

SOUL STIRRING

In Israel, there's an immigrant behind almost every stove. **The Yemenite Jews** of Tel Aviv are particularly creative.

BY ADEENA SUSSMAN

STIR HARDER!" said Ilana Tzana'ani, hovering over me in her kitchen in Rosh Ha'Ayin, a city near Tel Aviv that's a center of Israel's Yemenite-Jewish immigrant community. "We haven't got the thickness we want yet." I sat on a low stool rotating a wooden paddle inside a large aluminum stockpot wedged between my knees. My shoulders had begun to ache, and I could feel the hint of a blister forming on the inside of my right palm. Ilana and her sister-in-law, Daphna Sa'ad, lent encouragement as the semolina-and-water mixture in the pot congealed into *asid*, a thick porridge meant to accompany a soup—this one a simple pot of chicken, potatoes, and vegetables with Yemenite spices—that was simmering on the stove. "You remember what *asid* means, right?" Ilana laughed. "Cement." >

In Yemenite-Jewish tradition, chicken soup becomes a feast.



In Yemen, where the Jews—everyone, in fact—lived in poverty for thousands of years, flour equaled food. Which accounts for a popular joke in Israel: The traditional Yemenite-Jewish cookbook has only two pages—the first and the last. While that’s a bit of an exaggeration, the repertoire is indeed brief. Cooks have had to get creative to compensate for limited resources. “We figured out a thousand things to do with flour to fill bellies,” said Daphna.

In addition to *asid* there’s *kubaneh*, a baked yeast bread that is popped into the oven on Friday and taken out on Saturday morning to sidestep the prohibition against working on the Sabbath; it’s served with grated tomato and baked eggs in the shell. Then there’s oily, dense batons of rolled-up *jakhnun*, another Sabbath specialty—it cooks for 16 hours; crenellated *lakhukh*, with a surface akin to that of a soft English muffin; *saluf*, the Yemenite version of pita; and panfried, flaky-crisp *malawach*. Many of these breads, along with their various condiments and soups, are well-known to most Israelis, who have adopted them as comfort food. They are served at small, home-style restaurants, late-night joints frequented by young hipsters, and lunch counters across the country—with an especially large concentration of choices in Tel Aviv.

In Israel—where practically every kitchen has an immigrant behind the stove—recipes connect a newly adopted homeland to places left behind. The cooks of Rosh Ha’Ayin are an important link to one of the most dramatic mass immigrations to have occurred in the early years of the Jewish state. Between 1949 and 1950, Operation Magic Carpet airlifted some 48,000 Yemenite Jews to the Promised Land, thrusting them into the spotlight. Their rescue from poverty and isolation was a powerful symbol of the biblically inspired “ingathering of the exiles” that was intended to create a homeland for Jews from all around the world.

The Jews of the Arabian Peninsula clung to their faith for nearly 2,000 years, through poverty, drought, and the shifting alliances of capricious governments that were only intermittently tolerant of what the Koran calls the “people of the book.” Ilana was born in the rough-and-tumble immigrant tent camps of Rosh Ha’Ayin. She married Daphna’s brother in 1971. Best friends, they’re known for their singing in Rosh Ha’Ayin’s well-regarded Yemenite choir and, like many Yemenite women, for their cooking. I met them in 2004, when a friend from the choir introduced me. As a child, I spent summers in Israel, and after I graduated from college, I lived in Jerusalem for four

MARAQ

YEMENITE CHICKEN SOUP

SERVES 6 TO 8

ACTIVE TIME: 10 MIN START TO FINISH: 1½ HR

As in a pot-au-feu, the broth of this soup is served separately from the meat and vegetables. But unlike the French dish, this Yemenite one is given a brilliant turmeric hue from the spice mixture hawayij.

- 6 whole chicken legs (about 3½ lb), drumsticks and thighs split
- 3 medium russet (baking) potatoes
- 1 large onion, quartered
- 4 medium carrots
- 1 bunch cilantro, tied into a bundle with kitchen string
- 2½ tablespoons *hawayij* (recipe follows), or to taste

ACCOMPANIMENTS: *hilbeh* (optional; this page) and *zhug* (optional; page 190)

- Put chicken and 1 tablespoon salt in a 6- to 8-quart stockpot and cover with water by 2 inches. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer, uncovered, skimming foam, 15 minutes.
- Meanwhile, peel and halve potatoes.
- Stir potatoes into broth along with onion, carrots, cilantro, 2½ tablespoons *hawayij*, and enough water to cover if necessary, then simmer, covered, until vegetables are very tender but not falling apart, about 1 hour.
- Transfer chicken and vegetables to a platter and keep warm, covered. Discard cilantro

and season broth with additional *hawayij* and salt. Serve each bowl of broth with a dollop of *hilbeh* and with chicken, vegetables, and *zhug* on the side.

