

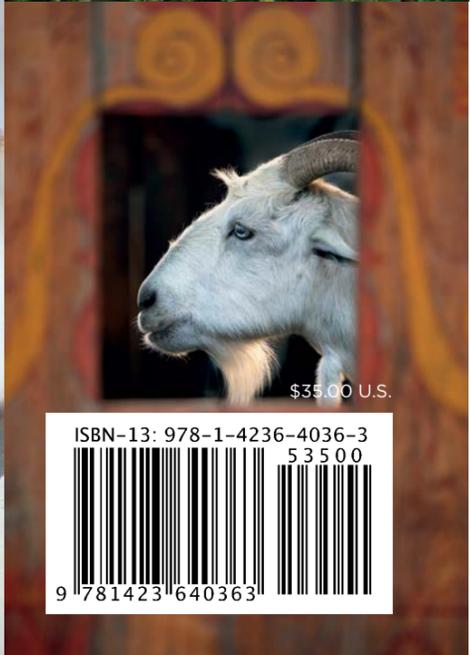
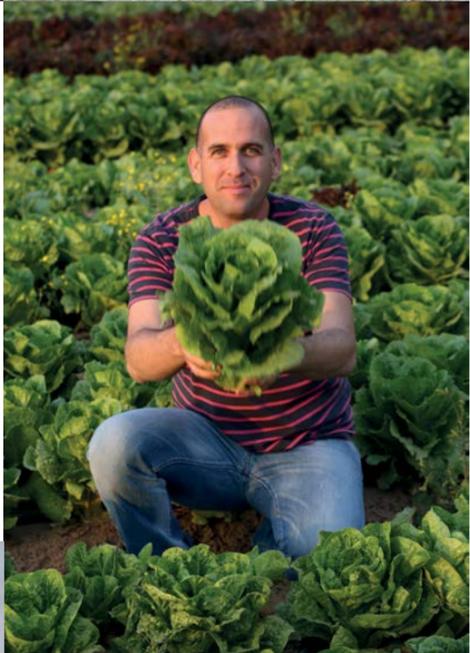


The Innovative Cooks of Modern Israel



"BEFORE THIS TRIP, I WOULD NEVER HAVE THOUGHT OF ISRAEL AS A FOOD DESTINATION. NOW, I'LL NEVER THINK OF ISRAEL WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT THE WONDERFUL CUISINE."

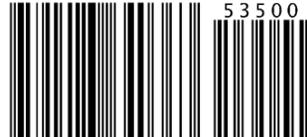
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ISRAELI EATS

ROTHFELD



GIBBS SMITH



ISRAELI EATS

STEVEN ROTHFELD

with an Introduction by
NANCY SILVERTON



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Halloumi Cheese Flower

2 SERVINGS

This soft, fresh cheese simmering with plump red tomatoes and seasoned with garlic, chili, and cilantro is presented in the shape of a savory flower blossom. A single flower will only make you crave a bouquet. Serve with warm pita.

3 tablespoons olive oil
 1 medium-size ripe red tomato,
 halved and thinly sliced
 3 to 4 ounces (85 to 110 g)
 halloumi or mozzarella cheese,
 thinly sliced
 Salt and freshly ground pepper
 3 large garlic cloves, thinly sliced
 1 small fresh green chili, thinly
 sliced
 10 cilantro sprigs

Heat oil in a heavy 8-inch (20 cm) skillet over medium heat. Arrange the tomato slices in a skillet in the shape of a circle. Top tomato slices with the cheese slices. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Arrange the garlic and chili slices atop the cheese. Bunch the cilantro sprigs in the center of the skillet. Continue cooking until cheese is soft but not totally melted. Serve immediately.



Siniya of Sea Bass

3 TO 4 SERVINGS

Most of the Siniya recipes I encountered in Israel were made with meat, so when Chef Alaa Muse served me this version with fish in his restaurant El Marsa in Akko, I was interested in tasting something different. The creamy tahini sauce is a rich and delicious accompaniment to the firm, fresh fish, and this recipe has become one of my favorites.

