



# Gingerbread Houses with a Palestinian Twist



By Riyam Kafri AbuLaban

Food, and all the knowledge produced around it – from anthropology to techniques to storytelling to science and art – is largely connected to the cultures we come from. But food is also a great entry point for fusion and interdisciplinary creative thought and production. In recent years, social media has been saturated with beautiful posts on specific traditional dishes, but also equally on dishes inspired by other kitchens but given a Palestinian twist. Food is probably one of the most flexible artistic mediums with creative breathing room. Palestinian chefs, foodies, and food artists are gradually reimagining dishes with contemporary approaches, or scientific and molecular perspectives, or simply putting a Palestinian twist on a well-known international dish. After all, the production of culinary knowledge is intimately connected to who we are culturally.

The Palestinian kitchen, like other kitchens, is in flux as it borrows and receives inspiration from other cuisines. Why not freekeh risotto? Why not hot cross buns with a cardamom-cinnamon Palestinian twist? (Visit Fadi Kattan's Instagram account to sneak a peek.) And why not build Palestinian-style gingerbread houses?

Gingerbread houses are a nineteenth-century German tradition that became popular after the Brothers Grimm published *Hansel and Gretel*. There is something magical about a house completely edible from top to bottom, even more so amidst the spirit and charm of the Christmas season. Under the spell of gingerbread houses and the holiday season, I wanted to create a family tradition that fit with my children's experience of Palestinian homes. I also wanted them to know that Christmas is a Palestinian holiday, that Jesus Christ is Palestinian.

In December 2019, the twins and I decided to build a Palestinian gingerbread house. We took photos of old homes everywhere. We noticed window shapes, balconies, rooftops, and gardens. The week before Christmas, we created the templates, mixed the dough, and added caraway seeds and rose water to the mix. Our model was



A Palestinian gingerbread house baked by Riyam Kafri AbuLaban.

an old home in Ramallah with a large garden. We called it "Return Home for Christmas." We imagined Handala finally coming home, rushing through the garden gate carrying his key, opening the door and entering the house as the sun set on Christmas Eve.

For Christmas 2020, after my bout with COVID-19, the children and I were finally able to build "150 Christmases," a house inspired by the Ramallah Friends School Upper Campus. It was a nod to our existence way before the creation of the state of Israel, and recognition that this building has seen its fair share of history, including wars, occupation, and sure enough, the last pandemic of 1918.

This year, we created an internal decor that depicted the radiating warmth of a family living room on Christmas Eve. The entrance was inspired by the Khalil Totah Auditorium at the Ramallah Friends School. The theme was "Christmas in Ramallah," with a light dusting of snow outside and a warm living room on the inside. The elements in the living room came from different places, but most importantly the tree was inspired by our own tree, and the fireplace by the one in my personal office. (Yes, I have a 100-year-old fireplace in my office!) This year's theme was more on the light side. After almost two years into the pandemic, we wanted to just imagine a happy, warm home. For New Year's Eve we baked a chocolate cake that was

decorated as an old city. The scene was inspired by Jerusalem and Acca and called "New Year's in Palestine."

I cannot claim to be a chef or an artist, I'm simply a mother of two who wants to create fun traditions and raise children who know who they are. I want them to build gingerbread houses that belong to them and resemble the country they live in. And we simply cannot wait to build next year's house.

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