HAWAYIJ

YEMENITE SPICE MIXTURE

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

ACTIVE TIME: 5 MIN START TO FINISH: 5 MIN

There’s a history lesson in this spice blend: Yemen and India were stops on the ancient trade route, so this turmeric-based mix bears a resemblance to some Indian masalas.

- 2¼ teaspoons black peppercorns
- 7 teaspoons cumin seeds
- 2¼ teaspoons cardamom seeds (from green cardamom pods)
- 2¼ teaspoons coriander seeds
- 2 tablespoons ground turmeric

EQUIPMENT: an electric coffee/spice grinder

- Finely grind peppercorns and seeds in grinder, then transfer to a bowl and stir in turmeric.

COOKS’ NOTE: *Hawayij* keeps in an airtight container in a cool dry place 1 month.

HILBEH

YEMENITE FENUGREEK CONDIMENT

MAKES ABOUT ¾ CUPS

ACTIVE TIME: 10 MIN

START TO FINISH: 2 DAYS (INCLUDES SOAKING)

After soaking for days, the fenugreek seeds release gelatinous properties that—when beaten—give the hilbeh a billowy texture as delicate as whipped cream.

- 2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons dried fenugreek seeds (see Shopping List, page 256)

- ½ cup packed cilantro sprigs
- 1¼ cups very cold water, divided
- ½ teaspoon fresh lemon juice
- 1½ teaspoons *zhug* (page 190)

EQUIPMENT: a stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment

- Soak fenugreek seeds in water to cover, replacing water every few hours for the first day and then just once or twice a day, at least 2 days total.
- Drain fenugreek and blend with cilantro and ¼ cup cold water in a blender until ground to a foamy pale-green paste, scraping down side if necessary, 1 to 2 minutes (add more water if needed).
- Transfer paste to mixer with ¼ cup cold water and beat at high speed until mixture is doubled and holds soft peaks (like whipped cream), about 10 minutes.
- Add ¼ cup cold water and beat 5 minutes more. Repeat 2 times. At low speed, beat in lemon juice, *zhug*, and ½ teaspoon salt until just incorporated.

COOKS’ NOTES: Fenugreek seeds can be soaked up to 3 days.

- *Hilbeh* can be chilled in an airtight container 4 days or frozen up to 2 months. Whisk or beat a few minutes before serving.



AIRY, FOAMY HILBEH—SHOT THROUGH WITH GARLIC AND HOT PEPPER—WAS LIKE MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY BROUGHT DOWN TO EARTH.

years. Though I returned to the U.S. in 1997, I visit often. And I've had more than one late-night fried pancake, or *malawach*. To eat and to cook are two different things, of course, so my introduction to the two women was a rare opportunity to enter the insular yet warm Yemenite community via the kitchen. One evening, I overheard them planning the menu for the wedding of Daphna's son, who lived downstairs. For weeks, they would come home from work (Ilana at a factory, assembling cellphone components, Daphna as a domestic) to prepare hundreds of pounds of salads, breads, and soups for the Sabbath festivities before the wedding.

"We don't really like to eat anyone else's food," said Daphna, poking a finger into the *asid*. (Ilana's husband, Itzik, likes to recount the story of how, not content to purchase local kosher food in Italy, they were nearly evicted from their hotel for cooking on a smuggled electric burner.)

Across the room, Itzik peeled garlic under Ilana's watch as she began making *hilbeh*, the fenugreek relish considered one of the true tests of a Yemenite cook's talents. After a long soak that removes their natural bitterness, the swollen, flax-colored fenugreek nuggets are ground to a paste, subjected to a lashing of ice-cold water, and finally put through a prolonged whipping in the bowl of an electric mixer.

After about 15 minutes, Ilana's seeds began a miraculous shape-shift, morphing into an ethereal, feathery cloud that

seemed soft and solid at the same time. When the final product emerged in all its pneumatic glory, it had traveled a very long way from its humble beginnings.

