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5 Reasons You'll Love This Unique Cooking Class In Israel



SANDY BORNSTEIN

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Rolling countryside near Sepphoris, also know as Zippori in the Galilee
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

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Have you ever prepared a locally sourced ethnic meal while traveling in an unfamiliar place? Most travelers will respond with the word *no*. After a day of exploring, vacationers who love food usually select well-regarded restaurants to sample a region's culinary gems. In most instances, they are thrilled to leave the time-consuming preparation to a professional culinary staff.

Foodies who are interested in taking a deep dive into a country's diverse cuisine will be attracted to cooking lessons offered by locals. Instead of waiting patiently at a restaurant table to be served, guests

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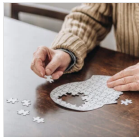
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can either observe the process or work alongside a local cook. During the workshop, guests can also learn about regional traditions and cooking techniques.

While we were touring Israel's Galilee, my husband, Ira, and I experienced a unique cooking class offered by [Galileat](#), specializing in culinary adventures in the Galilee. Almost a decade ago, founder Paul Nirens combined the culinary skills he acquired at Israel's Dvir Culinary School in Haifa and his cooking experience as a chef with the expertise he accrued while managing several food-related businesses to create a company offering an assortment of engaging experiences.

Note: Our cooking class experience was part of a partially hosted 12-day private [Israel My Way](#) tour. All opinions are my own.

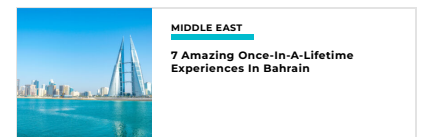
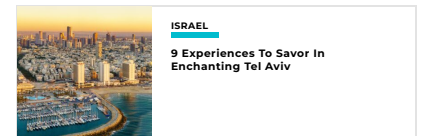
The Largest Cultural And Culinary Tour Operator In The Northern Galilee

As the largest operator of culinary and cultural programs in Israel's northern Galilee region, Galileat offers a variety of food tours, cooking workshops, gastronomic demonstrations, and seasonal programs designed to accommodate the time constraints of busy tour itineraries. Programs run from less than an hour to a full day.



Before checking into our Rosh Pina accommodations, our Israel My Way tour guide, Eric Tomer, drove us to a home in the town of Maghar, which is halfway between Karmiel and Tiberius, approximately 10 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. At the doorway, we were met by Paul, who introduced us to Miad, a local woman who would present her version of Galilean cooking.

Since Miad has a minimal understanding of English, Paul acted as our interpreter. Miad told us about her fascinating Druze background, provided instructions on how to prepare some of her favorite dishes,



and asked questions about our life in the United States.



Miad unwrapping the previously prepped vegetables for her Druze in-home cooking demonstration
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

1. Experience Hachnasat Orchim In A Druze Home

Hachnasat orchim, or “welcoming guests,” is a traditional practice that dates to biblical times. In Genesis, Abraham and Sarah’s tent was open to strangers, and their guests were made to feel comfortable and relaxed. This long-standing custom of welcoming people into one’s home has remained an integral part of Middle Eastern culture. Throughout Israel, Jews, Muslims, Druze, and Christians adhere to this practice.

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After entering Miad’s home, we were asked to sit down and were immediately offered coffee and tea. The Arabic coffee had been cooked on the stove with a touch of cardamon while the tea was made from a white-leaved savory shrub referred to in Hebrew as *zuta levana*. Paul told us that this tiny welcoming gesture represents the principle of *hachnasat orchim*. Locals have always understood coffee as a sign of wealth. By offering us coffee, Miad was honoring us.



Rollled vine leaves placed neatly in pot along with additional assorted vegetables in Miad's kitchen
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

2. Learn About Israeli Food

Throughout the workshop, Paul talked about Israeli foods. He reminded us that Sephardic Jews were influenced by their respective Mediterranean background. These Jews from Persian, Iraqi, Aleppo, Egyptian, Libyan, and Moroccan backgrounds, as well as Jews from other Mediterranean countries, used local foods to create their unique cooking styles.

"Just as Norwegian cooking is different from Spanish cooking; Sephardic cuisines are dependent on where the Jews first lived. As a result, it is not possible to identify a Jewish Galilean cuisine. What is described as modern Israeli cuisine is a mix of the Arab food and the influences of culinary traditions of Jews from around the world," he told us.

In addition to workshops focusing on Druze cooking, Paul offers classes with Muslim, Christian, and Bedouin hosts. Even though these cultures are distinct, Paul doesn't believe that there are significant differences between the ethnic groups. While he is aware of some regional differences, the defining element appears to be centered on each home cook's past experiences.

However, he highlighted one key point: Druze families tend to use more cinnamon in their cooking than the other Arabic-speaking groups in the region. Miad asked us to place an abundance of this spice along with the customary *baharat* (a special combination of Middle Eastern spices) into the mixing bowls and cooking pots. We were also advised to use more olive oil than we would have at home.



