



**YOTAM OTTOLENGHI**

**JERUSALEM**

**SAMI TAMIMI**

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houg





## **About the Book**

The flavours and smells of this city are our mother tongue: wild herbs picked on school trips, days in markets, the smell of the dry soil on a summer's day, goats and sheep roaming the hills, fresh pitas, chopped parsley, chopped liver, black figs, syrupy cakes, crumbly cookies.

**YOTAM OTTOLENGHI and SAMI TAMIMI**

## About the Authors

**Yotam Ottolenghi** completed a Masters degree in philosophy and literature whilst working on the news desk of an Israeli daily, before coming to London in 1997. He started as an assistant pastry chef at the Capital and then worked at Kensington Place, Launceston Place, Maison Blanc and Baker and Spice, before starting his own eponymous group of restaurants/food shops, with branches in Notting Hill, Islington, Belgravia and Kensington.

**Sami Tamimi** became head chef at Lilith in Tel Aviv in 1989, and moved to London in 1997 where he set up the traiteur section at Baker and Spice. It was here that he met Yotam and he has since worked as head chef at Ottolenghi.

**YOTAM OTTOLENGHI**

# JERUSALEM

**SAMI TAMIMI**



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## Introduction

One of our favourite recipes in this collection, a simple couscous with tomato and onion, is based on a dish Sami's mum, Na'ama, used to cook for him when he was a child in Muslim east Jerusalem. At around the same time, in the Jewish west of the city, Yotam's dad, Michael, used to make a very similar dish. Being Italian, Michael's dish was made with small pasta balls called ptitim. Both versions were beautifully comforting and delicious.

A dish just like Michael's is part of the Jewish Tripolitan (Libyan) cuisine. It is called shorba, and is a result of the Italian influence on Libyan food during the years of Italian rule of the country, in the early twentieth century. So Michael's ptitim was possibly inspired by Tripolitan cooking in Jerusalem, which in turn was influenced by Michael's original Italian culture. The anecdotal icing on this cross-cultural cake is that Michael's great uncle, Aldo Ascoli, was an admiral in the colonial Italian navy that raided Tripoli and occupied Libya in 1911.

Confusing? This is Jerusalem in a nutshell: very personal, private stories immersed in great culinary traditions that often overlap and interact in unpredictable ways, creating food mixes and culinary combinations that belong to specific groups but also belong to everybody else. Many of the city's best-loved foods have just as complicated a pedigree as this one.



This book and this journey into the food of Jerusalem form part of a private odyssey. We both grew up in the city, Sami in the Muslim east and Yotam in the Jewish west, but never knew each other. We lived there as children in the 1970s and 1980s and then left in the 1990s, first to Tel Aviv and then to London. Only there did we meet and discover our parallel histories; we became close friends and then business partners, alongside others in Ottolenghi.

Although we often spoke about Jerusalem, our hometown, we never focused much on the city's food. Recently, however — is it age? — we have begun to reminisce over old food haunts and forgotten treats. Hummus — which we hardly ever talked about before — has become an obsession.

It is more than 20 years since we both left the city. This is a serious chunk of time, longer than the years we spent living there. Yet we still think of Jerusalem as our home. Not home in the sense of the place you conduct your daily life, or constantly return to. In fact,

Jerusalem is our home almost against our wills. It is our home because it defines us, whether we like it or not.

The flavours and smells of this city are our mother tongue. We imagine them and dream in them, even though we've adopted some new, perhaps more sophisticated languages. They define comfort for us, excitement, joy, serene bliss. Everything we taste and everything we cook is filtered through the prism of our childhood experiences: foods our mothers fed us, wild herbs picked on school trips, days spent in markets, the smell of the dry soil on a summer's day, goat and sheep roaming the hills, fresh pitas with minced lamb, chopped parsley, chopped liver, black figs, smoky chops, syrupy cakes, crumbly cookies. The list is endless — too long to recall and too complex to describe. Most of our food images lie well beyond our consciousness: we just cook and eat, relying on our impulses for what feels right, looks beautiful and tastes delicious to us.

