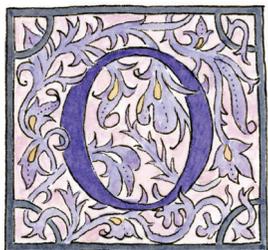


From Mouth to Mind: Food and Jewish Engagement

A conversation with

MICHAEL SOLOMONOV



VER THE PAST 15 years, Michael Solomonov has helped put Israeli food on the culinary map in the United States. His first restaurant in Philadelphia, *Zahav*, received the James Beard Foundation Outstanding Restaurant Award, and the recently opened NYC location of *Laser Wolf*, his Israeli *shipudiya* (*skewer house*), is one of the hottest reservations in the city. Chef Solomonov sat down for an interview with SAPIR's associate publisher, Ariella Saperstein, to talk about food as a linchpin of Jewish culture and how it connects to Jewish identity and Zionism.

Ariella Saperstein: In preparation for our conversation, I was looking at your first cookbook, and I was struck that when you

opened your restaurant *Zahav* in 2008, Israeli food was relatively unknown outside of Israel. That seems hard to believe now; I can't keep up with all the Israeli restaurants opening in New York City! Can you reflect on what it means to be a pioneer in popularizing Israeli food for mainstream American audiences?

Michael Solomonov: Well, I remember a couple of things very vividly. When I wrote my business plan with my partner, Steve, a lot of Israeli expats had opened "Mediterranean" restaurants they didn't call Israeli. And the idea was probably a smart one, because people thought Israeli food was falafel or shawarma or hummus or kosher food. But we wanted to call our restaurant what it was, and I think it was bold for the time. It required a bit of explaining to our investors, our PR company at the time, and certainly to our guests. But after we opened, it didn't seem like it should have been that much of a conversation. A lot of people thought maybe it would be political, or too risky from a messaging standpoint, which I find insulting. I'm Israeli — it's insulting to say that to me.

We opened *Zahav* because when we'd go back to Israel, there were 20 different gastronomies in the first course of *salatim* [salads]. And then it was all this meat cooked over charcoal. It was so robust and so soulful. And the question was, why is nobody doing this yet in the United States?

But we can't just copy and paste from Israel — to be a part of this movement meant combining all those elements in a region with a very different climate. Pennsylvania basically has butter-nut squash and cabbage most of the year, so we need to roll up our sleeves and spread our wings a bit, looking at different spices and techniques found in the *shuk* or around the table at Shabbat meals. All that informed how we put together our menus.

Saperstein: At *Zahav*, you won't mix dairy and meat in the same dish, which imposes some limitations on your cooking. How much do you think about kashrut laws when you are designing a restaurant,

bringing people to Israel, or hosting a cooking demonstration? It's limiting, but you argue that it's more authentic.

Solomonov: It is, and I would say those limitations are liberating. You have a framework in which you can really push things and excel. If we'd put butter on meat, or yogurt on lamb, we would've been like every other restaurant. I'm not doing that. This isn't "French chef cooks Middle Eastern." I'm Israeli. That's not the *nefesh* [spirit] or the terroir of Israeli cooking. Which is lamb fat, charcoal, tehina, a ton of olive oil.

Saperstein: You've made bold changes to common Israeli dishes like Israeli salad, to which you will add mangos because we don't have good cucumbers and tomatoes in the Northeast during winter. How do Israelis visiting your restaurant respond?

Solomonov: In true Israeli fashion, they either love it or hate it. Often, they'll tell you that it's wrong and how they would do it better—which is great! Most of our Israeli guests understand what we're trying to do. For us, it's less about making the Moroccan carrots "right," than "wow, when I eat this kohlrabi poached with cumin, orange, garlic, and harissa, it reminds me of the carrot salad that I had on Friday night at home."

Saperstein: That point about harking back to people's memories is a good segue to how Jewish food relates to identity. How does the work you've done reviving Jewish and Israeli food connect with your own Jewish identity? Do you think food can strengthen Jewish identity, particularly among more secular Jews?

Solomonov: I grew up in a Conservative Jewish community in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, which is a very Jewish neighborhood. My shul was great. The people in it were great. But I never really felt like I belonged. My Israeli identity was complicated because my parents

Food is part of who we are, what identifies us as Jews. We cook food a certain way; we don't mix milk and meat, while other foods are *treyf*. And food informs the way that every Jew has celebrated or mourned or wed or recognized a birth.

didn't speak Hebrew in the house, and we didn't go back to Israel that often. My dad was born in Bulgaria—a Sephardic Bulgarian who grew up in Lod as an atheist eating pork.

This is so cliché because every chef has a grandmother thing, but cooking was an expression of endearment for my grandmother. Her English was not awesome. She lived in Lod, we didn't see each other very often. Whenever she would visit, she would fill the fridge and freezer with borekas. I was a really picky eater as a kid, but I loved borekas. As I got older, I realized what the borekas said about her family, my ancestors who were pushed out of Spain after the Inquisition. Some say that the French appropriated puff pastry from a dough created by Spanish Jews. Whether or not that's true, Jews brought this pastry to the Balkans. After the region was conquered by Turks, they started stuffing the pastry with a form of feta cheese. After Jews survived the war by being protected from the Nazis by the Bulgarian king, many made aliyah to Israel. And now there are borekas on every street corner in Israel.

