



## Israel's culinary revolution

Production of cheese, wine, bread and olive oil in the country has significantly progressed from what it was 15 years ago

(Marc Israel Sellern)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

It was not so long ago that Israel was a pariah state regarding food. A tourist coming on holiday would eat at the Hilton Grill Room because to eat out would be risky. Bernard Levin, a wit who wrote for *The Times* of London, once complained: "Doesn't anyone in Israel have a Jewish mother?" He despaired of finding a reasonable place to eat.

Up to the 1980s, there was no brand marketing in the modern way and no perception of quality sought by producers – or consumers for that matter.

There was only a choice of white cheese, yellow cheese or salty cheese in Israeli supermarkets. Quality wines were few and far between. Olive oil was something one bought in a soft drink bottle in local Arab villages. And there was only one type of bread for the most part.

The change for the better began in the 1980s and crystallized in the 1990s. We watched the Golan Heights Winery import New World technology to change activity forever in both vineyard and winery. Chef Erez Komarovsky fermented a revolution in the baking of artisan bread. Shay Seltzer, Barkanit and Ein Kammonim started making local handmade cheeses. Then companies like Zeta, Halutza and Eger headed a revival of Israeli olive oil.

Today there is no lack of specialist dairies, boutique wineries, regional olive presses and artisan bakeries that have sprung up all over Israel. The large producers and major brands have also responded, so production of cheese, wine, bread and olive oil in Israel today is unrecognizable from that of even 15 years ago.

There was also a slow blooming of restaurants here. First there was Moise Peer's Mishkenot Sha'ananim, the first restaurant to contain a serious wine list. Then who could forget the iconic restaurants Tapuah Zahav and Keren in their prime, and later Mul Yam, Roshfeld and the recently closed Catit? They brought fine dining to Israel. Chefs like Israel Aharoni, Haim Cohen and Eyal Shani educated and brought the Israeli public gratefully into a new world where food was given respect. Shalom Kadosh did the same with kosher cuisine.

Israelis traveled and sampled the good life abroad. The new Israeli wanted to live to eat rather than eat to live. The next generation of chefs, such as Jonathan Roshfeld, Meir Adoni and later Assaf Granit, capitalized on the new foodie interest to take things to new levels. Adoni ensured that kosher foodies would not miss out by opening Blue Sky and Lumina in the Carlton Hotel in Tel Aviv.

In the early 2000s Israeli chef Yotam Ottolenghi started a revolution in London. He opened his first deli in 2002. He introduced a Mediterranean cuisine

infused with the spice of the Middle East, heavily influenced by the experimental cooking taking place in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Today he is the most famous Israeli in London, with an empire of restaurants, published books and a regular newspaper column.

Three books have helped to bring the message of the new Israel. All have won major awards. First was Janna Gur's *The Book of New Israeli Food*. Then Ottolenghi started writing a stream of best-sellers, the most famous of which was called *Jerusalem*. The third and most recently published is *Zahav: A World of Israeli Cooking* by Michael Solomonov.

Today we are in a different place. A recent addition to the genre is David Haliva's beautiful new book *Divine Food*, which brings together Israeli and Palestinian food culture and recipes in one cover.

Ottolenghi's success unleashed a flood of activity as Israeli chefs and Israeli Eastern Mediterranean fusion cuisine invaded the food capitals of the world. There has been unprecedented recognition and praise for this new wave. Tel Aviv was voted an outstanding culinary destination by the gourmet publication *Saveur*. At the James Beard Awards – the food Oscars – Alon Shaya's restaurant Shaya in New Orleans won the award of Best New Restaurant. The book *Zahav* won the category of Best Cookbook. Moshik Roth's Samhoud in Amsterdam won two Michelin stars. The Palomar in London's West End won the title of Best Restaurant 2015. Timna



1. CHEF EYAL SHANI at work. (Magister, CC BY 2.5, via Wikimedia)
2. THESE COOKBOOKS and others are creating new interest in Israeli cuisine. (Adam Montefiore)
3. CHEF MEIR ADONI (Via Wikimedia)



was awarded best restaurant in New York. All this is almost unbelievable, but it points to a trend. Eyal Shani has taken his Hamiznon gourmet pita concept to Paris and Vienna. Meir Adoni will shortly spread his wings too, by opening a new restaurant in New York called Nur. An Israeli revolution that has nothing to do with politics or hi-tech...