And this is what we set out to explore in this book. We want to offer our readers a glimpse into a hidden treasure, and at the same time explore our own culinary DNA, unravel the sensations and the alphabet of the city that made us the food creatures we are.

In all honesty, this is also a self-indulgent, nostalgic trip into our pasts. We go back, first and foremost, to experience again those magnificent flavours of our childhood, to satisfy the need most grown-ups have to relive those first food experiences to which nothing holds a candle in later life. We want to eat, cook and be inspired by the richness of a city with 4000 years of history, that has changed hands endlessly and that now stands as the centre of three massive faiths and is occupied by residents of such utter diversity it puts the old tower of Babylon to shame.

# Jerusalem food

Is there even such a thing as Jerusalem food, though? Consider this: there are Greek Orthodox monks in this city; Russian Orthodox priests; Hasidic Jews originating from Poland; non-Orthodox Jews from Tunisia, from Libya, from France or from Britain; there are Sephardic Jews that have been here for generations; there are Palestinian Muslims from the West Bank and many others from the city and well beyond; there are secular Ashkenazi Jews from Romania, Germany and Lithuania and more recently arrived Sephardim from Morocco, Iraq, Iran or Turkey; there are Christian Arabs and Armenian Orthodox; there are Yemeni Jews and Ethiopian Jews but there are also Ethiopian Copts; there are Jews from Argentina and others from southern India; there are Russian nuns looking after monasteries and a whole neighbourhood of Jews from Bukhara (Uzbekistan).

All of these, and many, many more, create an immense tapestry of cuisines. It is impossible to count the number of cultures and sub-cultures residing in this city. Jerusalem is an intricate, convoluted mosaic of peoples. It is therefore very tempting to say there isn't such a thing as a local cuisine. And indeed, if you go to the ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood of Me'ah She'arim and compare the prepared food sold in grocery shops there to the selection laid out by a Palestinian mother for her children in the neighbourhood of A-tur in the east of the city — you couldn't be blamed for assuming these two live on two different culinary planets.

However, if you take a step back and look at the greater picture, there are some typical elements that are easily identifiable in most local cuisines and crop up throughout the city. Everybody, absolutely everybody, uses chopped cucumber and tomatoes to create an Arab salad or an Israeli salad, depending on point of view. Stuffed vegetables with rice or rice and meat also appear on almost

every dinner table, as does an array of pickled vegetables. Extensive use of olive oil, lemon juice and olives is also commonplace. Baked pastries stuffed with cheese in all sorts of guises are found in most cultures.

Then there are looser affinities, those shared by a few cuisines but not all of them — bulgar or semolina cases stuffed with meat (kubbeh), burnt aubergine salads, white bean soups, the combination of meat with dried fruits. Eventually, these separate links between the different groups link all of the groups together to one clear and identifiable local cuisine.

Aside from that, there are the local ingredients. Jerusalemites tend to eat seasonally and cook with what grows in the area. The list is endless. It is made up of dozens of vegetables — tomatoes, okra, string beans, cauliflower, artichokes, beets, carrots, peppers, cucumbers, celeriac, kohlrabi, courgettes, aubergines; and fruit — figs, lemons, peaches, pears, strawberries, pomegranates, plums and apricots; herbs, nuts, dairy products, grains and pulses, lamb and chicken.





# The passion in the air

The diversity and richness of Jerusalem, both in terms of the cooks and their disparate backgrounds and the ingredients they use, make it fascinating to any outsider. But what makes it doubly exciting is the emotional and spiritual energy that this city is drenched in. When it comes to people's emotions it is hard to overstate how unique it is as a city.

Four thousand years of intense political and religious wrangling ([see here](#)) are impossible to hide. Wherever you go — in Jewish parts in the city centre or within the walls of the ancient old city — people are zealously fighting to protect and maintain what they see as their piece of land, their endangered culture or their right for a certain way of life. More often than not, this is pretty ugly. Intolerance and trampling over other people's basic rights are routine in this city. Currently, the Palestinian minority bears the brunt with no sign of it regaining control over its destiny, while the secular Jews are seeing their way of life being gradually marginalized by a growing Orthodox population.

