

It was only during the tenure of President Clinton that the White House ended a long tradition of employing European chefs to bring aboard an American-bred and trained executive chef. When young Israeli chefs started studying and training abroad in the 70s and 80s, they too turned to Europe; studying at the prestigious French culinary institutes, and absorbing the foundations of what is often considered the ultimate in haute cuisine. But their return to Israel—the warmer climate, the menage of ethnic influences and the multitude of delectable fresh foods—urged them to put their talents and skills towards molding and refining a local cookery.

Even the name of one of Israel's most popular TV cooking programs, "Garlic, Pepper and Olive Oil," hosted by the congenial master chef, Haim Cohen, sums up that *back to basics* approach. Haim

and many of the other TV chefs made it their business to squeeze into the kitchens of Moroccan grandmothers, hippie cheesemakers, and Arab confectioners, in order to reap the breadth of generations of experience. Using seasonal fruits, fish and vegetables, local cheeses, meats and wines, traditional staples like tehina and eggplant, and mixing it with pluck, ingenuity, and an almost daredevil approach to taste combinations, they epitomize the new path of Israeli cooking.

A Change in Supply

It is difficult to discuss Israeli cuisine without mentioning the changes over the past sixty years. During the early years of the State, there simply wasn't enough food – what there was, was rationed. Primarily the communal settlements - kibbutzim and moshavim - had the task of providing for the burgeoning population. They performed that task only too well,

perfecting growing methods and maximizing distribution. When food became plentiful, small-scale traditional agriculture, as in much of the rest of the world, ceased to be a lucrative enterprise. As a result, just as the local chefs were returning to their roots, the Israeli agriculturalists were searching for alternative sources of income. The rural landscape changed—cottage industries sprang up like wildfire.

For decades, the hardworking dairymen and women, who had brought Israeli milk production to an international acme, would wait loyally for the milk tanker to arrive and draw its daily fare; which was then transported to the largest dairy processor, Tnuva. About thirty years ago, more than a few farmers began to siphon off canisters of the creamy, white liquid for their own creative experimentation. Their handiwork was good. At the same time, medium-sized dairies were encroaching on to what had once been a monopoly; and all producers began expanding their range of offerings.

On the barely tillable soil, following a tradition of millenia, more and more goats and sheep were being raised for milk. Scattered entrepreneurs introduced water buffalos, and developed an array of cheeses from their milk. Dozens and dozens of local cheeseries now produce smooth goudas, tangy pecorinos, creamy camemberts, and of course a giddy collection of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern soft white cheeses - labane, feta, halumi, ricotta, etc.

As in any trend, particularly in Israel,

Bittersweet tehina dripping down the sides of a warm pita stuffed with sizzling falafel, freshly cut cucumbers and spicy cabbage salad, remains a common site in the local foodscape; yet the endless culinary possibilities of those familiar ingredients — tehina, chick peas and vegetables — are what drive the new Israeli cuisine.

Getting past the Falafel, but Sticking to Basics



by Becky Rowe

- Whole grain rice molded with pomegranetes, sweet potatoes and fresh herbs (based on a traditional Persian recipe)
- Greens and cabbage salad with tehina dressing
- Pasta with roasted bell peppers, tomatoes and basil

word spreads quickly. Restaurateurs and curious epicurians flock to examine and taste the new selections; supermarkets which used to carry only the products of major Israeli companies, are stocking shelves with small cheesery produce, and of course the international market is awakening to the high quality of Israeli dairy products, the majority of which are kosher. Along with the cheese came boutique wineries and cottage industries of olive oil, herbs, breads, honey and condiments.

It all boils down to a plate of Humus

The saying goes that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach; well, the way to capture an Israeli's heart is through a hearty portion of humus. But it cannot be just any humus. Hours of argument and discussion are devoted to identifying the best *humusiya* (humus restaurant) in any locale—which use more tehina, which are creamier, which need another twist of lemon or pinch of cumin. At lunch break, laborers join hi-tech execs at local hangouts, all happily or grumpily swiping their humus with broken off bits of pita.

Then there are those who try to recreate the cream of the pounded chick pea on their own. Wannabes snatch up the latest edition of the newspaper which advertises recipes by some of the most famous humus restaurateurs in the county (all household names of course)—only to be disappointed. Each recipe is more convoluted than the next - confusing instructions, inobtainable ingredients and interestingly enough - never mentioning quantities. Let's face it, no one is



ever going to reveal a good humus recipe. In Israel, it is worth its weight in gold.

Ingathering of the exiles

A constant theme of Israeli food is in fact its diversity and inconsistencies, only natural in a land with such a wide variety of ethnic cuisines. In the give and take, it is usually the Mediterranean which claims an upper hand due to the availability of ingredients. Yet, no child, from Ashkenazi, Sephardi or Arab heritage, grows up without the ubiquitous Central European *shnitzel* (breaded meat/chicken/turkey cutlet) on his or her lunch plate. This Northern staple is often accompanied by a fresh combo of deliciously crunchy small cucumbers and sweet tomatoes, with a side dollop of spiced eggplant salad. What multi-ethnicity means is a combination of spices, tastes and textures from the kitchens of Egypt to Buenos Aires, and Riga to the Galilee.

And what and when people eat is inextricably woven into the calendar and traditions of the Jewish people. Cheesecakes and quiches on Shavuot in celebration of the land of milk and honey promised to the People of Israel; Fried potatoes and doughs on Chanukah commemorating the oil in the Temple's menorah; Pome-

granetes and honey on Rosh Hashana with wishes for a sweet and fruitful new year. And just as all the holidays have traditional foods, Friday night dinners in every variety are a staple of family life. For both the secular and the religious, Sabbath and holidays are a time for guests, repartee and partaking in refreshment.

Outdoors and At Home

Routine good weather often turns food in Israel into an outdoor experience. Grilling meats has turned from pastime to obsession, and can sometimes make holidays at large parks seem more like a bad smog day in L.A.. Urban Israel may be defined by its sidewalk cafes - standard in even many small communities. Cafes in Israel serve much more than coffee; they offer the ubiquitous Israeli light lunch - sandwiches, quiches and of course salads—and more than food, they supply a good view of the passers-by; to see and be seen, a place to gossip, discuss and argue. For those who choose to contend with larger crowds, major Food Festivals feature Israeli-made honeys, cheeses, wines, cherries, olives and chocolates.

A recent affluence, a growing worldliness, quality local produce, a traditional/emotional attachment to food, and a tendency towards taking things to an extreme, has branded a unique Israeli cuisine and elevated it to international standing.

Conde Nast claims Tel Aviv has the best vegetarian food in the world; and it has the highest per capita number of vegan and vegan-friendly restaurants.