

## Traveling with Jewish Taste

### No Need to Travel – Jerusalem Cookbook Brings Authentic Middle Eastern Cooking Home

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Joel and I recently hosted two groups of people that each won a Middle Eastern feast at a fundraising auction at our synagogue. To prepare for this event, I scoured my collection of recipes gathered and adapted over the years. Wild rice-stuffed grape leaves. Labneh with za'atar and olive oil. Soft, fluffy pita bread. Clementine cake.

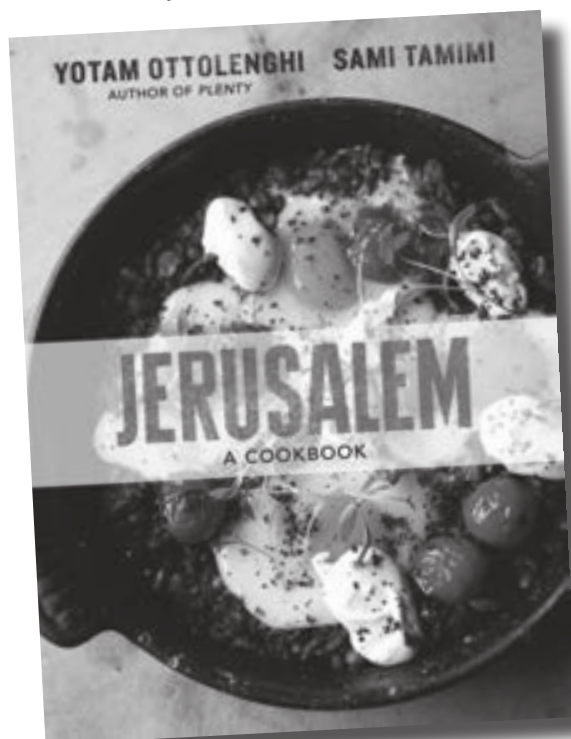
But I also used this homework phase to explore the contents of *Jerusalem*, the groundbreaking cookbook by Israeli Yotam Ottolenghi and Palestinian Sami Tamimi.

I loved the idea of two men who could be enemies, but who instead cook together and feed others. Breaking bread instead of heads, as it were. But I also adored the look and feel of the cookbook. Resplendent with gorgeous color photos and filled with personal stories, the book is a masterpiece.

The recipes in *Jerusalem's* pages call for ingredients that bring to mind caravans of colorfully clad camels bearing goods across vast deserts. Orange blossom water, za'atar, turmeric, cumin, and cinnamon. Pine nuts, hazelnuts, goat cheese, tahini, dates, and figs. The aromas wafting from my kitchen made me feel as if I were strolling through the narrow, vaulted alleyways of the shuk. As I write these words, I am craving a piece of halvah. Or Turkish delight.

For the feasts, I didn't want to serve same-old same-old hummus or falafel. I wanted something new, bold, and innovative. I craved uncharted territory. And, to be honest, I wanted to make a splash.

And, boy did I ever get that. The sheer range of delights, from appetizers to desserts, was mind-boggling. I was a just a little bit afraid that I would grow weary of Middle Eastern food after kitchen testing so many recipes. But, it turned out that the flavors in *Jerusalem's* pages were so varied – representing Sephardi, Ashkenazi, and Arab cultures – that there was no way we could tire (except for the sheer exhaustion I felt when these dinners were over and I collapsed into my warm, cozy bed).



Time out for fair warning: This cookbook is not specifically kosher, so I chose recipes that were kosher, or I used kosher versions of non-kosher ingredients. Also, Ottolenghi and Tamimi cook for a living and have a phalanx of sous chefs doing the scut work. Some of the recipes in the book require many steps and lots of pots and pans (see eggplant soup, below). Luckily, the deal I struck with Joel was that I would cook if he would clean up. I think I could live with that arrangement permanently.

Here is a sampling of the recipes I tried.

Pureed Beets With Goat Cheese and Hazelnuts was both a stunningly beautiful and tasty starter. The sweetness of the beets was counterbalanced by a swirl of tangy Greek yogurt that not only provided a creamy mouthfeel, but which made for a

stunning alabaster contrast to the deep red of the beets. The creaminess in turn contrasted with the satisfying crunch of toasted nuts.

Of the three soups I tested, each was a hit. First up was a Watercress and Chickpea Soup with Rose Water and Ras El Hanout, a Moroccan mixture of thirteen different herbs and spices. Since I rarely use watercress, I was delighted to discover its spicy tang playing foil to the earthy chickpeas' straight man.

Aroma drew us to the table to partake of the Tomato and Sourdough Soup. A deceptively easy recipe to prepare, the results were sublime. The tomatoes provided a springy freshness and nice chunky texture, and the bread worked as a great thickener, and made me think fondly of a fabulous ribolletta I had in Florence.

