



Palestinian Cuisine in the World



By Fadi Kattan

Our cuisine, as much as we cherish and adore it, is largely unknown to the world! A harsh statement? Yes! And powerful as well. Just as powerful as the potential and possibilities of our cuisine everywhere.

We have inherited a very rich cuisine that has been resilient in the face of challenges that range from culinary appropriation to displacement, from the globalization of taste to intensive farming of produce intended for export – all factors that unsettle our relationship to the seasonality of the products of our land.

To understand the dynamics of Palestinian cuisine in the world today, we need to go back and look at both what has happened in Palestine and what has happened worldwide.

In Palestine, our cuisine started traveling with the first Palestinian families that settled elsewhere mainly for economic reasons. And this elsewhere was quite varied. In the new homes that range from the laid-back islands of the Caribbean to the bustling Latin American countries, far-away Japan, the splendid capitals of Europe, the chilly capitals of the Russian Empire, and the colorful kitchens of Constantinople, Palestinian food was both a comforting preserver of identity and an invitation to share our hospitality. Yet the traditional recipes were adapted, changed to suit the local terroirs where people cooked. With the waves of dispossession and forced exile, people tried to recreate the Palestine they knew through the dishes they cooked, the trees they planted, the herbs they grew in small metal pots on windowsills of refugee shacks, in backyards that defied the cold winters of North America, or even in refugee camps only a few kilometers



Chef Fadi Kattan during a talk at the Mosaic Rooms in London.

away from their city or village of origin but yet in a totally different terroir.

When Palestinians started to open restaurants abroad, very few named the genre as Palestinian cuisine, often opting for generic terms such as “Middle Eastern cuisine” or, following the successful trend of Lebanese restaurants, calling theirs a “Lebanese restaurant.” This choice was often made either for commercial reasons or because, at that time, Palestinians were wary of the negative connotations that the mention of their nationality could have.

Change was happening simultaneously in Palestine with the increasing availability of imported cuisines (mainly “standardized and diluted” versions of French, Italian, American, and Chinese cuisines), reflecting the aspirations and culinary education of local chefs, all of whom considered foreign cuisine and produce as “better” than that of Palestine. The popular trend of the time was to go towards “international” cuisine rather than

to celebrate our local produce. This is something I never understood, as, sadly, many restaurants were presenting poorly rendered versions of foreign dishes while their chefs would go back home to feast on Palestinian olives, hot *taboun* bread (baked on hot stones over a wood fire), and fragrant *musakhan* (glazed onions served on a special bread soaked in olive oil, covered with roasted pine nuts and sumac), and celebrate the *akub* (a root vegetable traditionally served in a yogurt sauce) and fig seasons with gusto. Where was the gap?

In the late 1990s, things started to change, with more and more Palestinian restaurants popping up across the globe, whether they served traditional Palestinian cuisine or street food. Then, people began to write about Palestinian food, with Christiane Dabdoub Nasser’s *Classic Palestinian Cookery* being published in 2000. I recall that in 2005 and 2006, international media shyly started to cover stories about Palestinian chefs.



Mohamed Hadid plating his *bamia* dish at Fawda with his daughter Alana and Chef Fadi.

Today, we have a vibrant Palestinian food scene that spreads from Chile to Australia, with Palestinian women and men living in the diaspora cooking Palestinian, calling it Palestinian, and perpetuating the stories, the recipes, and the traditions while bringing their own style to the kitchen. From the dynamic Knafeh Bakery (a traditional sweet from Nablus prepared from white cheese and fine pastry, drenched in syrup) in Australia to the classic Tanoreen restaurant in New York, to Palestinian produce made available in the United States through Canaan and in the United Kingdom through Zaytoun trading companies, to the multitude of Instagram cooks that showcase superb Palestinian recipes everywhere, and the many cookbooks that have been published recently: Palestinian cuisine is shared and appreciated today by many across the globe.

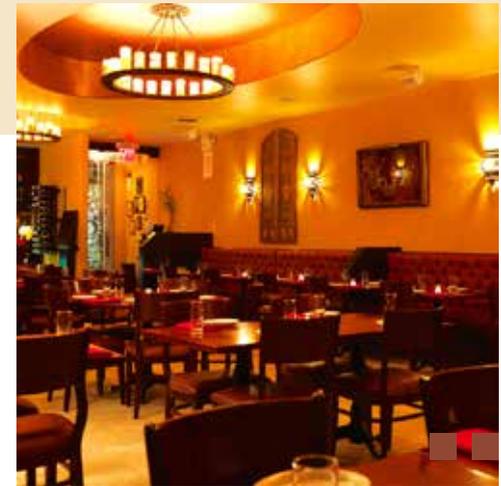
The beautiful fact that thousands of people can access Palestinian cuisine through social media has also been a

blessing. Palestinians from different walks of life have often contributed enormously to raising awareness and awakening the desire in people to taste Palestinian flavors. To mention a few: Mohamed Hadid's *bamia* (okra) stew has become legendary, and Trio Joubran's passion for *za'atar* (commonly translated as thyme but really a kind of oregano) has made many understand that *za'atar* is not only the mix, but a lush fragrant herb that grows all over the land of Palestine.

In Palestine, we are seeing many creative initiatives, though we still face the challenge of having our voices heard, and sadly, the recurrent culinary appropriation places hurdles in how we manage to portray and share our cuisine. For a chef, it is extremely frustrating to be caught in the middle of the challenges faced by our source of inspiration, the fantastic resilient farmers and artisans, on the one hand, and a marketing machine that attempts to erase all our claims



Wissam and Adnan Joubran with *za'atar* in the Bethlehem Market.



The dining room at Tanoreen restaurant in Brooklyn, New York.

to terroir, to land, to memories, and to food, on the other. I rejoice when I see a new kind of Palestinian produce, taste a new dish by a Palestinian chef, or read an article by a Palestinian academic about food. I believe strongly that we need to persevere in making our cuisine as mainstream as possible. This process has to go through many, many initiatives: From preserving traditional cuisine to reinterpreting it; from making sumac, *laban jameed* (dried yogurt), and *freekeh* (cracked wheat) available all over the world to creating travel food shows that take the audience into the secrets of Palestinian kitchens; from publishing recipes in all mediums to creating cooking experiences in

Palestine for visitors to share the delicacies of Nablus beyond *knafeh*, of Hebron beyond *qidreh* (a meat dish with rice and chickpeas), of Gaza beyond *zibdiyeh gambari* (shrimp bowl), and of Jerusalem beyond hummus. I rejoice because today, many of these endeavors exist!

Fadi Kattan is a Franco-Palestinian chef and hotelier who has become the voice of modern Palestinian cuisine.

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