

We Chat With: Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi, Authors of 'Jerusalem'

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While cooking from their new book, *[Jerusalem: A Cookbook](#)*, we were given the opportunity to sit down and chat with [Yotam Ottolenghi](#) and [Sami Tamimi](#) about the process of writing the book, the inspirations, and the politics of hummus.

How did the city of Jerusalem act as a source of inspiration in the book?

Yotam Ottolenghi: The inspiration [for the book] is very much all the communities in the city. You just need to go to Jerusalem to see that there's a lot of things going on. You can find traditional Palestinian restaurants or Persian restaurants or Turkish restaurants. I mean, *everything* is out there. Inspiration also comes from peoples' homes. There are dozens of communities and they're all cooking their own traditional foods. The way we chose the recipes was really just to pick the best that we like. We didn't try to cover all of the communities of Jerusalem. It would have been impossible to cover all of them.

How much did your own family histories play into your recipe selection?

YO: [Neither of] our families were much involved, but I think both of us are very much inspired by our parents. Sami's parents and my parents, they're all very good cooks. We were constantly inspired in our childhood. A few of the recipes in the book are ascribed to our parents. Sami's mother was a very illustrious cook, so she maybe either invented those

recipes or cooked them for him when he was growing up, so we mention them quite a bit. All the flavors really are our childhood flavors.

So did you cook with your parents growing up at all?

YO: Not so much, sometimes, but not often. I didn't hang around the kitchen so much. I love to eat, but I used to arrive once everything was more or less done. I cook with my parents more now than I did when I was a kid.

Given the current political climate in the region, do you think politics is a running thread throughout the book?

YO: Not so much politics in the strict sense of the word, but yeah, [we talk about] food politics. We're not trying to make the book itself political, but we're also not ignoring the fact that it's a very politicized space and there's a lot of conflict. So we describe the conflicts when we need to, and then talk about the food politics which are sometimes amusing, sometimes interesting--how people argue over ownership of recipes, who made it first, all of those politics. Jerusalem is always going to be a very interesting place. Nowadays people are getting quite a lot of bad news from Jerusalem, and we're trying to bring a slightly more positive aspect of life there, which is the wonderful food that there is in the city.

Do you think showcasing recipes from both sides of the conflict has any effect on the audience for the book?

Sami Tamimi: It varies. A lot of the people that we've met appreciate the fact that we both come from two sides and we've become good friends that cook together. And they see that friendship as a message. But we don't really have a [political] message. If we have a message it is that we try to open people's eyes to Middle Eastern food.

YO: We also don't see ourselves as people who bring peace. We just do what we like doing, and that's cooking and writing recipes.



Speaking of conflict, can you talk a little bit about hummus?

YO: Well what we say in the book, and we say it in our talks, is that hummus is the national dish of two nations. The Palestinians and the Israelis both see it as *their* national dish, and because it's not the most peaceful place in the world, it creates quite a lot of argument of ownership. The Jews claim that their people were cooking hummus like 2,000 years ago, and then the Arabs say that no, it's actually something that's just appeared and we invented it. And everybody's happy to keep on having those arguments. For us, it doesn't really matter who is the owner of hummus. We just like to feature it, enjoy it, show it to our readers, and give an example of the hummus that we really like. For us, it contains quite a lot of tahini and sharpness, and is very, very, very, smooth. This is our idea of a good hummus, but people will keep on arguing forever about it.

Besides hummus, what are your favorite recipes in the book?

YO: It's always hard for us to give this example because we really like all the recipes. Choosing recipes is a very rigorous process. We had to turn down dozens that we just didn't think were good enough. So the ones that ended up in the book, we were very happy with.

ST: Well they were good enough, but we didn't think we loved them enough to put them in the book.

YO: Sami, what is your favorite at the moment?

ST: This changes every day.

YO: It's a really tough question. At the moment I'm really in love with kofta b'siniyah. They're little meatballs with tahini. It's a very simple thing, but it's the best combination of lamb kebabs and tahini sauce. It's like the essence of Jerusalem in many ways. This is one of my favorite recipes at the moment.

