



MICHAEL SOLOMONOV



ZAHAV

• **A WORLD OF ISRAELI COOKING** •



AND
STEVEN COOK



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IT TAKES MORE than a restaurant to move a person to write a cookbook. For that matter, it takes more than being a cook to move a person to open a restaurant. This book is the chronicle of a journey—physical, emotional, personal. As inevitable as it likely seems now, since you are holding this book in your hands, nothing in my life happened the way it was supposed to.



FAMILY PORTRAIT
I am about ten years old in this picture taken about 1988 at our house in Pittsburgh, with my little brother David, my dad, Big Solo, and my mother, Evelyn.

“Along the way I share the story of my life. It’s inextricable, the life and the food.”

No one event followed logically from one point to the next. Luck, coincidence, hard work, even tragedy have shaped me, have led me to a life, a restaurant—quite a few of them now—a true working partnership, a marriage, and my two sons.

I wrote this book to celebrate those things, of course. But something stronger motivates me. I am compelled, driven even, by the need to share what I have learned about the cooking of Israel and how I interpret it for others to experience and enjoy. To me, it is urgent that the flavors of Zahav reach a wider audience. I want you to fall hard for the warm spices of baharat, the lemony tang of sumac, the powerful peppery punch of the condiment called schug, and see how those things can enhance not just your cooking, but your understanding, too. I want you to know the mellow excitement of a bowl of Yemenite soup and appreciate

how that bowl contains a world. Sure, I’ll show you how I make fluffy matzo balls, but I want you to love other dumplings, too, like the stuffed kubbe, ghondi, and kofte that can float your soup.

I want to celebrate the vegetable classic that we know as Israeli salad, but then I want to show you how I make it in the dead of winter using persimmons and mangoes instead of out-of-season tomatoes. I learned so many things from my Bulgarian grandmother, Savta Mati, especially the flaky borekas she taught me to make as a young boy. We shared no common language, but we communicated just the same.

I would love to see you filling your dining table—or kitchen table—with many delectable little plates—mezze. To me, mezze is hospitality incarnate: Dishes like Fried Cauliflower, Lamb Basturma, Chicken Pastilla, and “Baked” Kibbe helped me fall in love with the intense flavors of Israeli cooking. And sure, I want to celebrate real tehina, the essential paste made from the purest sesame seeds. It is what makes the hummus you probably bought this book for (and that probably put Zahav on the map). But I want you to know, too, the sweeter side of tehina, how it easily becomes the confection halva, or a crumbly cookie, or that almost-ice cream semifreddo. I have cooked all this food in front of Mike Persico’s camera to demystify the methods and

ingredients, to help you make it yours. I want to get you as close as a book can get you to the true experience of cooking this food.

I want you to taste how Twice-Cooked Eggplant combines char and creaminess to become almost another vegetable. You will come to appreciate the Zen of making rice and the utter joy of coming ever closer to perfection with every pot you make. I want you to share the inner thrill I get each time I turn a piece of meat over live fire, feeling an ancient connection to this primitive ritual. I want you to experience Mesibah, party time: how a tableful of friends and family enhances the lives of cooks and eaters, too. I want you to make the braised lamb shoulder that's launched a thousand dinners at Zahav, and I'll reveal all its secrets, down to the last chickpea infused with pungent pomegranate. Along the way I'll share the story of my life. It's all inextricable, the life and the food. How could it be otherwise?

I WAS BORN IN ISRAEL, in a small town called G'nei Yehuda, south of Tel Aviv, but my family moved to the United States when I was two, and I grew up in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, feeling mostly American. My brother, David, was born when I was three. One of my clearest childhood memories is standing next to my father in the hospital and screaming, "That is my brother, David, and HEEE is Jewish!" When I was fifteen, my parents decided to move back to Israel. To say I went grudgingly is an understatement. I returned to the U.S. as soon as I could. David stayed behind. And while I was learning how to julienne, brunoise, and make (and break) hollandaise sauce, David was graduating from high school and, like every other young Israeli, preparing for military training. In October 2001, he entered an Israeli Defense Forces infantry unit.

Culinary degree in hand, I weaseled my way into a job at Marc Vetri's eponymous restaurant in Philadelphia. After I nearly broke all the kitchen equipment, and finally learned how to keep the chocolate polenta soufflé from collapsing, Marc offered me the sous chef position. I was terrified but over the moon with excitement. I signed on for the two-year commitment right before Vetri closed for its three-week summer break. A three-week break? Super Italian, I know. So it happened that in the summer of 2003, I



OVED'S SABICH

On a trip to Israel in 2008 with the Zahav staff just before we opened, we stop in Givatayim on the outskirts of Tel Aviv for Oved's famous pita stuffed with fried eggplant, eggs, and hummus.

