guide of *In Search of Israeli Cuisine* is Michael Solomonov, the James Beard award winning chef/owner of Zahav and a number of other restaurants in Philadelphia and New York. His book, *Zahav: A World of Israeli Cooking* (Houghton Mifflin 2016) was released to universal praise, landing on the NYTimes bestseller list, as well as many Best Of lists.

Mike was born in Israel and grew up in the States. He's smart, funny, self-deprecating, and very knowledgeable about the traditions and foods of Israel. Mike enters peoples' lives, and their kitchens, and discusses their roots, inspirations, what their grandmothers cooked, how they're preserving traditions and updating recipes with global influences.

An important part of the story is diversity. Featuring a variety of Israelis in every region of the country – the filmmakers shot in over 100 locations – from the Lebanese, Syrian, and Egyptian borders: to Akko on the Mediterranean, Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee, Ezuz, a tiny outpost in the harsh Negev Desert to the heart of Jerusalem, and the hip and happening Tel Aviv. Both secular and religious Jews are profiled, including one of the few Jewish-Muslim couples who together cook their very personal food, Majda, near Jerusalem. An old-fashioned Christian Arab tahini (sesame paste) factory in Nazareth run by two very modern women. A Druze wedding in a mountain town in the north. Mike, helping pick olives from an ancient tree with a long stick, is admonished by his Druze host: “Please do not hurt the olive tree. Be gentle.” Chastened, Mike apologizes to the tree.

Film Highlights



- Meir Adoni, chef/restaurateur at his Mizlala in Tel Aviv tells Mike that his dishes begin with classic French and Spanish cuisine. Then, he plays with influences from the Diaspora.
- Ezra Kedem, seen cooking in his gem-like glass box atelier magically perched in the Jerusalem hills, tells a story of some years ago being invited to cook in Italy, burning an eggplant on the stove. “He’s crazy,” they said. Of course, burning eggplants is now the rage in Israel.



- Ruthie Rouso, a young chef/journalist, cooks her grandmother's Turkish food with Mike in her kitchen. He asks how styles develop and change here. She replies, "Being such a young country, we are not tied to traditions. Chefs are freer to riff and experiment."
- Husam Abbas is probably the best-known Palestinian chef in Israel, and one of the most outspoken. In his El Babour restaurant kitchen, he makes Mike his famous kibbe El Babour—ground lamb wrapped around cinnamon sticks, grilled over charcoal, then baked under a laffa shell. He tells Mike: "This is Palestinian food. It goes back hundreds of years."
- The filmmakers find remarkable food traditions as diverse as Moroccan, Persian, and Lebanese, French, Italian, and Russian, in the most cutting-edge restaurants – Jewish, Arabs, Palestinians, Christian, and Druze – kosher and non-kosher, secular and religious. Home cooks are preserving their grandmothers' recipes and dynamic chefs are updating them.

- The influence of Palestinian cuisine is an important element in the film. We hear how Israeli Jewish cooks respect Palestinian culinary traditions, while freely borrowing from them. We witness how Israeli adaptations of Palestinian food rile Palestinians. There is no part of Israeli society food included that is immune from conflict.



- One of the biggest surprises is how Israeli advanced high-tech agronomy has literally changed the way the world eats. Our cameras visit a tomato farm in the Negev where cherry tomato vines grow to thirty-six feet, producing for two years. Eggplants and peppers do, too. They're all made sweeter by drinking a combination of fresh and saltwater.
- Viewers will be surprised to learn that Israelis invented seedless watermelons and seedless lemons, too, which are about to come to market. Drip irrigation transformed agriculture worldwide when it was invented in Israel in the 1950s.
- Ancient agricultural methods will amaze viewers, too. At a farm in the Negev desert, Avi Arazuni uses 2000– year old Nabatean techniques to control floods

that otherwise devastate his neighbors' crops. Our cameras visit a Nabatean ruin, filming a large wine factory. "Wine was exported to Rome," Mike is told. By making a portrait of the Israeli people told through food, the film helps viewers better understand them.

About the Producer/Director/Writer Roger Sherman



A founder of Florentine Films, [Roger Sherman](#) is a producer, director, cinematographer, still photographer, and author. His films have won an Emmy, a Peabody, a James Beard Award, and two Academy Award nominations. His subjects include art, history, science, social issues, the environment, and food. Charlie Rose called his PBS American Masters special, [Alexander Calder](#), "an extraordinary American masterpiece." The Wall Street Journal said [Richard Rodgers: The Sweetest Sounds](#), another American Masters special, was "Perhaps the best film ever produced in the American Masters PBS series." Kat Kinsman, writing for CNN's Eatocracy, said of [The Restaurateur](#), a portrait of Danny Meyer, "Beg, borrow as needed, but do yourself a favor and see Roger Sherman's doc." About [Medal of Honor](#), The New York Post said, "There won't be anything more worth your while on TV." He is currently screening In Search of Israeli Cuisine, a portrait of the Israeli people told through food, in film festivals (theatrical) across the country.

"I first visited Israel in 2011 on a press trip. At the time, I couldn't have cared less about Israel. I wanted to go to Paris. But I went, and I couldn't believe what I discovered: one of the most dynamic food scenes in the world. Over a hundred cultures have come to Israel over the last 100 years, or have been there for hundreds of years, each with their own

traditions. And it's a country where every 10 miles is a different microclimate. Locavore is a foreign term there — everything is local. I returned home and when I told people what I had seen, they laughed at me. Our concept of Israeli cuisine is bad falafel or brisket. And, conflict. People usually don't think of Israel as a destination unless they're going on a bible tour. The reason I created *In Search of Israeli Cuisine* is because I found a food culture that no one in the world knows about."