Did you feel like you had to simplify things for your audience?

ST: Yeah, quite a lot.

YO: It's not that they're complicated, they're just a lot of work. We know that people just don't have enough time to spend doing things that are very fiddly. Some recipes we kept really busy and others we simplified.

How much recipe testing did you have to do to get the flavors right?

YO: A lot. We are very obsessed testers. A recipe doesn't leave us before it's been tried and tested quite a few times, by ourselves and also by the people we trust to give us good comments. That's the main reason why it took us two years to write the book. That, and all the research that went into the personal stories and histories.

When you're not testing recipes, what are your go-to meals to cook at home?

ST: It all depends on the mood, you know. I do quite a lot of lentil soup with like cumin and lemon. It's really easy to make.

YO: Sami does a lot of interesting things. He's more keen on cooking in the evenings when he comes home than I am. I don't have the patience.

So do you go out a lot?

YO: Yeah I go out, almost every night. I don't cook that much.

What's your favorite type of food to eat when you go out?

YO: I like a lot of Asian food. Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Indian. Those are my favorites if not Middle Eastern. We also have a trend of tapas bars at the moment in London. I love Spanish tapas, all the types of Spanish food from different regions of Spain. I don't like to go to very fancy restaurants, I prefer regional restaurants. Japanese food is one of our favorite cuisines. There's really nothing like it. All the other cuisines of the world are just a little mixed together. Like Vietnamese is a bit like Thai, a bit like Burmese, but Japanese food is just a stand-alone cuisine. There's nothing like it.

ST: Like us, they're really obsessed with how the dish should work.



So if I were to go out and buy Middle Eastern ingredients, what should I buy?

ST: Sumac, za'atar, tahini, pomegranate molasses probably.

YO: You'd want to get a few essential waters, like rose water or orange blossom water, or geranium water.

ST: Then you need a spice kit. A lot of spices and a lot of herbs.

YO: Most of the recipes in the book are based on, I'd say 15 key ingredients we like using. Here are a few: cumin and cardamom, turmeric, saffron, and coriander, allspice, cinnamon, caraway. Once you get yourself stocked, you can do a lot.

What do you keep in your fridge?

YO: Harissa and preserved lemons. A few mustards, mayonnaise--homemade, normally.

ST: Garlic and lemon. I always have cheeses. Cured meats, I always have those. Pickles...

YO: Yeah, lots and lots of pickles. I have pickled turnips and pickled chiles, pickled cucumber and cauliflower. In the book we have a large number of pickles. In Jerusalem one of the identifying features of all cuisine is pickles. Everybody eats pickles with their food. There are these turnips pickled with beet juice so they go pink. That's something that you see all over. People also love pickling cauliflowers and cabbage and cucumbers. I quite love pickles.

ST: The other thing I have is yogurt. Full fat yogurt. I go to my local Turkish place every time. They have so many different yogurts there, every time I choose a kind I've never had before. I don't have a particular favorite brand.

Do you have any advice for new cooks just getting started or who want to learn more about cooking?

ST: Don't get too stressed about cooking directly from the book. Cooking should be enjoyable.

YO: It is good to get to know the recipe first, follow the rules and then see how it comes out. Once you know the recipe you can cook it without fear and change things you don't like. I also think people should just have a core of about 5

recipes that they are really really familiar with, and keep on cooking them.

ST: Our recipes are also quite easy to follow because we think about the home cook.

Any closing thoughts on your book, or cooking in general?

ST: Buy our book!

YO: Most people don't know enough about Middle Eastern food. They may know a lot about Italian or maybe Spanish, but they just haven't immersed themselves in Middle Eastern cooking. But I think that people who do will find that it's exciting and it's also as complex as what they'd consider the most famous European cuisine, like French. It's a whole world of ingredients and flavors and techniques that have worked for so many tons of generations. In terms of techniques it's actually one of the most simple. So I think that the message of the book is how approachable Middle Eastern cooking can be.