Previous spread: On the beach at Caesarea, near Haifa, 2008.



LAST TIME
With David in the
backyard of our
half-sister's house
in Hadera in 2003.
On that trip, I first
saw Israel through
the eyes of a chef.

*"We were talking and
laughing like we'd never
been apart; not only
brothers but friends."*

returned to Israel for the first time since I'd graduated from culinary school in Florida two years earlier. My mom had bought me the plane ticket on the condition that I cook for her and her friends. Dave had a month's leave from the military, and my mother wanted us to spend time together. It was also Savta Mati's eightieth birthday. The whole family would be there to celebrate.

Dave and I had been close growing up, but the move to Israel created a wedge in our relationship. Our parents had divorced soon after they'd returned there. Dave was still young enough to make a relatively easy transition to his new life, but I felt betrayed and angry. When I returned to the U.S., we drifted further apart. By 2003 we rarely spoke and hardly knew each other. But all that changed on that trip to Israel. We spent three weeks together, hanging out at the beach,

partying. We visited Savta Mati together, and we did a lot of eating. Dave had the inside scoop on all the best places, so we traveled up and down the country, eating. I cooked two dinners for my mother and her friends, and Dave served them. I bought foie gras from a bicycle delivery man, shopped for produce and spices in the open-air markets, and sorted through fish caught in local waters. For the first time, I saw the country through the lens of a chef, and it was amazing! There were so many ethnic influences, so many different styles of eating. But the best part was being able to reconnect with my brother. By the end of the trip, we were talking and laughing like we had never been apart. We were not only brothers but friends.

Right before I left for the airport to return home, I embraced David, squeezed the shit out of him, and kissed him on the cheek. I told him that I loved him and that I was proud of him. We said our goodbyes while he shook me off. I returned to Vetri, and Dave went back to the army for his final month of service. I remember wondering when I would see Dave next, if he would try college in Philly or go back to Pittsburgh.

A few weeks later, it was Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. Vetri was closed, so I went to Pittsburgh for the night to drive my father's old car back to Philly the next day: My brother would need it when he returned to the U.S. I was heading

east on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, just outside of Lancaster, when I got a call from my Aunt Ava. She could barely get the words out. "You need to call me the moment you get home," she said. "It's very important. Do you understand?" I pulled over and got out of the car. I made my aunt tell me what was going on. "It's David," she said. "He is dead. He was killed today in the North." The words rang in my head.

He.
Is.
Dead.

How could this be? David was supposed to be out of the army. I had just seen him. This had to be a mistake. But it wasn't. David had volunteered to cover a patrol shift on Yom Kippur for one of his religious comrades. He was holed up behind a boulder in an apple orchard in Metula, at the top of a hill overlooking Lebanon. He was a spotter, charged with locating Hezbollah fighters across the valley and relaying their locations back to his unit. A trap was set to draw David out of cover, and he was shot by three Hezbollah snipers.

WE BURIED MY BROTHER right after I landed in Israel, and I stayed for the next seven days, in my mom's little apartment, mourning with friends and family and what felt like the entire country. When I returned to Philadelphia, I was somewhat relieved that I could put all my energy into work and cooking and my new position. From the outside, it looked like I was hanging in there, working hard and coming to terms with Dave's death, but truthfully, my tendency toward addiction reared its head the moment I returned from his funeral. I broke up with my longtime girlfriend and ended up sleeping on a futon in Vetri's office. I was becoming increasingly difficult to be around, and even my attitude at work became spotty. Everyone around me attributed my behavior to Dave's death. I played that card for years.



LITTLE DAVID
Ten years later, in 2013, with another David, my two-year old son, we have a simple memorial service for my brother in Moshe Fine's apple orchard in Metula, 100 yards from the Lebanese border.



MARIGOLD
Steve opened his restaurant in 2004. That's him in the kitchen a year before I took over.

"Slowly my destiny revealed itself. I had to translate this food for the American palate."

Since my two-year stint as sous chef at Vetri would soon be coming to an end, it was time to figure out the next step. For a moment, I considered joining the Israeli Army myself. I wanted to live Dave's life (and probably die his death) to get closer to him and to his memories. Thankfully, Marc and my new girlfriend, Mary, talked me out of it. One

night at Vetri, Marc came down from the office and said that a chef that he knew who owned a little BYOB in West Philly was looking for a cook in the kitchen. Marc thought I should consider it.

