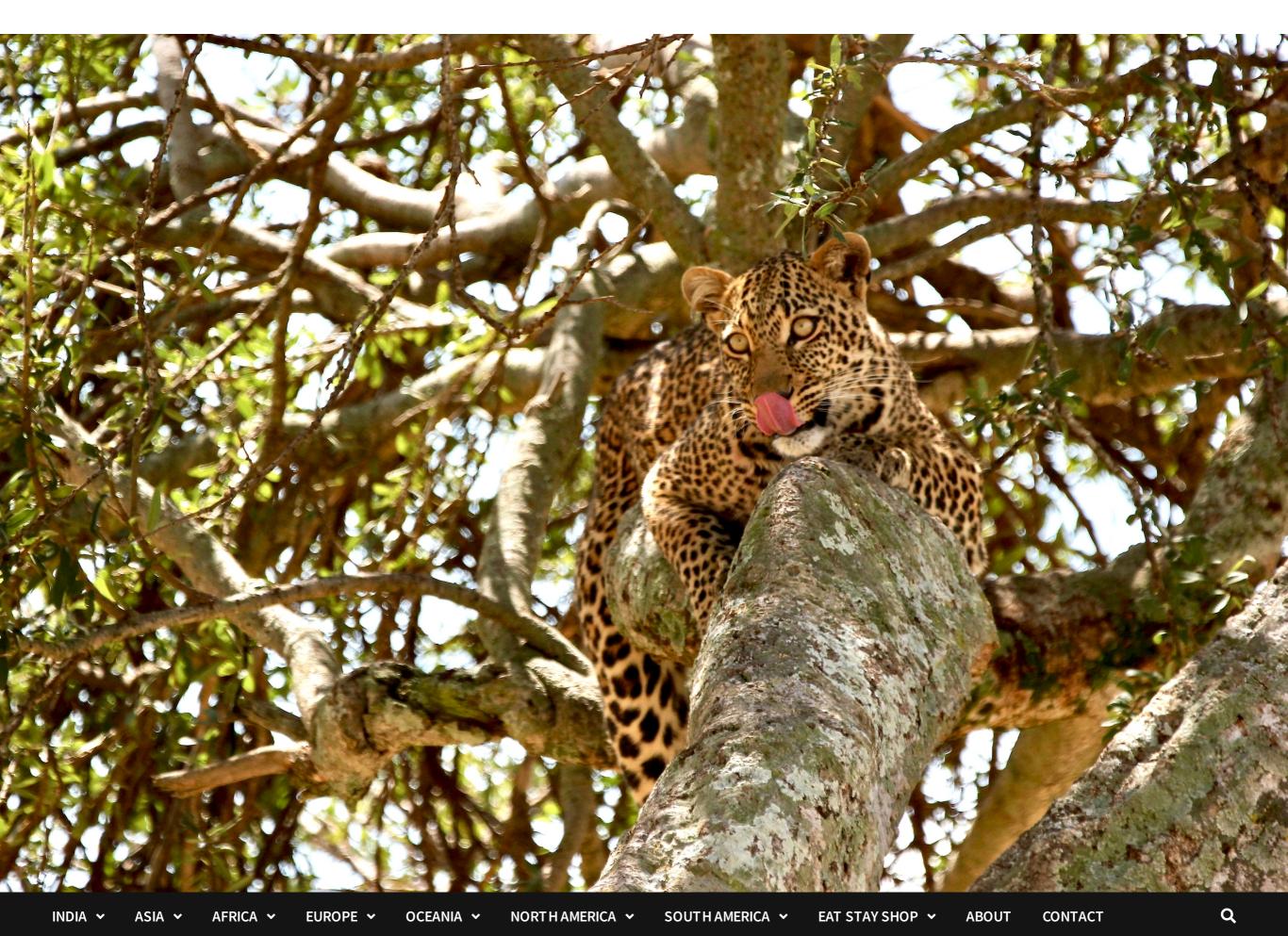
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EAT STAY SHOP / ISRAEL / PUBLISHED A vegetarian food pilgrimage in Israel

by charukesi 🕓 March 13, 2018

Almost two centuries ago, French gourmand 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, as I find out during a recent whirlwind trip.



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While there is a lot of cuisine in common 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, himself a Jew of Persian origin, who has recently moved here after living in Europe and the USA all his life, is a fount of information on Israeli culinary traditions. It is from him I learn that 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 before them came from.





One evening, I am at dinner at a fancy restaurant in the northern city of Tiberias – the usual suspects like crunchy tabouleh, smoked aubergine, moist falafels and creamy hummus have come and gone. For the main course, since 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 the middle east, 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 crunchy texture 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 to me.

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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 Israel halva made of sesame seeds and honey. Each of these shops has its throngs of loyal locals and curious tourists queuing up for a taste.



If this is liberal Tel Aviv's idea of ushering in the Shabbat, then 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 string, 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 my captures heart thoroughly in Israel, then it is the humble 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 at both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

At 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 drizzle of olive oil. In Tel Aviv, it is the legendary Ali Karavan hummusia 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.

A slightly edited version of this was published last year in The Hindu Businessline as "What's cooking in Israel"

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