About Chef/Guide Michael Solomonov



[Mike Solomonov](#) is the chef/guide of *In Search of Israeli Cuisine*. He is a 2011 James Beard Award winner for Best Chef, Mid-Atlantic; Eater's 2014 Best Chef in America, and a 2015 semi-finalist for Rising Star Chef of the Year. Born in Israel and raised in Pittsburgh, he presents his vision of Israeli food to America through Zahav: Philadelphia's renowned modern Israeli restaurant. To Mike, Israeli cuisine is full of delicious contradictions: the food can be both vibrant and elemental, rich and healthy, old and new. It's both a melting pot and a barely melted pot: a succulent array of dozens of distinct cuisines.

"It's important for Americans to realize that regardless of what you see on TV, regardless of your political stance, Israeli cuisine reflects humanity at its best. Sometimes the easiest way for people to relate to a country is through its food and culture."

Along with his business partner Steven Cook, he co-owns Abe Fisher, his take on Ashkenazi food; Dizengoff, a hummusiya; Percy Street Barbecue; and Federal Donuts. Recently, Mike was named Best Chef in America by Eater, the same publication that

described him as “the genius of Jewish cooking.” He’s also been featured in Food & Wine, The New York Times, Condé Nast Traveler, Travel + Leisure, Esquire, Bon Appétit, Playboy, and more.

His book *Zahav, A World of Israeli Cooking* (Houghton Mifflin 2016), which he wrote with his business partner Steven Cook, has been a smashing success since it was released.

Selected Quotes from the Film

- “I don’t use ingredients that cannot grow here. For example, I love coconut milk; but coconut milk does not enter my kitchen because it takes people’s consciousness to the beautiful beaches of Thailand. I want them here in this land with the lamb, with olive oil, with basilicum, with tomatoes.” -Rama Ben Zvi, owner of Rama’s Kitchen
- “What is amazing about Israel is that I think it’s the only country in the world that so many cuisines came here together and you have, like, more than 150 different cuisines that came and all of them of course Jewish and what we are trying to do is trying to do is take those traditional Jewish dishes and, like, play with them.” -Meir Adoni, Chef and Restaurateur
- “It’s a combination of what we have here: a local terroir of Palestinian cooking; and of our immigrant baggage, which we brought from our grandparents, who basically came from all over the place. That’s what makes it special.” -Janna Gur, Israeli Cookbook Author
- “You don’t create a kitchen from day to day, but from generation to generation. Now, creating a kitchen: it’s not my kitchen, nor is it my mother’s. It’s a kitchen created by the earth. Whatever the earth produced, people cooked.” - Husam Abbas, Arab Chef and Restaurateur
- “It’s about tasting new things and talking about history: this rich, abundant history, and conflict and turmoil, as well. The mission is to show Israeli cuisine in its entirety, and to show Israeli culture and the complexity of things, but also the beauty of things here.” -Michael Solomonov, chef/guide to our film.

Eating History: Food Films at the SF Jewish Film Fest

By Mark Taylor

July 18, 2016



In Search of Israeli Cuisine is one of three food-related films featured at this year's San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, which runs July 21 through August 7, 2016 at locations across the Bay.

My favorite by far is *In Search of Israeli Cuisine*, mostly because it contains so many twists as Solomonov delves deep into Jewish cooking traditions and the fascinating histories with which they are freighted.

He notes the country itself is the size of New Jersey but contains multitudes: a long

coastline, a mountainous region, the desert, a religious capital and a secular center. Israel somehow brings together the contradictory impulses of old and new within its food, the observations of ancient traditions and practices alongside the fusion of ingredients, spices and techniques from around the world.

The film visits world-class chefs in gorgeous settings who are serving up fresh local ingredients to an appreciative population. Interestingly, the country's food boom has only occurred within the last few decades. Many of the chefs interviewed attribute this to survivor guilt, but it may also be a function of newfound affluence. Food as a lifestyle is a recent luxury and modern Israelis are working hard to reverse some of the practices and misconceptions about food (and wine) that formed during the country's infancy.

Israel has both an ancient history and a short one. The Jewish culture, alongside the Arabs, can be regionally traced back to the beginning of recorded history, while the state is only in its late sixties. That recent history is infused with a peasant mentality imported from the old world that the population is struggling to shed. Naturally, the transported culture was powerfully connected to food, its ingredients, traditions, preparation and signification.

In a scant ninety-seven minutes, Sherman and Solomonov unpack a whole range of messy and fascinating truths about food in general and the Israeli relationship to it in particular. Every piece of food Solomonov puts into his mouth comes with a complex backstory often involving family, history, tradition and struggle.

Most chefs cite their grandmothers as their leading influence, crediting their decision to cook for others to a nostalgia for the comforting tastes of their youth. A great question then is what happens in the kitchen when Moroccan and Polish Jews marry? When a Jew whose grandmother grew up in Europe joins forces with one whose family emigrated from Iraq? Ashkenazi dishes, spices (or the apparent lack thereof) and ingredients go head to head with the items and practices found in a Sephardic kitchen. And along with this comes controversy. Many of the dishes that are considered as necessarily central to any definition of Israeli cuisine are also powerfully connected to Arab traditions.

And I didn't even get to tell you about the most interesting thing I learned about ancient Nabatene practices for capturing flood waters in the desert.

<https://www.kqed.org/bayareabites/2016/07/18/eating-history-food-films-at-the-sf-jewish-film-fest/>