The other, more positive, side of this coin is that the inherent passion and energy that Jerusalemites have in abundance results in some fantastic food and culinary creativity. The best hummus joints, where methods have been perfected over generations, are in the city (and locals are happy to go into some seriously heated debates about the best one), as are some of the country's most creative modern restaurants. There is something about the heated, highly animated spirit of the city's residents that creates unparalleled delicious food. It also has a very obvious effect on the flavours, which are strong and bold, with lots of sour and sweet. The Jerusalem Palestinian hummus is patently sharp, as are the Friday night Sephardi soups.

On top of that, there is a spirit of warmth and generosity that is sometimes almost overbearing. Guests are always served mountains of food. Nothing is done sparingly. 'Eat more' is a local motto. It is unthinkable not to eat what you are served. Going into a friend's restaurant, or a friend of a friend, you are never expected to pay. It is a combination of the famous Middle Eastern hospitality that goes back to the days of Abraham and the typical Jewish Ashkenazi way of always showering guests and relatives with delights, lest they 'go home hungry'. Heaven forbid.

Alas, although Jerusalemites have so much in common, food, at the moment, seems to be the only unifying force in this highly fractured place. The dialogue between Jews and Arabs, and often between Jews themselves, is almost non-existent. It is sad to note how little daily interaction there is between communities, with people sticking together in closed, homogenous groups. Food, however, seems to break down those boundaries on occasion. You can see people shop together in food markets, or eat in each other's restaurants. On rare occasions, they work together in partnership in food establishments. It takes a giant leap of faith, but we are happy to take it — what have we got to lose? — to imagine that hummus will eventually bring Jerusalemites together, if nothing else will.









# The recipes

Our selection of recipes here includes traditional, age-old dishes, cooked just as they should be, with no change or modern touch. Others are fairly traditional, but we allowed ourselves poetic licence and updated them to suit the times or our sensibilities. And then there are recipes that are just loosely inspired by the flavours of Jerusalem — delicious concoctions that could have easily fitted on many Jerusalem dinner tables but have yet to become local classics.

We don't mean to cover all of the city's foods, or even substantial parts of it, nor all of its communities. This is impossible. Smarter people have delved deep into Jewish and Arab cuisines and have documented both extensively. Other communities in the city have also had their foods written about. So a lot is omitted. Some typical local dishes like kugel (slow-cooked noodle cake), bagel (Arab or Jewish), pashtida (savoury flan), pastelikos (little Sephardi meat pies), tchulent or hamin (everything cooked in one pot overnight for Shabbat), strudel, challah (sweet Shabbat bread) — all are left neglected. Ashkenazi foods particularly are under-represented. This has to do with our personal backgrounds and the types of flavours we tend to cook and eat.

As we draw deep inspiration from Jerusalem and its food but are in no way trying to represent its realities, the justification for this collection of recipes is our preferences and cooking habits and those of our readers. The cooks who like our style and flavour combinations lead a (usually) western, modern lifestyle. They have a certain set of ingredients available to them and a 21st-century mindset (use less oil in the food, spend less time in the kitchen...). We can only hope that through our haphazard, often eccentric selective process and through our modifications we have succeeded in distilling the spirit of the place that made us and shaped us.

## Finally, a comment about ownership

In the part of the world we are dealing with everybody wants to own everything. Existence feels so uncertain and so fragile that people fight fiercely and with great passion to hold on to things: land, culture, religious symbols, food — everything is in danger of being snatched away or of disappearing. The result is fiery arguments about ownership, about provenance, about who and what came first.

As we have seen through our investigations, and will become blatantly apparent to anyone reading and cooking from this book, these arguments are futile.

Firstly, they are futile because it doesn't really matter. Looking back in time or far afield into distant lands is simply distracting. The beauty of food and of eating is that they are rooted in the now. Food is a basic, hedonistic pleasure, a sensual instinct we all share and revel in. It is a shame to spoil it.