I have recently eaten at the Palomar in London and Einat Admony's Balaboosta and Bar Bolonat restaurants in New York. They have something in common. There is an unmistakable Israeli atmosphere: noisy, tables crowded, a controlled *balagan*, with service on small plates but wildly innovative, unpretentious exciting food that has one saying "wow" again and again. Culinary chutzpah.

In the next 12 months two films are going to be released lauding the new Israel food and wine. American filmmaker Roger Sherman has made a documentary outlining Israel's best-kept secret: its exciting food scene. Also Snowdrum Audio Visual is in the final stages of producing a film about Israeli wine. I eagerly look forward to both.

For the first time in 2,000 years, Israeli food and wine are in. Think what a fantastic ambassador Israeli food and wine is for our country. Israeli chefs like Eyal Shani, Meir Adoni and Assaf Granit have become spokesmen for the positive side of Israel.

We also have our winemaking superstars. Think of

Dr. Yair Margalit, producer of Israel's first cult wine. Or Eli Ben Zaken whose Domaine du Castel set the standards for style and quality in the country. We should not forget the Golan Heights Winery and Victor Schoenfeld, who ushered in the quality revolution and maintained high standards for so long. More recently there are Eran Pick, winemaker of Tzora Vineyards, Israel's first ever Master of Wine, and Dr. Shibi Drori of Gvaot Winery, who is undertaking groundbreaking research on the indigenous varieties here.

However, in the midst of this success, I have one beef. I can't for the life of me understand how a restaurant selling Israeli, Eastern Mediterranean or Middle Eastern cuisine could do so without a wine list to match the direction of the food. It is like visiting an Italian restaurant with no Italian wines, or a Greek restaurant without Greek wines. It is inconceivable to me.

I have for years campaigned that Israel should be considered as part of the Eastern Mediterranean wine region and that Israeli wines should appear on wine lists alongside those of Cyprus, Greece, Lebanon and Turkey. If restaurants list North African wines (usually from Morocco) or a Middle Eastern wine too (specifically there is one particularly high-quality Syrian wine), then they should appear with the Eastern Mediterranean wines, too. This ancient wine region gave wine culture to the world. Now its revival makes it one

of the most exciting and dynamic of all wine regions.

However, Palomar, magnificent restaurant that it is, lists a paltry three Israeli wines, with only one in every category, red, white and rosé. Ottolenghi also usually prefers not to list Israeli wines. Yet Israeli wines are a broad church to cover every political view.

There are exceptions. In the excellent wine list in Shaya Restaurant in New Orleans, there are wines from Israel, Lebanon, Morocco and Greece. The regionality of the food is matched by the choice on the wine list. That is exactly as it should be. Michael Solomonov's Zahav Restaurant in Philadelphia makes it even clearer. Their list is divided into Wines of The World, Wines of Israel and Palestine, and Wines of Lebanon and Turkey. I see with my own eyes how Israel is becoming part of its region on the plate, which fulfills my vision of Israel's rightful place in the glass.

Those who support Israeli food and wine may do so with their heads held a little higher than before. Be inspired by the creative energy surrounding Israeli cuisine, but please ensure when you visit these restaurants that you support Israeli wine. The 'new' Israeli cuisine produced by an Israeli chef undoubtedly tastes more authentic with a glass of Israeli wine! ■

*The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for more than 30 years. He is known as "the ambassador of Israeli wine" and "the English voice of Israeli wine."*