The Burnt Eggplant with Mograbieh was both the most delicious and the most labor-intensive, as well as the greatest consumer of olive oil. I have to admit that pureed eggplant didn't sound all that attractive to me, but with tomato adding vibrant color, and several toppings providing texture, it was a hit. This soup garnered rave reviews and requests for the recipe. Mograbieh, by the way, is simply the large "Israeli" style couscous.

Once starters and soup were under control, it was on to salad. The Baby Spinach with Dates and Almonds was filled with a variety of flavors and textures.

Sweet dates and onion marinated in vinegar gave sweet and sour zest. Almonds spiced with tart, deep red sumac, and fried pita provided crunch and a real Middle Eastern vibe, and chile flakes and lemon juice tied the whole thing together.

The Roasted Cauliflower and Hazelnut Salad was the first of several recipes requiring a substitution for an out-of-season ingredient, in this case pomegranate seeds. But that shouldn't stop you from preparing this salad with dried currants or cranberries. It features a great crunch of hazelnuts, cauliflower, and celery and an aromatic mixture of cinnamon and allspice, vinegar, and maple syrup.

The tantalizing aroma alone will have you salivating for one of my favorite recipes in the book: an absolutely divine Chicken With Caramelized Onions and Cardamom rice. Although the dish is great for company, the recipe is easy enough to prepare on a weeknight. I do advise eschewing the prescribed cardamom pods for powdered spice. Fishing through the rice to remove pods is simply too cumbersome, but necessary. Biting into a whole pod is a nasty experience.

There are a few clunkers in the book. One recipe I will probably never make again is the Grilled Fish Skewers with Hawajej and Parsley. Although easy to prepare and lovely to look at, the hawajej – a mixture of pepper, coriander, cumin, cloves, cardamom, and turmeric – overpowered both the cod and my tastebuds.

A better alternative is the Cod Cakes in Tomato Sauce, a comfort food found among the Jews of Syria redolent of a wonderful mixture of herbs and spices, both in the fish itself and the sauce. For this recipe, I recommend using a food processor to blend the fish with its herbs and spices, and do not try to cut corners. Please note: You *must* refrigerate the cakes overnight to ensure they hold together.

Finally, the Turkey and Zucchini Burgers with Green Onion and Cumin make a delicious mid-week meal. Although the recipe calls for sour cream, Tofutti brand "Better Than Sour Cream" provides a cooling counterpoint to the spicy patties in the kosher home.

The Roasted Butternut Squash with Onions and Tahini is probably the most talked dish about from this cookbook, and I have made it several times. It's that good. And, it's super easy to prepare. Although technically a side dish, the protein from the tahini and the pine nuts make this eminently doable as a main dish for vegetarians and even vegans.

The Roasted Sweet Potatoes with Fresh Figs was another recipe that I wouldn't make again. The Mission figs on the sunroom tree were still green, and there weren't any at the market, so I had to use dried fruit. With a balsamic reduction poured over all, even the addition of scallions, goat cheese, chile peppers, salt and pepper couldn't temper the cloying sweetness of the dish.

Sweet, however, is good for dessert. From the cookbook I made the Semolina, Coconut And Marmalade Cake, prepared with orange juice, orange rind, and orange marmalade, with orange blossom water in the soaking syrup. I found the orange blossom water much too perfume-y for my taste, so the second time I made the cake I cut the amount in half. It made all the difference. Next time, I plan to substitute orange juice to get a tangier, more citrusy flavor.

#### Roasted Butternut Squash & Red Onion With Tahini & Za'atar

Serves six as a side dish (or four fressers)

This recipe is super easy to prepare and absolutely divine to eat. I have adapted this slightly to suit my taste and reduce the amount of fat.

##### Ingredients:

1 large butternut squash, cut into wedges (leave skin on)	1 small clove garlic, crushed
2 red onions, cut into wedges	1½ t. olive oil
Vegetable spray	¼ cup pine nuts
¼ cup tahini paste	2 T. za'atar
1½ T. lemon juice	1 T. coarsely chopped flat-leaf parsley
2 T. water	Salt and pepper to taste

##### Directions:

Preheat oven to 475 degrees.

Put squash skin side down and onions on one or two large baking sheets, coat with vegetable spray, and sprinkle with salt and pepper.

Roast for 30 to 40 minutes. Watch onions closely as they might cook faster than the squash and need to be removed sooner.

Remove from oven and let cool.

Whisk together tahini, lemon juice, water, garlic and ¼ t. salt in a small bowl until the consistency of honey. Add more water if needed.

Pour oil into a small frying pan and place over medium-low heat. Add the pine nuts and ½ teaspoon salt and cook for about two minutes, stirring often, until the nuts are golden brown. NOTE: Watch the nuts carefully to avoid burning.

Remove nuts and oil to a small bowl to stop their cooking.

To serve, spread the vegetables out on a large serving platter and drizzle the tahini over all. Sprinkle the pine nuts on top, followed by the za'atar and parsley.

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Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at [carolgoodmankaufman.com](http://carolgoodmankaufman.com) and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.