

Dining in Israel: Emerging culinary destination

Dining Adventures

By David Rottenberg

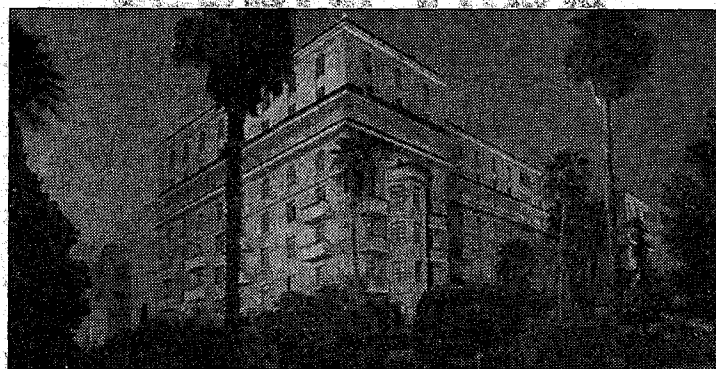
A visit to Israel can be an eye-opening growth experience for foodies who think of Jewish cuisine only as bagels & lox or kishke (stuffed derma). True, there are ubiquitous falafel stands and even the occasional McDonald's, but in addition to the country's dynamic scientific, social and architectural achievements, many new restaurants in Israel's major cities feature innovative dining based on culinary concepts from all over the world. For example, a restaurant may bill itself as "Chinese," but the dishes often are given an Israeli touch, using local products. And many restaurants are "kosher."

There are hundreds of dairy restaurants, which don't serve meat in order to avoid the issues relating to "kosher." Those restaurants that do serve meat dishes will usually not have dairy products available.

"Keeping kosher" involves a

number of duties, including not mixing meat and dairy dishes at a meal, having separate meat and dairy plates and utensils, and serving "kosher" meat and fish. To qualify, fish must have scales and fins. That excludes smooth-skinned fish like shark. Kosher animals must chew a cud and have cloven hoofs, excluding pork. They must also be slaughtered ritually, with their throats slit by a razor-sharp knife that inflicts no pain. The meat must be drained of blood, usually by salting it. Even then, not all sections of beef are kosher, because the blood can't be gotten out.

To me, a visit to Israel is a unique experience — one that I've had the pleasure of doing many times. Whenever I go there, I fall more deeply in love with the people. Some visitors call local residents "rude" or "in your face." I call them "real." Israelis consider themselves equal to each other, equal to visitors. As equals, they may not always show the politeness that is often called for in our culture's



The historic King David Hotel, located in Jerusalem, is just one spot for tourists visiting Israel to stay. The country's chefs pride themselves on kosher dining specialties.

social interactions. But, if you can deal with it, their behavior has a charm all its own.

Renting a car and driving in Israel can be challenging. The vehicles are small, the roads are narrow and often congested, signs are frequently written only in Hebrew and parking is difficult to find. That is why so many tourists come in organized groups, leaving the driving to someone else. But, if one is up to the challenge of driving, it is actually a lot of fun.

Hotels in Israel are comfortable (it is best to book in 3-

star or above properties) but standards may not compare clearly to U.S. standards. A top room at a 5-star Israeli property may not offer the same amenities as a Ritz Carlton or St. Regis, but it is nevertheless good.

The Dan Hotel chain has properties all over the country (danhotels.com), including the historic King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The Dan Panorama in Haifa is a multi-story property on one of the highest points of the city. Its

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mering city lights, the Bahai Temple and Haifa's fascinating port. The weather in Haifa is most similar to that of Southern California. The Dan Panorama in Jerusalem has a great central location near the Great Synagogue, Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall and walking distance to the Old City. Its rooms feature state-of-the-art electronics.

Jerusalem's Inbal Hotel (inbalhotel.com), around the corner from Dan Panorama, has views of the Old City and the Montefiore Windmill. Its rooms are among the most spacious I've experienced there. It also has an excellent, helpful business center for working travelers. Its restaurant, Sofia, under the direction of Executive Chef Itzik Mizrahi, offers innovative Dairy Italian gourmet cuisine. Menu items include Le-Brac Con Pepperoni Fish on a bed of rosti potatoes with grilled vegetables and pepper sauce; Trouta al Cartoccio (oven baked trout) in butter sauce with lemon and thyme; and Bauletti di Melanzana — eggplant stuffed with pasta and

Israel's greatest attraction to many visitors is the religious heritage of three of the world's greatest faiths. Jews flock to the Old City to pray at the Wailing Wall. Christians come from all over the world to walk the streets where Jesus walked, to pray at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Muslims visit the Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock, where Mohammed is said to have ascended to heaven.

The city of Tiberias (named after the Roman emperor Tiberius), located in Northern Israel on the western edge of the Sea of Galilee (called "kinneret" in Hebrew because the large freshwater lake is shaped like a harp, "kinor" in Hebrew), is also a religious destination to Christians and Jews. It was here (or nearby) that Jesus was baptized. He performed the "miracle of the loaves" at the water's edge, the miracle of walking on water and delivered his "sermon on the mount." For Jews, Tiberias is where the great Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, relocated after the fall of Jerusalem,

Jerusalem Talmud was written.

The Sheraton Tiberias (sheraton.com), with its own dock, overlooks the lake and the promenade walkway that circles it partway. Its glittering pool's reflection competes with the light coming off the lake's surface. Rooms are comfortable, though the electronics are dated.

Nearby, Decks Restaurant at Lido Beach (lido-galilee.com/decks) is considered by many to be one of Israel's finest. Ariel Sharon, ex-prime minister, used to dine there. He owns a nearby sheep ranch. "I won't eat any lamb here," he said to the owner. "I don't eat my friends." Benjamin Netanyahu, ex-prime minister and possibly a future prime minister, held his son's bar mitzvah there.

Owned by the Gross family, whose grandfather was one of the pioneers of the Tiberias region (he founded the local community Mitzpe), the restaurant serves large portions of grilled meat and fish at a scenic restaurant that overlooks and juts out over the lake. "We grill our meat so that we don't have to salt it to make it kosher," Vered Gross, the genial and outgoing current owner explained. "Salting destroys the fiber and flavor of the meat. Grilling under high temperature, using our special

adding great flavor." The food and ambiance were very special.

In a dramatic moment while dining, all the lights in the restaurant suddenly went off. The only illumination came from the moon and twinkling stars. A large boat quietly and surreptitiously moved close to the dock at the far end of the restaurant. No, it was not an attack!

Suddenly, sailors aboard the vessel lit flares and a ceremony began, honoring a group of more than 60 diners at the restaurant. The group, Zion's Hope Ministries, was being honored for its support of the country. "I received a special phone call from our military to organize this well deserved tribute," Vered Gross explained.

Israel is a country well worth visiting, for a multitude of reasons. One thing is certain: One need never go hungry there. For more information and tourist suggestions, visit goisrael.com.

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