

Traveling with Jewish Taste® The Sights – and Tastes – of Independence

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Yom Ha'atzmaut, Independence Day, falls this year on May 6, marking the sixty-sixth anniversary of the founding of the modern State of Israel. It commemorates David Ben-Gurion's public reading of the fledgling nation's Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948.

If you find yourself in Tel Aviv, it would be well worth your while to visit Beit Ben Gurion, the historic house museum in which the "Old Man" lived and worked from 1931 to 1968, and from which he read the Declaration – triggering joy and dancing in the streets.

At the museum, you can listen to a recording of that very speech, and if you close your eyes, you can imagine being out in the street listening to the crackling voice

coming over the loudspeakers.

Given that the Jewish day begins at sundown, the holiday opens with an official evening ceremony on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem. The Speaker of the Knesset gives a speech, the blue-and-white flag is raised, and artists perform. And, in a moving tradition, a dozen Israel citizens who have made significant contributions to the country are invited to light twelve torches, representing the twelve ancient tribes.

Israelis celebrate their Independence Day with even more verve than Americans – picnics, barbecues, fireworks, flags, and concerts are all part of the day's mix, but there is so much more.

Although long gone are the Hebrew song contest and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) parades, cities still close off the streets around the main squares welcoming throngs to gather and dance in celebration. For the indoor types, Israeli Television broadcasts live all official events, and airs classic cult Israeli movies.

The State's highest honor, the Israel Prize, is presented to an Israeli citizen who has displayed excellence in his or her field, or who has contributed significantly to Israeli culture. The formal ceremony takes place in Jerusalem in the presence of dignitaries, including the President, the Prime Minister, and the President of the Supreme Court.

Since the Israel Defense Forces figure so prominently in the life of the nation, they are honored in several ways. Many army bases open their gates to the public on Yom Ha'atzmaut, and the President of Israel honors the top 120 IDF soldiers at



On Yom Ha'atzmaut the Israeli President bestows the Israel Prize – the nation's highest award

a reception at his official residence in the State's capital.

Another annual ritual on Yom Ha'atzmaut is the International Torah Contest. The competition among Israeli students is broadcast live from Jerusalem on both Israeli television and radio, while that for Diaspora entrants takes place in different cities every year. The contest tests students on four-hundred chapters of the Tanach, with top scorers winning college scholarships.

And, what would a Jewish holiday be without food? Israel is such a mix of cultures from across the globe that celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut makes for a culinary feast.

So, what should we choose from among the many options? I would recommend starting your day with the Israeli comfort food from North Africa: "shakshuka," eggs poached in a spicy tomato sauce.

Dip fresh, hot pita bread into the sauce and you are in gustatory heaven. Along with the eggs, try some leben sprinkled with zaatar, and fresh seasonal fruit.

Around lunchtime, the aroma of grilling meat will fill the air and make your stomach grumble, as every family in the neighborhood or park is cooking kebab, little footballs of spiced ground lamb. This dish brought by immigrants from the Arab lands is a staple in the Israeli menu, and goes well with the mezzes that make the table groan.

The Yom Ha'atzmaut picnic array will include a traditional "Israeli" salad of diced vegetables, several eggplant dishes, goat cheese, tabbouleh, fattoush salad, falafel, olives, hot peppers, hummus, and tehina. And, of course, fresh warm pita.

The Yemenite contribution to the day-long banquet is melaweh, a flaky, multi-layered bread made flaky by a generous use of butter or margarine, and rendered totally decadent by frying.

Not healthy, but

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Joyful dancing has always been part of Independence Day celebrations



Independence Day's International Torah Quiz tests students on four-hundred chapters of the Tanach

Pita Bread

One of my favorite culinary memories from the time I lived in Israel is of humus and pita my friends and I devoured in a tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurant in Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market. The pita bread there was baked on premise as needed – never left sitting on a shelf – and was so soft, fluffy, and delicious that I still think about it with great fondness, forty years later.

In 1990, we took our family to Israel for their very first visit. In the Old City, young boys hurried through the winding alleys shouldering wooden pallets piled high with loaves just out of the oven, and my husband Joel fell in love.

Up 'til then, he had only eaten the flat, hard, wrapped-in-plastic variety of pita from our neighborhood supermarket. But, after one taste of the real thing, he became such a snob about this scrumptious bread that he would actually ask vendors when it had come out of the oven, and turn up his nose up if it had been out longer than fifteen minutes.

If you love the aroma of baking bread wafting through your house, try this very simple recipe for pita that will make you realize that the store-bought cardboard you have been eating is, well, "so last century."

The stuff of this recipe is the real deal – warm, soft, and fluffy. You probably have every ingredient in your cupboard already, and if you happen to have a bread machine, half the work is done for you.

You can serve this pita with anything – or alone. For a simple lunch, have it with leben (plain Greek yogurt) and zaatar; or how about a nice falafel, with humus, tahini, shredded red cabbage, pickles, and harif (hot sauce).



Ingredients:

2-1/2 teaspoons of active dry yeast	3-1/2 cups of flour, plus more for dusting
1 teaspoon of sugar	
1-1/2 cups of warm water	1 teaspoon olive oil
1 teaspoon of salt	

Directions:

In order, add ingredients to the bowl of a bread machine and set on "dough" setting.

When the bell rings, turn the dough onto a lightly floured surface and punch it down, divide it into eight pieces, and form each piece into a ball, keeping all of them lightly floured and covered while you work.

Let the dough rest, covered, for fifteen minutes.

Place an ungreased heavy-duty cookie sheet on the lower oven rack and preheat to 500 degrees. (You can invest in a bread-baking stone if you really get into this).

Using a rolling pin, roll each dough ball into a circle about eight inches in diameter and one-quarter inch thick. Take care that the circle is totally smooth, with no creases or seams in the dough. Cover the rounds as you roll them out, but do not stack them.

Put as many pita rounds as will fit comfortably on the cookie sheet, and bake for three to four minutes, or until the bread puffs up and is pale golden on the bottom. Remove the bread from the oven and place on a rack to cool for five minutes; they will naturally deflate, leaving a pocket in the center.

Repeat with the rest of the rounds.

Wrap the pitas in a large kitchen towel to keep them soft.

Yields eight loaves

Your Federation Presents

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Beit Ben Gurion's library

absolutely delicious.

The late, lamented Yemenite Step restaurant, once in downtown Jerusalem, used to serve melaweh in a variety of forms: sweet with honey or chocolate sauce, or savory with spinach or meat. Either way, it is a delicious treat.

And, speaking of honey, we all know that Israel is known as the "Land of Milk and Honey," but that Torah syrup came not from bees but from the fruit of date palms. With your melaweh – or used in place of jam, or even as a dressing or in a marinade – try silan, a sticky and dense sauce made from dates.

By the end of the day, you may just want something very light to eat. While watermelon is not strictly an American product, it is so closely associated with our own Independence Day that it can add a cool Western Diaspora flavor to the Israeli melting pot of cultures.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She recently launched the blog "Food for Thought," on her website at carolgoodmankaufman.com. She invites visits and comments.

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