The same could be said of the Yemenite Jews, who went through many changes following their arrival in Israel. For the first time ever, the Yemenites came in contact with nonobservant Jews. A proud people accustomed to self-sufficiency, they were initially completely reliant upon the government for housing. In an effort to help them integrate into modern Israeli society, the Jewish Agency issued the Yemenites Western-style clothing. The Yemenites had envisioned a land of milk and honey; instead they found themselves in camps that were more sinks of mosquitoes and sewage.

Still, they adapted. In one way, they had a natural advantage over other immigrants from Arab countries, in that their rigorous religious education in Yemen had been conducted in Hebrew. They found work, built homes, and expanded their families. Some moved to other parts of the country, but many stayed in Rosh Ha'Ayin, which today looks more like a busy suburb. "Our parents never regretted coming," said Daphna. "Just the opposite. This was where we were meant to be."

Many hints of the old Rosh Ha'Ayin remain. The site of the original tent camps, not far from the commercial center of town, brings the contrasts between past and present into sharp relief. Older women in housecoats and headscarves rest on front porches watching as construction crews rip up the streets. Lugging backpacks home from school, young religious boys with sideburns intersect with teenagers in low-cut jeans and belly-button rings. A few of the original boxy, utilitarian buildings (into which the Yemenites moved once the camps had been dismantled) stand in the shadow of four new pink-marble apartment buildings.

At a long kitchen table, we sat down, washed our hands, and blessed the bread. Then we turned to bowls of fragrant chicken soup laced with *hawayij*, a turmeric-based, currylike spice mix that connects the culinary dots between Yemen and India, both of which were on the ancient spice route. The *asid* acted like a dumpling, mellowing the spiciness of the bright-yellow broth. A dollop of airy, foamy *hilbeh*—shot through with *zhug*, the ubiquitous paste of garlic and hot pepper—was a good example of molecular gastronomy brought down to earth: Fenugreek contains carbohydrates that, when agitated with water, form a gelatinous substance that helps the *hilbeh* achieve great heights. Unlike many chicken soups that call for cooking the bones for a long time to extract the flavor, here the soup is only on the stove for about an hour. (Many Yemenite cooks add a heaping tablespoon of bouillon powder.) Ilana served the chicken separately, on a platter. We cooled our palates with spears of romaine lettuce, sliced bell peppers, and cucumber rounds, and then finished with glasses of steaming-hot Yemenite coffee made with pale, unroasted coffee beans and laced with ginger, cinnamon, and cloves.

Since that night, it has been my custom to visit Ilana and Daphna whenever I'm in Israel. Last summer, as war raged in the north and Hamas forces based in Lebanon fired Katushya rockets across the border, a reunion seemed unlikely, until Ilana called: "When are you coming?" I knew we were going to make *samneh*, the clarified butter, prized for its distinctive smoky flavor, that shares many characteristics with India's ghee. *Samneh* had been on my mind ever since my two friends produced a squat glass jar filled with opaque, solid fat, heated it gently, swirled it with honey, and served it on top of crisp-

edged flour-and-water pancakes called *zalabya*. It's typically made in May or June, before a thick veil of heat and humidity descends on central Israel, and in time for Shavuot (Pentecost), the only major Jewish holiday during which the consumption of dairy foods is prescribed.

IT WAS AUGUST, and they were making an exception for my birthday. "There's only one person in charge of making *samneh*," they told me. Sara Natan, or Doda Sara (Aunt Sara) as she's known to everyone, is Daphna's 77-year-old sister and the de facto matriarch of the clan. She's also the standard-bearer of Yemenite cooking in the family, and I'd waited a long time to meet her. It was a hot, sticky night, 57 years after she'd come to Israel, and Doda Sara moved fluidly, calling out orders to Ilana and Daphna, her trusted assistants. She carried wood, stones, and branches toward the bonfire she was building in back of her home, set on land given to her family four years after they arrived. "I hope the neighbors shut their windows," said Sara, her gold filigree earrings reflecting the moonlight. "It's going to get smoky."

Though she'd been performing physical labor practically since the time she could walk, Sara's hands were impossibly soft when she touched my cheek with her palm. Soon after arriving in 1949, she found work with a wealthy Ashkenazi family on the other side of Tel Aviv. To this day, she rises at four in the morning to begin her two-hour commute to work for the girl she helped raise, who is now a mother herself. Sara's husband, who never worked outside the home but ran the synagogue they had built (it's attached to their living room), died three years ago. Sara is rarely lonely, though; the synagogue ensures a stream of people every day, and the house is always packed with relatives.

