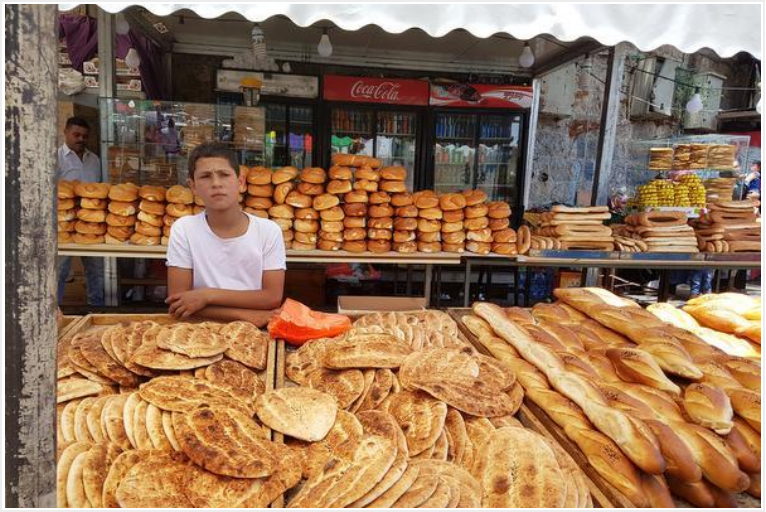
What's cooking in Israel

CHARUKESI RAMADURAI



Bite by bite: Breads are part of every meal in Israel. Photo: Charukesi Ramadurai

The country has no definitive cuisine, and that is what makes it both diverse and tempting

Almost two centuries ago, French gourmet Jean Brillat-Savarin wrote, "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are."

In all my travels, nowhere has this been truer than in Israel.

While there is a lot in common in the cuisines across the places I visit — Akko, Haifa and Tiberias in the north, Jerusalem at its very heart and Tel Aviv on the west coast — I discover that food in Israel depends not so much on where you live but where your roots are. My guide Ofer Moghadam, a Jew of Persian origin who had grown up in Germany and then worked in the US, was a fount of information on Israeli culinary traditions. This country's secret to great food lies in the fact that there is no definitive "Israeli" cuisine — it is all about where your parents, and theirs, came from.

One evening, I am at dinner at a fancy restaurant in Tiberias — the usual suspects like crunchy tabbouleh, smoked aubergine, moist falafel and creamy hummus have come and gone. For the main course, because I am a vegetarian, my host from the regional tourism board suggests *frikeh*.

Before going on, I must pause to point out that each of these starters comes from that region known broadly as West Asia — with Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, even Egypt laying claim to them (the origin of the falafel is an especially hot topic of debate) — but have now been embraced into the broad blanket of Israeli cuisine.

But frikeh (also freekeh) is another story altogether — even Moghadam, a foodie of considerable experience, has never heard of it. This salad is made of young green wheat that has been roasted on an open fire, imparting a slightly nutty flavour and crunch to the cooked grain. It turns out that my host here is an Arab, and therefore has *frikeh* cooking in his kitchen all the time.

While this dish still remains within the purview of home cooks from a specific community, a few days later, in Tel Aviv, I taste another Arab dish that is vaguely similar. This one is the *mujadara* (also

mejadra) from Egypt, but more or less mainstream in Israel now. This combination of rice, lentils and onions, topped with slightly sour yoghurt, feels more like a taste of home.

I am at Carmel Market, bustling with shoppers and diners out to enjoy their Shabbat (the seventh day of the Jewish week) morning. There are dozens of stalls selling local fast food, from piping hot *boureka* pastries of cheese and spinach, to kebabs and shawarma in pita bread, to Israeli halva made of sesame seeds and honey.

If this is liberal Tel Aviv's idea of ushering in the Shabbat, in conservative Jerusalem, another story is playing itself out on the days I visit. It is the month of Ramadan, and the street markets are heaving with food of all shapes, colours and descriptions, the Arab women shopping for the evening's feast.

The falafel stands catch my fancy with their enticing array; apart from the plain chickpea fritters I am familiar with, there are the modern versions with onions and with cheese, both equally crisp on the outside and soft on the inside, as any self-respecting falafel ought to be. There are heaps of scarlet cherries and ruby pomegranates, and large platters of the popular *knafeh* (a stringy, syrupy and cheesy pastry). And the breads — from the omnipresent pita to the braided challah and simple flatbreads brushed with olive oil and za'atar spice, the very air of Jerusalem is filled with the fragrance of these breads.

However, if there is one dish that captures my heart thoroughly in Israel, then it is the hummus, cutting across regions, communities and mealtimes with ease. Sure, almost every restaurant serves a version of the hummus, but I am in search of the real deal, and so Moghadam takes me to the local icons in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

In Jerusalem, it is the tiny Abu Shukri shop, deep inside the Muslim Quarter, where the bald owner makes magic with a handful of chickpeas and a drizzle of olive oil. In Tel Aviv, it is the legendary Ali Karavan Hummus, in the erstwhile port neighbourhood of Jaffa, where I also get a taste of a spicier version with *ful* (fava beans).

Served typically with falafels and pita bread, the creamy and tangy hummus in Israel is a reminder that sometimes the simplest things in life can be the most brilliant.

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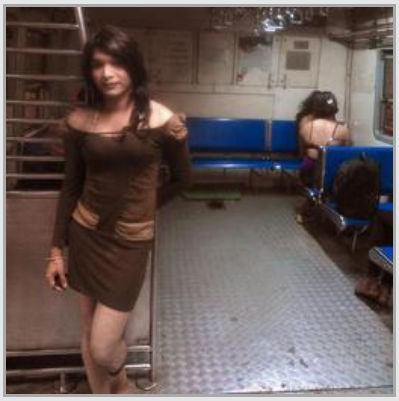

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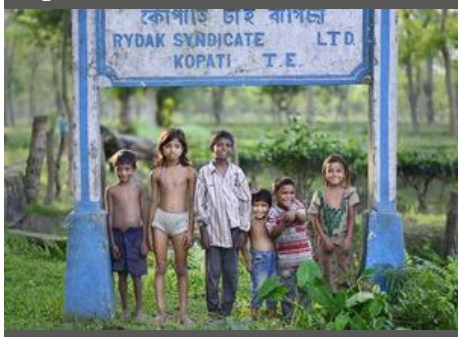

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