Secondly, you can always search further back in time. Hummus for example, a highly explosive subject, is undeniably a staple of the local Palestinian population, but it was also a permanent feature on dinner tables of Allepian Jews who have lived in Syria for millennia and then arrived in Jerusalem in the 1950s and 1960s. Who is more deserving of calling hummus their own? Neither. Nobody 'owns' a dish because it is very likely that someone else cooked it before them and another person before that.

Thirdly, and this is the most crucial point, in this soup of a city it is completely impossible to find out who invented this delicacy and who brought that one with them. The food cultures are mashed and fused together in a way that is impossible to unravel. They interact all the time and influence each other constantly so nothing is pure any more. In fact, nothing ever was. Jerusalem was never an isolated

bastion. Over millennia it has seen countless immigrants, occupiers, visitors and merchants — all bringing foods and recipes from four corners of the earth.

As a result, as much as we try to attribute foods to nations, to ascertain the origin of a dish, we often end up discovering a dozen other dishes that are extremely similar, that work with the same ingredients and the same principles to make a final result that is just ever so slightly different, a variation on a theme.

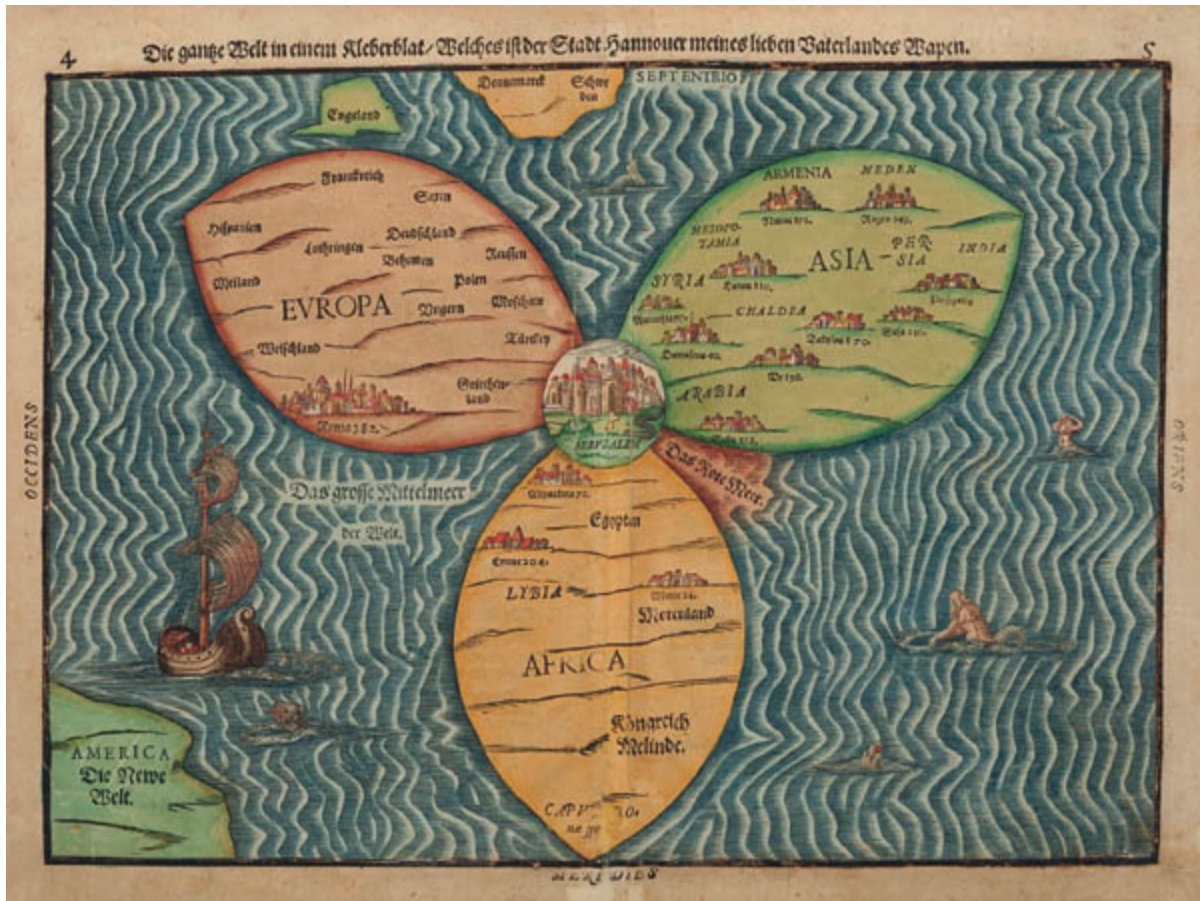


# History

The complexity and vibrancy of the food in Jerusalem stems from its location as a meeting point between Europe, Asia and Africa and the incredible richness of its history. Jerusalem was traditionally depicted, as in this medieval map ([see here](#)), as the centre of the universe, surrounded by three continents. Indeed, there are few places in the world to match its importance. Yet Jerusalem has never been a great metropolis. It has never had temples as big as those of Luxor, art as refined as Greece, or public buildings as magnificent as those of Rome. It didn't possess large imperial courts like those of China or India, or busy commerce hubs as in central Asia. It has always been a rather small and crowded city, built of the stone of its surrounding hills.

The energy of Jerusalem is introspective. It is born out of an interplay between the peoples that have been coming and going for millennia, and the spirit that seems to hover among the olive trees, over the hills and in the valleys. It is not through anything material but through faith, learning, devotion and, sadly, fanaticism, that Jerusalem gained its importance.