1½ cups (350 ml) water
½ cup (120 g) raw tahini
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
2 garlic cloves, minced
Salt and freshly ground white pepper
6 tablespoons olive oil, divided
8 cauliflower florets
1 pound 5 ounces (600 grams) skin-on sea bass fillet, cut into 4 pieces
1 large russet potato, baked and quartered (do not peel)
Fresh dill sprigs
2 tablespoons toasted pine nuts
½ teaspoon ground sumac

Preheat oven to 400°F (200°C). Combine the water, tahini, lemon juice, and garlic in a small bowl and stir until smooth. Season with salt and pepper. Set the sauce aside until ready to use.

Heat 3 tablespoons of the olive oil in a heavy small skillet over medium heat. Add the cauliflower florets and sauté until golden brown, stirring occasionally so they color evenly on all sides.

Heat a heavy medium ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat. Coat the fish fillets with the remaining 3 tablespoons olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Place fillets in the heated skillet and cook for 3 minutes. Turn and cook 1 minute on the second side. Add cauliflower and potato to the skillet and pour tahini sauce over it. Transfer to the oven and bake until fish is cooked through, about 3 minutes. Garnish with dill, pine nuts, and sumac and serve immediately.

JERUSALEM AND THE JUDEAN HILLS

IT WAS CLOSE TO FOUR IN THE AFTERNOON when I maneuvered my way through the crowded restaurant to see if I could sit down and have a meal. The hostess said they were full and showed me a long list of people waiting ahead of me for a table. Two questions popped into my mind: what meal was being served at this hour and how would I manage to eat here? I am a competitive person when it comes to being seated at a restaurant that I really want to try, so I summoned all my cosmopolitan charm, scanned the room, and noticed one stool at the end of the bar that was technically half inside the restaurant and half outside, on the sidewalk. I coolly flicked my head toward the empty spot and asked, “What about over there?” The hostess followed my head flick to the uncomfortable-looking stool and said she’d ask the chef. I watched her as she approached the bar and saw the chef lean over, listening intently. Then he caught my eye. I didn’t want to look too eager so I smiled impassively and with a slight upward jerk of his head, I was in.

I sauntered over, slid the stool inside and a little too close to my neighbor, who responded by splashing a generous amount of Sauvignon Blanc into an empty glass and handing it to me. For the next two and a half hours, it was smooth sailing. My convivial neighbor, who was with a woman and another man, informed me that when you sit at the bar, there is no menu—the chef cooks for you.

I began the meal with long, plump, crispy fried potatoes accompanied by three metal dipping bowls filled with soft, seasoned eggplant, *labneh* cheese with a slightly sweet pomegranate sauce, and tahini. After that came a deluge of fish dishes and calamari with crunchy green beans, whole roasted cloves of garlic, slivers of caramelized onion, and soft, sweet, roasted cherry tomatoes that burst in my mouth with an intense flavor that I had never experienced before. I complimented the chef and he replied, “We are famous for our tomatoes.”

I decided against dessert, as it was getting close to dinnertime, and when I said good-bye to my dining companions, my neighbor handed me an engraved card, saying he hoped to see me again. Later that evening I met my friend Dorit and told her that I had eaten (had it been lunch or dinner?) at a superb restaurant called Machneyuda and had serendipitously dined with a charming trio of people. I presented my neighbor’s card, and when she read the name her eyes grew wide and she howled, “Only Sivan (she has called me this for years—it is the month on the Hebrew calendar that falls in May and June) would arrive in Israel and have lunch with Eitan Wertheimer, the Bill Gates of the Promised Land!”

This happened in 2010. Looking back, I realize that my lunch on that October afternoon was the decisive experience that sparked the idea to do this book. I had never had a meal that was so good and so fun, with singing chefs dancing while they grilled and pan-fried and puréed, downing shots of Arak while they spun dinner plates on the tips of their fingers. Was all of Israel like this, I wondered? I had to find out.