A few days later, I got a call from Shira, an old Pittsburgh friend. Shira's family and mine were friends. My mom had been Shira's teacher in middle school. Shira, it turned out, was engaged to Steven Cook, who happened to be the restaurant guy who'd called Marc looking for a chef. We all met for coffee and talked for a while. Steve explained that he was looking for someone to take over for him in his kitchen at Marigold, which was already getting tons of great press. He said I could cook whatever I wanted. I left the coffee shop quite enthusiastic and the following day, while driving with Mary (by this time my fiancée), we saw Shira and Steve on the street and gave them a ride to the movies. A week later, as I was leaving my apartment in the Italian market, I literally ran into Shira on her way from getting sandwiches at Sarcone's.

Of course, I assumed all of this was a sign from the restaurant gods. And after working in the kitchen of Steve's restaurant one Saturday night, I felt that the gods were correct. I began as the chef of Marigold Kitchen in October 2005. It was clear from the beginning that Steve and I were onto something. Our strengths and weaknesses seemed to complement each other, and in addition to growing as business partners, we became friends.

I began to appreciate Steve's business sense (he was a graduate of Wharton as well as the French Culinary Institute), and I tried to absorb as much as I could. I focused on making great food and for the first time, I set free the Israeli influences that had begun to seep into my consciousness. The Yemenite soup that I had fallen in love with at boarding school found its way onto the menu in the form of braised monkfish with apple, celery root, and Yemenite spices; grilled kebabs became lamb kofte, wrapped in cabbage and served in a pool of lentil soup.



The more my menu at Marigold leaned toward Israel, the more passionate I became about cooking. I had loved making Northern Italian food at Vetri (and serious French at the Striped Bass before that), but now I was beginning to develop my own style—a style that because of David's death took on deeper meaning. My brother had died fighting for Israel, and nothing I could do would change that. But for the first time, I began to see cooking as a powerful way to honor David's memory.



I could expose people to a side of Israel that had nothing to do with politics and didn't ever make the evening news. After a couple of trips to Israel together, Steve and I began discussing opening an "Israeli" restaurant. There was something magical about eating in Israel, we agreed, something that you just could not find back home, and certainly not in an upscale restaurant. In Israel, the meal always began with pita and hummus and other dips, followed by a dizzying array of bright vegetable salads, plate after plate of intensely flavored mezze, and ended with skewers of kebabs and shishlik grilled over live charcoal. It was all delicious and soulful, vibrant and elemental. It was rich but healthy. It was old but new.

Slowly my destiny seemed to reveal itself. Someone had to translate all of this for the American palate, and I knew then that it should be me. When Zahav opened in May 2008, it was the first restaurant of its kind in America. Today, people assume that the success of Zahav was a foregone conclusion. But in fall 2008, things looked very different. What most people knew about Israeli food began and ended with hummus and falafel. Even the two of us didn't quite know what it meant to be an Israeli restaurant. During our first year, we were forced to make painful staffing cuts. Steve and I stopped taking paychecks. At one point, we were a month away from turning out the lights.

Zahav began to turn around when we embraced the notion that Israeli food is not a static collection of traditional recipes. It is an idea. Israel is only sixty years old, a barely melted pot of cultures from all over the world. There aren't really Israeli restaurants in Israel, as strange as that sounds. There are Bulgarian restaurants and

BIG PLANS

If it looks like we have no idea what we're doing, in the winter of 2007, that's because it's true. The early days of Zahav were a mystery to us. Thankfully we had our contractor Ofer (see Yemenite Soup, page 160).

SAY CH ... A GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

THE RECIPES AND INGREDIENTS in this book are straightforward, but sometimes the spelling and pronunciation are not. The Hebrew language has sounds for which there are no English equivalents, so the spelling I use here is as close as I can get. There are no official transliterations; the spellings I tend to prefer are the ones my family used when I was growing up.

Fortunately, spelling has nothing to do with flavor. And just because an ingredient sounds unfamiliar or exotic doesn't mean it's hard to find or difficult to use. The word *hawaj*, pronounced CHA-waj (or *hawaj*, *hawajej*, *hawayij*, *chawage*), for example, may look like a monkey got ahold of a keyboard. But it really just refers to a spice blend of black pepper, cumin, and turmeric, three ingredients found in every supermarket in America. In cases where a particular ingredient may be trickier to find, I ask you to see *Resources* (page 359), where we've made a list of our favorite vendors. (I promise, none of these recipes call for eye of newt, but if you know where to find some, please let me know.)

The food will taste the same no matter how you pronounce it, but if you want to impress your friends, you'll need to master the "ch" sound that is prominent in Hebrew. This is not the soft sound in cheese, but a hard, guttural sound that comes from the roof of your mouth, like you're clearing your throat. It is the sound of the letter "h" in words like *hummus* and *tehina*. To practice, channel your inner Jewish grandfather and repeat the following sentence: On Chanukah, I dip my challah in hummus-tehina.

"Spelling has nothing to do with flavor; an ingredient may look unfamiliar, but that doesn't mean it's difficult to use."