Sandy and Ira Bornstein trying to determine the ideal amount of rice so the zucchini wouldn't explode while being cooked in Miad's Galilee home
PHOTO CREDIT: PAUL NIRENS

3. Participate As A Couple In An Immersive Cultural Experience

Prior to our arrival, Miad had arranged the ingredients for the recipes on a narrow table covered with a purple tablecloth and had set her wooden dining table for our festive feast. For dinner, we would be eating stuffed vine leaves and zucchini, vegetable salad, *majadara* (lentils and bulgur wheat), cauliflower and tahini, *mnazaleh* (eggplant and chickpeas stew in tomato sauce), *kata'i'if* (stuffed fried pancakes), and homemade Middle Eastern cookies referred to as *mahmoul* or *ma'amul*.

Fun Fact: These sweet treats are made with dates and *mahleb*, a spice sourced from a cherry stone. We were told that the last ingredient has a similar taste to marzipan.

When asked if this menu represents a typical Druze evening meal, Paul responded, "My hosts over-cater as a sign of respect. Stuffed grape leaves will be served at almost every meal. I would label our upcoming meal as Galilean. All the Arabic-speaking groups cook and eat very similar dishes that are affected by the seasons. Since you are interested in Druze cooking, I'd like to add that Druze are

forbidden to eat a few green leaf dishes — Egyptian Mallow (*mulachya*), cilantro, and watercress. The folklore states that these foods raise the male libido (yes, seriously) or more politely, it is forbidden to eat foods that raise an individual's passions."

For approximately 2 hours, Ira and I stood side by side with Miad and Paul to assist in the preparation of the recipes on her menu. Initially, we sliced, diced, and chopped an assortment of vegetables and then cored out the zucchinis with an unfamiliar narrow, long utensil. A rice mixture was placed inside the hollowed-out zucchinis.

Later, we wrapped grape leaves and added and mixed numerous ingredients for the different recipes. Blocks of time were spent at the hot stove cooking the dishes and then pouring the finished products onto the serving platters. Even though Ira usually leaves the cooking to me, he remained engaged throughout the process.



Miad demonstrating how to core a peeled zucchini with a very narrow kitchen tool in her kitchen prep area
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

4. Empower A Woman To Operate A Business (And Promote Authentic Cooking)

Galileat cooking workshops bring people from around the world together in a Galilee home where they can experience camaraderie. Our inability to speak directly with Miad did not diminish our mutual appreciation of family and food. Even though her three children were not in the room, she pointed to pictures on the wall and provided a few details. She shared information about her husband Snir, a high-ranking border policeman who spends several nights a week in Jerusalem's Old City defending the country.

Our ability to work together to create a bountiful meal reinforced our belief that our differences were irrelevant when our commonalities created a harmonious experience.

While helping Miad prepare the meal, I asked Paul what prompted Miad to open her home to outsiders. He responded by stating, "She is proud to show off her family along with her culture to other people." As the food was cooking, he added, "This is a great example of empowering local women. A woman who barely finished high school can connect with travel writers, millionaires, and world leaders in her own home. By doing these workshops, she has created her own micro business. This scenario was unimaginable before I initiated this business."

This backstory showcases another reason why this type of experience is worth booking.



5. Taste Farm-To-Table Mediterranean Recipes In A Galilee Home

The Galilee has a rolling terrain resembling [Italy's Tuscany region](#). The fertile fields are filled with top-quality agricultural produce. Since biblical times, the region has been associated with olives, olive oil, pomegranates, dates, grapes, avocados, and herbs, as well as an abundance of other fruits and vegetables.

A portion of the ingredients used for our meal came from Miad's own garden while other items were purchased at a nearby village store selling freshly harvested products. Each of the items displayed on Miad's prep table had a robust color and exhibited a crisp texture when sliced.

When it was time to sit down at the table, we couldn't believe how much had been accomplished. Under Miad's direction, we had worked together to create six homemade vegetarian dishes that we had placed in the middle of the table. Some still had steam rising from the top. The aroma associated with the combination of olive oil and spices like cardamom, cumin, nutmeg, cinnamon, and Miad's baharat consumed the room.

As we sampled each entrée, we could taste the robust flavor emanating from the fresh produce and herbs. From the simple tomato, cucumber, green onion, parsley, and mint salad with a smattering of sumac to the traditional stuffed vine leaves and zucchinis flavored with both baharat and dried chili flakes, our taste buds were invigorated as we savored every mouthful.

At the conclusion of the meal, we sipped on a specially prepared herbal tea combined with wild sage while munching on mahmoul cookies made earlier in the day.

As the sun was beginning to set, we thanked Miad for her gracious hospitality and said goodbye to Paul. The hours spent cooking and eating together opened our eyes to the benefits of a cooking class in Israel.

Pro Tip: If you choose to [book a similar experience](#), remember to inform the host of your food allergies and dietary restrictions.

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SANDY BORNSTEIN

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Sandy Bornstein is a Colorado-based, award-winning travel and lifestyle writer who focuses on active adventure, food and beverages, history and culture, cruises, luxury boomer travel, family travel, health and wellness, worldwide Jewish culture, and the importance of embracing life when faced with an... After living as an expat international teacher in Bangalore, India, Sandy wrote [May This Be the Best Year of Your Life: A Memoir](#) as a resource for people

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