Date Honey and Tahini Semifreddi with Cashew Brittle

8 SERVINGS

The inventive use of tahini in Israeli cuisine fascinates me. I stayed a few nights at Smadar and Yossi Yardeni's B+B in Clil, where Smadar finished off the meal with this pleasing balance of sweet, nutty, and frozen sensations. Silan is often called date honey and is a brown syrup extracted from dates. It can be found in Middle Eastern markets, or you can make it yourself following the step-by-step pictures and detailed instructions on blogger Tori Avey's website, www.ToriAvey.com.

SEMIFREDDI

- 2 (14-ounce; 400 ml) cans coconut cream
- 1 cup (240 g) raw tahini
- ½ cup (120 ml) (or more) silan (date honey)

CASHEW BRITTLE

- 2 heaping tablespoons muscovado sugar
- 4 tablespoons water
- 12 raw cashew nuts, roughly chopped

FOR SEMIFREDDI: Refrigerate the cans of coconut cream for at least 3 hours or overnight to separate the fat from the liquid.

Open cans and scoop out the fat that has risen to the top and place it in a bowl. (Reserve remaining liquid for another use, such as cooking rice or making curries.) Using a hand-held electric mixer or a balloon whisk, beat the coconut cream solids until the mixture reaches the texture of whipped cream. Fold in the tahini and silan. (Taste and add more silan if desired.) Transfer the mixture to silicone molds that have a 3-inch (7.6 cm) radius or a 6-inch (15 cm) diameter. Freeze until set or overnight. (You can also use similar-size custard cups or a 9 x 5-inch [23 x 13 cm] loaf pan, but make sure to line them with plastic wrap for easy unmolding.)

FOR BRITTLE: Combine the sugar and water in a small heavy saucepan over medium-high heat and bring to a boil. Continue cooking until sugar dissolves, stirring and brushing down the sides of the pan with a wet pastry brush to prevent sugar crystals from forming. Reduce heat and simmer without stirring, swirling pan occasionally, until the caramel is golden around the edges, about 8 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in the nuts. Spread thinly and evenly on a silicone mat or a greased baking sheet and cool completely. Snap the brittle into pieces or crumble into small bits.

Unmold the semifreddi onto plates. Garnish with the brittle pieces or bits.

Tunisian Salad

MAKES 2 CUPS (250G)

Mazal Maryoussef Uzan deftly uses two knives to chop this salad, a technique she learned from her grandmother in Tunis. It is a spectacle to witness. When she performed it for me, I turned to her daughter, Brigitte, and grandson, Matan, and asked, “Can either of you do this?” Both of them mournfully shook their heads from side to side in unison. So don’t feel inadequate if you must use the food processor. Be careful to pulse the mixture gently—you do not want a paste. In Mazal’s household, it is customary to store the salad, which conserves well with the olive oil, in a jar and serve it on weekends.

- 1 large red bell pepper
- 1 large green bell pepper
- 4 medium-size ripe tomatoes
- 1 small head garlic or 1/2 large head garlic
- 2 tablespoons (or more) olive oil
- 2 teaspoons (or more) fresh lemon juice
- Salt and freshly ground pepper
- Olive oil (for drizzling garlic)

Preheat a grill. Place the peppers and tomatoes on the grill and cook them until they are blackened on all sides. (Alternatively, roast peppers and tomatoes over an open flame on a stove until they are blackened on all sides.) Place the charred peppers in a paper or plastic bag and let them cool. Remove peppers from the bag and peel off their skins. Cut peppers in half and remove their stems, veins, and seeds. Peel the tomatoes, cut in half, and squeeze out the seeds.

Grill the head of garlic with its skins on until it is brown on all sides and the inside is soft. Let cool, and remove the skins.

Place the garlic, peppers, and tomatoes in a food processor and pulse until coarsely chopped. Do not over process. Transfer the mixture to a bowl. Stir in 2 tablespoons of olive oil and 2 teaspoons of lemon juice. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Add additional olive oil and lemon juice to taste if desired.

