

# Why isn't there more 'Jewish food' in Israel?

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It was mid-May in Tel Aviv and the afternoon heat was rising. Sitting in Eva's, a small un-air conditioned restaurant, eating chicken soup with *kreplach* (small dumplings filled with ground meat), sweat formed quickly behind the knees.

Eva's has been located on this dumpy stretch of Allenby Street for 48 years. The menu is classic Ashkenazi – or Eastern European Jewish – food, and the glass display case is full of prepared potato *latkes* (pancakes) and fried cauliflower. The *matzoh* balls (soup dumplings) here are 'sinkers', in the common parlance. That means that they're dense and bready, sitting in the bottom of the bowl of chicken soup. ('Swimmers' are lighter and spongier, and they float on the surface. The difference is a question of both skill and personal preference.)

There were three separate tables of single men in their 70s, one of whom was completing a crossword while working away at a large chicken schnitzel. Business was otherwise quiet. "This is not food for young people," said proprietor Eva Schachter, whose family is originally German. "It's grandma food. I'm old enough to remember the taste of the food my mother and grandmother used to make." Eva smiled, her freckled and deeply wrinkled

face framed by a gamine haircut.

One of the biggest shocks for many foreign visitors to Israel is the lack of Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine with which they are familiar. Where are the smoked salmon, bagels and cream cheese at breakfast? What about the delis that define 'Jewish cuisine' from Montreal to Los Angeles? Or the *kugel* (a casserole made from egg noodles or potato), *gefilte* fish (an appetizer made from poached fish) and matzoh ball soup served at Jewish tables around the world? Time Out Tel Aviv even has a section entitled 'Where to find the best Jewish food in Tel Aviv', and the few cafes that do sell Ashkenazi food (like Eva's) typically emblazon their menus and awnings with the label 'Jewish food', something you would never see at a neighbourhood shawarma joint. These are strong indicators of just how spare this kind of cuisine is here.

In reality, Israeli cuisine has long been more closely associated with its immediate environment, a fusion of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern traditions and ingredients. The early Zionists eagerly adopted Arab dishes, such as falafel, hummus, and shawarma, while in recent years Israelis have developed a more diversified palate. Still, 'Jewish food' remains scarce. But very few visitors know the reasons behind the dearth of it in Israel: despite the fact that many Jews living in Israel can trace their lineage to Eastern Europe, they forsook traditional Ashkenazi food both because of scarcity but also in deliberate service to the formation of a new national narrative.

Israeli cuisine has long been more closely associated with its immediate environment

Unlike the relative prosperity of the US, where the deli – which specialises in preserved meats – flourished with the arrival of Jewish immigrants from Europe, the early years of Jewish statehood were marked by austerity. For the first decade following the formation of the state in 1948, the Israeli government imposed rationing on its rapidly growing population. Dwindling foreign currency made imported staples like oil, sugar and meat scarce. Fuel, such as natural gas and electricity, was also in short supply; bagels, which require an extra step of boiling before being baked, were too energy-intensive. The population instead made due with extra helpings of aubergine, which grew in abundance, and spawned such dishes as *sabich*, a pita sandwich overstuffed with the meaty vegetable.

Even after austerity ended, the Levantine environment was never quite suited to Ashkenazi cuisine. Cattle, a necessary first step for a pastrami-on-rye or braised brisket, originally failed to flourish in the hot climate. But Ashkenazi food always consisted of more than a deli sandwich, so austerity alone cannot explain its failure to thrive in the new Jewish state – and that's where ideology comes into play.

Early adherents to the Zionist project, committed to creating a Jewish state in the territory now known as Israel, sought to abandon vestiges of their past. Just as the European settlers favoured Hebrew over Yiddish and khakis over frock coats and homburgs, they also purposefully chose to eat indigenous foods over Ashkenazi ones. “Many of the first Ashkenazi Jews who came here, the ideological pioneers, were interested in cutting off their roots from the past and emphasizing the newness of the Zionist project,”

explained Shaul Stampfer, professor of Soviet and East European Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. “One of the ways of doing that [was] through the food.”

The adoption of indigenous food lent the early European implants an air of authenticity. The production of local ingredients – the things that grew well in the desert and along the Mediterranean coastline, and the many dishes adapted from Arab kitchens – became part of the Zionist narrative.

Advertisements at the time implored the population to eat locally grown ‘Hebrew watermelons’. The Jewish people had returned to Zion and had the diet to prove it.

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Later, as Jewish immigrants from Morocco to Ethiopia began piling in, each with their own unique style of cooking, the creation a national cuisine became ever more important. “They were grappling with people from different cultures and traditions and it was a challenge to convince them that they belonged together,” said Yael Raviv, author of [Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National Identity in Israel](#). “They had to use everything and anything to forge this unified nation. Food is so tied to Jewish heritage, laws of *kashrut* [kosher dietary rules], and the Israeli economy is really driven by agriculture – so it became a very effective tool because it could be used in these various ways.”

The earliest Zionist settlers, most of whom were Ashkenazi, proved willing participants in the building of this unified food culture. “The early

participants in the building of this unique food culture. “The early immigrants were very committed to making a new life in the land of Palestine,” said Raviv. “That gave them a high degree of motivation to leave behind certain things and embrace new things.” And Raviv noted that there was a certain pragmatism to this attitude: “If you can’t get something, you have to learn to live without it.”

In recent years, Israelis have developed a more diversified palate, with Thai and Mexican restaurants easy to find on the streets of Tel Aviv. Still, Ashkenazi food remains scarce. Several delicatessens have tried to break into the Israeli market – though the training wheels are still on. One of the more successful entrants, [Deli Fleishman](#), describes their sandwiches as a ‘Jewish taste for the Jewish state’ – although their ‘Brooklyn’ sandwich inexplicably contains Argentinian-style chimichurri and is a far cry from New York’s famous [Katz’s Deli](#). “Smoking and fermenting are a real skill,” said Israeli chef Michael Solomonov, the James Beard Award-winning chef behind Philadelphia’s [Zahav](#) restaurant. “Only recently have Jewish Americans come to Israel and started making pastrami.”

Still, some more traditional elements of Ashkenazi cuisine have had greater success. As part of the nouveau Israeli food movement, which is synthesizing diaspora Jewish traditions from around the world, there’s a renewed interest in North American and European contributions. Classic European Jewish fare like chopped liver is starting to work its way onto fusion menus at high-end restaurants alongside more local ingredients like pomegranates and avocados. At Raz Rahav’s [OCD](#) restaurant in Tel Aviv, kasha (puffed buckwheat groats) mingle with trout sashimi and caper aioli. Solomonov has

great hopes for the resurgence of this culinary tradition.

The next frontier will be Ashkenazi food

“People are getting really excited about their roots, and it’s less about the clichés and more about celebrating traditions,” he said. “The next frontier will be Ashkenazi food.”

But back at Eva’s, the Ashkenazi food isn’t a wave of the future or an enticing trend; it’s a comfortable vestige of the disappearing past. “I have my clients,” said Eva, as she nodded towards another older man who walked in, found a table and was offered a taste of a world left behind.

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** *An earlier version of this story implied that Ashkenazi cuisine defined all ‘Jewish’ cuisine. We have made adjustments to the text to clarify that Ashkenazi cuisine, while highly recognisable, does not exemplify all ‘Jewish’ cuisine.*

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