

Hummus Ville

Sarah Treleaven And Jamie Levin, *Weekend Post* · Apr. 7, 2012 | Last Updated: Apr. 7, 2012 3:12 AM ET

In 1996, Martin Indyk, the United States ambassador to Israel, faced a political quandary. It was the eve of the 3,000-year anniversary of Jerusalem, and the U.S. could not be seen participating in celebrations that recognized the contested city as the unified capital of Israel. And so Indyk went to the nearby Arab town of Abu Gosh in order to avoid controversy - only to find himself in the middle of a lesser-known, much-tastier conflict.

Like religion, hummus in Israel inspires feelings of jealousy, ownership, competition and pride. It also has the power to divide families and (even more unbelievably) unite Jew and Arab, which is exactly what happened in the town of Abu Gosh.

Abu Gosh has become famous for two reasons: the feud between the Abu Shukri brothers, scions of a hummus dynasty and the persistent efforts of Jawdat Ibrahim, a lottery millionaire, to reclaim the Guinness World Record for the largest bowl of hummus that was lost to Lebanon in May 2010. Two years later, we returned to determine whether peace is prevailing.

First, forget everything you think you know about hummus. This isn't the cold starchy supermarket variety that we are accustomed to in Canada. The hummus of Israel is sublime: Chickpeas blended to a perfectly smooth consistency, mixed with rich tahini (sesame paste), and drizzled with freshly pressed olive oil. Usually served warm, with billowy pita and raw quartered onions for dipping, Israeli hummus is often topped with warm beans or spiced meat. Obligatory side dishes include pickles and olives.

In a region noted for its local colour, when it comes to food, people worship beige and Abu Gosh is the Mecca. Even Justin Bieber, who refused a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when he was on tour in Israel last spring, has been to Abu Gosh for the hummus. Situated just outside of Jerusalem on the road to Tel Aviv, it's a convenient escape for secular Israelis looking to avoid strict kosher laws, which require restaurants to close on the Sabbath. A proliferation of "hummusias" have popped up to meet the demand.

The Abu Shukri family, already famous for their hummus in East Jerusalem, opened up their restaurant in Abu Gosh during the first Intifada, or Palestinian uprising. As violence increased, Israeli Jews became reluctant to patronize businesses in Jerusalem's Arab neighbourhoods. But even in Abu Gosh they couldn't evade conflict for long. The Abu Shukri brothers quickly became notorious for the souring of their relationship, which resulted in competing hummus joints and the occasional fistfight. The dispute soon became known as "the hummus wars," with both brothers claiming to be the "original Abu Shukri."

Next came "The Third Lebanon War," as it was referred to by Israeli Army radio. After years of trading the title back and forth, in 2010 Abu Gosh lost the Guinness World Record for the biggest dish of hummus (over 10,000 kilograms!) to a small town in Lebanon. The current record holders more than doubled Abu Gosh's previous record of 4,100 kg, which required more than 50 chefs, several cranes and, in lieu of a bowl big enough, an enormous satellite dish brought in especially for the occasion from Los Angeles.

The man responsible for Israel's most recent hummus record is Jawdat Ibrahim, owner of the Abu Gosh Restaurant. After years of living in the U.S., Ibrahim returned to Israel in 1993 after winning \$17.5-million in the Illinois state lottery. Born and raised in Abu Gosh, Ibrahim wanted to do something for his hometown, so he established a scholarship fund for Jewish and Arab university students, opened a restaurant, and set about claiming the Guinness record - and Israeli pride - back from Lebanon.

Ibrahim now wants to reclaim the title from Lebanon, and he's planning to do it with a 15,000 kg H(ummus)Bomb. "Like Champagne [to the French], the Lebanese think hummus belongs only to them," says Ibrahim, still smarting from the loss. "But all over the Middle East, everywhere you go, to any meeting, there is a bowl of hummus."

But given the high level of tensions between Israel and its neighbours - he cites, in particular, the rhetoric surrounding Iran - Ibrahim is waiting for the right moment. "It's better to do it when it's stable," Ibrahim says. "For me it's like a soccer game, somebody wins and somebody loses, but some people take these things very seriously."

But lest it seem hummus is always divisive, there's also been progress in Abu Gosh. The Abu Shukri's were eventually reunited with the help of a popular supermarket hummus brand, Sabra, which brought the brothers together for a national ad campaign. Since

then, a cool peace has prevailed, and Abu Shukri No. 1 and Abu Shukri Original No. 1 now sling hummus in relative harmony.

As for Ibrahim, consider his hummus challenge one man's gastronomic contribution to peace. Upon winning the previous Guinness title for Israel, he released white doves and hundreds of blue and white balloons (the colours of the Israeli flag) before a crowd of elated Jews and Arabs. Ibrahim has even hosted informal meetings between Israeli and Palestinian politicians. "Hummus is the witness to the peace process," he says, with a laugh.

And in a region without much peace, at least there's a lot of hummus.

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