When King David founded it as his capital, in around 1000 BC, it was, as it is now, a collection of rugged hills with little vegetation or water. David was a warrior, and chose his capital for strategic reasons — it was at the centre of his kingdom. His son, Solomon, the most glorious Jewish king, built the first temple in Jerusalem, and sanctified its place as Temple Mount. Following Solomon's death the young Jewish kingdom was broken up by squabbling relatives, and often attacked from the north. This culminated in 587 BC, when Babylon attacked Jerusalem, burnt the city and the temple, and dispersed its inhabitants.

It is then that we first see one of the greatest emotions attached to Jerusalem — yearning. We are told of two Jewish leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, who successfully made it their life mission to restore the temple in Jerusalem and the Jewish nation in its homeland. This yearning will play out again and again, in Jews, Muslims and



Christians, from all parts of the world. Indeed it is so strong that psychiatrists have identified the Jerusalem Syndrome — pilgrims who break down when their life goal, the long-anticipated journey to the holy city, is accomplished.

In 332 BC the Persian empire fell to Alexander the Great, and a few centuries of Hellenistic influence followed. A protracted war of cultures took place between the modern, frivolous and inter-marrying Hellenistic Jews, and the more traditional Jews. For a while, a rebellion of Jewish traditionalists — Maccabees — gained the upper hand and managed to control the religious life. This revolt gave us Hanukkah, the festival of lights, based on the story that, upon restoring the temple to its Jewish traditions, a little jug of oil could miraculously feed the sacred light of the temple for eight days.

While for many the Maccabean revolt is a story of liberation and inspiration, some scholars see it as another episode in a centuries-long struggle between traditionalists and cosmopolitan Jews. This is another pattern that is played out in Jerusalem again and again, nowadays manifested as the struggle between the orthodox and the secular Jews in the city.

The Romans — following hot on the heels of the Hellenistic influence — first appeared in Jerusalem in 63 BC, and then gradually asserted their authority against Jewish resistance, which culminated in a failed revolt in 70 AD, when the second, and last temple was destroyed. This event is painfully etched in Jewish history as the onset of a slow process of decline that would not end until the advent of Zionism.

Jesus Christ lived some decades before this momentous event, at a time of great political, military, cultural and spiritual upheaval. His presence is of course still evident in many monuments in the city, first and foremost in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the site of the resurrection. This is a collection of dimly lit caves, buildings and churches, encompassing 17 centuries, each attributed to a different