Food is part of who we are, what identifies us as Jews. We cook food a certain way; we don't mix milk and meat, while other foods are *treyf*. And food informs the way that every Jew has celebrated or mourned or wed or recognized a birth. As my business partner,

I think that any avenue that can strengthen the Jewish future should be embraced. If food is a way for young people to express themselves as Jews, then you have to promote it.

Steve, wrote in our cookbook, *Zahav*, you bring food to a bris, and you bring food to a shiva. And there's obviously symbolism in the food itself [as during Passover].

My faith is ever-changing. I have practices that anchor me sometimes closer and sometimes less closely to Judaism, but food has the utmost importance.

Saperstein: Recent surveys about Jewish engagement have shown that making and eating Jewish food tend to be among the top ways that young Jews feel connected to Judaism. You're on the board of the Jewish Food Society, which was founded only in 2017 and has 100,000 followers across social media. Maybe it's a larger trend related to food more generally, but I wonder whether you think there's anything unique about the current generation in its use of food as a connection to Jewish identity.

Solomonov: Opening an Israeli restaurant was a way to be able to advocate for Israel. And I would say the same thing with Judaism — people are looking for ways to connect.

When you're hesitant or apprehensive about institutional religion, there's a way to relate with food. Everyone can agree that hot challah is the best thing ever, right? Most of us can agree that breaking bread with your friends and family is a spiritual experience, even if you don't also say the prayers or light candles. That's why I think the

Jewish Food Society is incredibly important: It's giving everybody more ways to connect, whatever their level of observance.

Saperstein: On the flip side, do you think there are limits to food as an engagement tool? There's a concern among some Jewish leaders that in the near future, eating bagels and lox—and maybe at *Zahav!*—will be the primary connection to Judaism for most non-Orthodox Jews, instead of anything more substantive. Is that a risk?

Solomonov: I think that any avenue that can strengthen the Jewish future should be embraced. If food is a way for young people to express themselves as Jews, then you have to promote it. I don't think there's a limit. Nobody's ever going to get sick of food.

Do you think there's a limitation? That it's a mistake to push as much as we can with food?

Saperstein: I don't think that it's a mistake, because it is a successful engagement tool. But if it becomes a substitute for other modes of connection—if it's seen as “enough” of a connection, not as an entry point—then we risk a future generation with a relatively thin connection to Judaism that can't stand the test of time. And then not much will hold Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews together. So I wouldn't put all our eggs in the “food” basket, as it were, though I think it can be one component of outreach to less engaged Jews, ideally if it's also a route to deeper engagement.

Solomonov: I want people to leave *Zahav* and think: *I've never been to Israel, I see a lot of its conflict on the BBC, but man, that was delicious. And I felt good. And it was warm. And wow, I didn't know that there were 100 different cultures in Israel.* If Jewish food makes Jews feel proud of who they are, then that's actually enough for me. What's interesting, though, is I feel that Zionism is such a core part of Judaism. And it would be hard for me to separate that out of the equation.

Saperstein: Your point about Israeli and Jewish foods drawing from many different cultures is important, especially because of the accusations—recently featured in the *New York Times* Style section—that Israelis are appropriating Palestinian cuisine or calling dishes Israeli that are authentically Palestinian or originated elsewhere. What do you have to say about that?

Solomonov: It's something that I've unfortunately had come up in my life, and I think that there are a couple of truths to all this.

One is that if you want to make a case for why Israel doesn't or shouldn't exist, you can certainly use food. Saying there's no such thing as Israeli food is a way of saying there's no such thing as Israel. Saying that Israeli food is stolen is a way of saying that Israel's been stolen, and so on. But this is just lazy. We could go through each dish. Falafel is what Coptic Christians made from the fourth century—the vegetable patties were to mimic meat during Lent. Shawarma was Arabic, but from before the Ottoman period. And hummus is probably originally Egyptian. None of those dishes were created by Palestinians. They're regional, and Jews are from those regions, too. They're hybrids of many cultures, and Jews were part of those cultures, too.

I think it's ironic that Lebanon and Syria have the same national dish [kibbeh] and nobody makes any sort of political accusations there, even though we could talk about the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. But the moment I make any of that food, I'm the occupier, or I'm perpetrating apartheid. Food transmits across cultures and geographies. But I get it—if I were Palestinian, striving and suffering, wanting independence and self-determination and things to claim as my own heritage, I would probably feel exactly the same way [angry].

When the world blames Israel for things that other countries or cultures do all the time without criticism, I find that to be a double standard, antisemitic, and anti-Zionist.

Israeli food is my life. Israel is a very important part of my life.

But we should also be able to say “This is Palestinian” or “Palestinians taught us this.”

Saperstein: I'm reminded of the BDS campaign in 2018 to get chefs to drop out of the Round Tables Festival in Tel Aviv. A number of prominent chefs signed a letter pressuring their peers not to participate. There are many educational trips now to Israel for different demographics, including non-Jews who are influential in various fields, often those most vulnerable to anti-Zionist narratives. Are politics so dominant now in the culinary world that we should be thinking about trips for people in your field?

Solomonov: Absolutely. The easiest way to understand Israel is to be there for three days and to just see it for yourself.

Can you oversell food when it comes to Jewish identity or getting people to connect? Maybe, but we have to continue to use whatever methods we have to promote dialogue and conversation. Frankly, at the end of the day, we don't have anything else. *