

Traveling with Jewish Taste® Israel: From Tree to Shining Tree

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



It may be hard for New Englanders to reconcile the cold, snow, and ice of our February with the holiday of Tu B'Shevat. But in Israel, the weather is beginning to warm up around the traditional "Jewish New Year of Trees" – and pink and white blossoms cover almond branches across the landscape. Soon, the hills will come

alive with ancient olive trees and sprawling vineyards that will provide a stunning backdrop for a tour of the Jewish State.

What better time to enjoy Israeli food – one might say.

But then again, what is Israeli food?

While we may automatically think of felafel and hummus as the quintessential Israeli street food, as a land of immigrants Israel features many food traditions: some belonging to the greater Middle East, others coming from the four corners of the globe; but many able to be celebrated as "home grown" Israeli.

In the very early years of the re-born nation, my dad traveled to Israel to visit our extended family. On his return, our U.S. relatives gathered together to view his slides.



In Israel, it's almond blossom time

apple, including the grapefruit-sized "Orleans."

Israeli produce is distinctive, unlike anything in American supermarkets – and a physicist friend of mine explained why this is not just a figment of my ardent Zionist imagination.

Rather, it's because Israel uses brackish water to irrigate her crops, thus, the plants are forced to make more sugar to counteract the salt – the result, scrumptious fruits and vegetables.

My cousins at Moshav Nir Banim grow peaches so sweet that they are famous throughout the country. In fact, they are so delicious that unscrupulous vendors in some markets have been known to put other growers' fruits into Nir Banim boxes in order to sell them to

unsuspecting customers.

Produce is not the only thing to devour in Israel. Various types of bread and rolls – such as pita (with pockets; or thin and flat) and "baygeleh" – are baked and sold "fresh from the oven" daily – and not only in corner stores and large supermarkets, but straight from the bakers' trays on the street.

In fact, on one trip to Jerusalem, my husband became quite the "bread snob," turning his nose up at any bread that was "older" than fifteen minutes. With a sprinkling of "zaatar," you have a perfect snack to enjoy while exploring the Old City or Mahane Yehuda markets.

Israel's cuisine has evolved from its early (almost inedible) pioneer days to "world class." With so many chefs receiving training at Hadassah College, Jerusalem, Israeli restaurants today feature delicious and innovative cuisine that incorporates both native produce and the traditions of its multi-faceted population. And, Israeli wines – consistent international award-winners – make every meal better.

In recent years, a few entrepreneurs have established food and wine tours of the country. For example, "Culinary Tours" visits the various wineries in the north, such as the award-winning Carmel Winery in Zichron Ya'akov. Its "Center for Wine and Culture" offers tastings with professional sommeliers, a wine shop, and the Bistro de Carmel restaurant, housed in the beautifully restored former winemaker's home.

"Cook in Israel" operates tours throughout the nation – from Tel Aviv through the Galilee and Jerusalem – wherein participants visit open-air markets to taste and shop for the "hands-on cooking classes," included in the package.

One class, called "Savoring the Seven Species," highlights the Biblical wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and honey in the recipes to be prepared.

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A plethora of Israeli produce

One particular photograph remains in my mind: cousin Shoshanah standing in front of her orange trees on Moshav Kfar Yehezkkel, the golden fruit highlighting her russet hair.

I fell in love that day.

While our Eastern European ancestors must have been disappointed to learn that the streets of America were not really paved with gold, when I arrived in Israel, in 1971, I was amazed by the huge amount of acreage dedicated to orange, grapefruit, banana, peach, and pineapple groves, and fields of tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplants, and dozens of other vegetables and fruits.

Malkia, the kibbutz on which I volunteered, cultivated over a dozen varieties of



Really fresh bread ...really!

Couscous with Figs & Toasted Almonds

The Prophet Micah famously predicted an age in which... "every person shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree." The sweetness of a fresh fig must certainly reflect the sweetness of the Messianic age, if those I have plucked from Israeli trees are any indication. So what better way to enjoy a Tu B'Shevat Seder with family and friends than with this wonderful side dish that combines figs and almonds?

- 1 10 oz. box plain couscous
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 6 large figs, fresh if possible
- One-half cup sliced almonds, toasted in a skillet until golden
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon

- Prepare the couscous according to package directions.
- Mix the couscous with the other ingredients and serve with either fish or chicken.

Serves 6



Best with fresh figs

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