In Sara's immaculate kitchen, while we waited for the fire to heat up downstairs, we molded bar after bar of malleable butter and margarine to the inner walls of two circular aluminum pots, working the fat like modeling clay. In the backyard, a large tray of ripe summer fruit had materialized next to bottles of water and lemonade that were sweating beads of condensation. Grandchildren, sons-in-law, and cousins popped in and out for food and gossip, a cacophony of cellphone rings punctuating the night. Someone had snaked an extension cord from Sara's work shed and strung a light in the backyard, illuminating clementine trees and bushes of *qat* (an evergreen that men in Yemen chew for a mild narcotic effect) she had planted decades ago. The flames had begun to die down. It was nearly midnight, and we were finally ready to begin.

A red-hot stone made hissing sounds as Sara placed it on top of an inverted aluminum coffee mug (called a *finjan*) that was set inside the hollow center of each butter-lined vessel, then topped with flour, which began to sizzle immediately. As the flour burned, gray smoke slithered out of the sides in thin ribbons. When the stones cooled, we'd replace them with piping-hot ones, and with fresh flour, again and again. With each round, the butter changed color and melted, until the opaque mass became a pool of caramel-colored liquid.

At around one-thirty in the morning, we headed upstairs to clarify the *samneh*. As the butter came to a boil, the curds and whey sank away from the purified butterfat. Sara quickly fried batter into thick, doughy pancakes. She added batter layer by layer, flipping the cake as soon as the surface was cooked. She pressed a deep crater into the dough with her thumb, and then dripped honey and *samneh* inside. "This is how we ate it in Yemen," she said, closing her eyes just for a moment. "This is exactly how we ate it."

ZHUG

YEMENITE CHILE GARLIC SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

ACTIVE TIME: 5 MIN START TO FINISH: 5 MIN

A homemade staple in the Yemenite household, this hot chile and garlic sauce becomes an ingredient itself—and may very well play a recurring role on your table.

- 6 oz fresh jalapeño chiles (about 6 medium), coarsely chopped
- 12 garlic cloves
- ¼ cup water
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 10 black peppercorns
- ¼ teaspoon cardamom seeds (from a green cardamom pod)

► Purée all ingredients with ½ teaspoon salt in a blender, scraping down side, until smooth.

COOKS' NOTE: *Zhug* can be kept, covered with a thin layer of olive oil and chilled in an airtight container, 2 weeks, or frozen in ice cube trays, then transferred to a freezer bag and kept 2 months.

LAKHUKH

YEMENITE BREAD

MAKES 12 (6-INCH) BREADS

ACTIVE TIME: 1 HR START TO FINISH: 3 HR
(INCLUDES STANDING AND COOLING)

This is a very versatile bread, similar to Ethiopia's injera. In other words, it's like a cross between a crumpet and a crêpe, with lots of tiny holes for absorbing soup or toppings such as butter and jam—or the Yemenite favorite, smoked butter.

- 3 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon rapid-rise yeast (from a ¼-oz package)
- 3½ cups warm water (105–115°F)

EQUIPMENT: a large (2-burner) cast-iron griddle

► Whisk together flour, salt, sugar, and yeast in a large bowl.

► Add warm water to flour mixture and whisk until batter is smooth. Let stand, loosely covered with plastic wrap, at room

temperature 1½ hours. (Batter will rise and become foamy.)

► Lightly oil griddle, then heat, straddled across 2 small or medium burners on medium heat, until hot.

► Gently stir batter a few times to reduce foam.

► Make 2 breads at a time by ladling ½ cup of batter onto griddle in area over each burner, using ladle to gently spread each bread to about 6 inches in diameter, then cook until bubbles have created holes across surface of bread and 1 to 2 inches of batter across center remains uncooked, about 2 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook until tops are dry and bottoms are dark brown (do not turn over; if bottom darkens too quickly, adjust heat), 4 to 5 minutes more.

► Transfer breads as cooked to kitchen towels (not terry cloth) and cool completely, at least 30 minutes. Lightly oil griddle between batches.

COOKS' NOTE: *Lakhukh* can be made 1 day ahead and kept, layered between sheets of parchment paper and in 2 stacks, in an airtight container at room temperature. 🍞