

The Bountiful Culinary Options of Israel

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“You have to taste a culture to understand it” – Deborah Cater

To fully appreciate the depth of Israel’s diversity, it is essential to sample a variety of foods in several different regions of the country. To accomplish this goal, Ira and I visited Israel’s two largest cities— Jerusalem and Tel Aviv— and spent multiple days in the Galilee and the Negev Desert. In conjunction with visiting popular attractions, we exposed our taste buds to each regions’ cuisine.

From onsite hotel restaurants to street food kiosks to trending restaurants to food tours, we loved the opportunity to learn about Israel by sampling foods that originated in the Middle East as well as other places around the world. While it is always advisable to have flexibility when traveling, having reservations for food tours and popular restaurants is a wise decision.

Foodies will have no problem finding a wide array of choices as they travel from one region to the next. After numerous trips to Israel, I’d like to share highlights from our recent trip.

Note: Our private 12-day tour was partially hosted by Israel My Way. All opinions are my own.



Hotel And Resort Breakfast Buffets

For as long as I can remember, health experts have debated the importance of breakfast. While a consensus has yet to be reached, most would agree that individuals should start the day with a nutrient-dense meal. Simple and elaborate hotel buffets along with traditional sit-down menus meet this criterion. From Sunday to Friday, restaurants adhering to Jewish kashrut (kosher) laws will offer a wide variety of hot and cold buffet breakfast foods along with made to order cooked foods. On the Jewish Sabbath, the options will be modified to conform to the restrictions associated with the seventh day of rest. It should also be noted that many restaurants will be closed throughout the country on the Jewish Sabbath. (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown)



Mamilla Hotel

In Jerusalem, the conveniently located Mamilla Hotel caters to an upscale clientele who appreciates the convenience of being walking distance to the Old City’s Jaffa Gate. At this buffet, one can comfortably select foods from a long counter and choose to sit inside or outside. This buffet showcases an assortment of quiches, made to order omelets, Belgium waffles, Israeli salads, cheesecake, and breakfast pastries. Don’t forget to try their shakshuka served in miniature pans.



Mitzpe Hayamim

Guests seeking an authentic farm to table experience will be in heaven at the Mitzpe Hayamim, in the Galilee. This luxury resort has both an onsite dairy and organic farm, along with amazing grounds perched above the Sea of Galilee. An early morning walk on these serene grounds can jump start your morning. The resort’s breakfast buffet is the place to indulge in cheeses and dairy products along with seasonal vegetables. Other things to consider are oven baked omelets emulating local traditions and entrees at the Msabbaha station.



Beresheet Resort

If your travels include the Negev Desert, check out the Beresheet Resort. It is adjacent to the 40-kilometer long Makhtesh Ramon, the world’s largest erosion crater. The onsite buffet in the Rosemarine Restaurant will not disappoint. The number of options is so great that I would recommend taking some time to review what is available before diving in. The hotel’s culinary staff singles out gravlax, smoked fish, herring, organic cheeses, humus and pita, homemade pizza, and knafeh as their guests’ top picks.

Notable Kiosks

Abu Sneina

Our guide, Eric Tomer, introduced us to a small Palestinian bakery in the Jewish Quarter in the Old City identified as Abu Sneina. We peeked inside to observe an older man baking different types of bread in a large open-fire oven. If you want to sample freshly baked sesame flat bread and Jerusalem bagels with zaatar, this is one place worth visiting in the Old City.

Lehuhe Zefat

In between touring Sephardic synagogues and shopping in Tzfat’s (also known as Safed) boutique shops, stop at Lehuhe to taste Lahuhe, a Yemenite bread that is like pita bread.



Our Tour Guide, Eric Tomer outside Abu Sneina

Café Levinsky

Near the end of our graffiti and outdoor art tour, our informative guide, Libbi Cohen, stopped at Café Levinsky so that we could taste a carbonated non-alcoholic drink made with fresh produce called a gazoz. More information about this popular drink can be found in the book, Gazoz: The Art of Making Magical, Seasonal Sparkling Drinks.



Libbi Cohen & Sandy sampling Gazoz

Food And Wine Tours And Workshops



Falafel Sampling at Ayesha Falafel Bar during Mechaneh Yehuda Market Culinary Tour in Jerusalem

Machaneh Yehuda Market Culinary Tour

Cities around the world are known for their food markets. Jerusalem's Shuk or Mechaneh Yehuda Market is often cited as one of the best in the world. While it is possible to wander around the marketplace on your own, I recommend taking a tour with Roi Damari so that you can fully appreciate the diversity of Israel's culinary scene. During our culinary tour, we sampled foods in several restaurants adjacent to the market as well as a selection of foods sold in numerous stalls inside the Shuk. If you'd like to experience the rush for shopping before the Jewish Sabbath, schedule a visit on a Friday afternoon.



Wine Tasting in the Galilee

Wine Tasting at Bazelet HaGolan

Israel has hundreds of wineries. Our travels have taken us to a few in the Galilee where the climate and rich soil are conducive for producing quality wines. At Bazelet HaGolan, I sampled several different types of wine. This is the first time in a long time that I enjoyed everything that I tasted.

Galieat Workshop in Druze Home

Regional cooking workshops introduce travelers to authentic dishes and local traditions. In the Galilee, we visited the Druze home of Miad and Snir where we experienced firsthand the preparation of seven traditional Galilean dishes. For a couple of hours, we worked side by side with Miad to prepare the dishes and then enjoyed the fruits of our labor. Paul Niren, the founder of Galieat, organized this memorable culinary encounter.



Vegetarian dish prepared during Galileat Cooking Demo in the Galilee



Sandy and Ira having great time during Druze cooking demo in the Galilee

Restaurants

Happy Fish

After a very long day of traveling from Colorado to Israel, Happy Fish, a restaurant in the Mamilla Hotel, was the most convenient option for our first night in Jerusalem. We opted to sit outside on an elevated patio overlooking Alrov Mamilla Avenue. From our table, we looked down on a stone paved outdoor pedestrian mall filled with local and international stores, cafes, and restaurants leading to the Old City.

Our top choices were a falafel and tahini dish and a fish shawarma made with yogurt, eggplant, and pickled onion. Fish lovers will be equally pleased with the abundance of fish entrees. Our taste buds were energized and ready to try more Israeli foods.



Falafel at Happy Fish in Jerusalem



View from Happy Fish in Jerusalem

Machneyuda

Reservations at Machneyuda may not always be available because it is considered one of Jerusalem's best Mediterranean restaurants. To assure a spot, I recommend making a reservation well in advance of arrival. Eric warned us not to anticipate a romantic endeavor. By 6:30 PM, this popular restaurant was filled with at boisterous crowd.

While we struggled to maintain a conversation at our second-floor table, we loved the innovative dishes that we shared. Most notable was the Yellowtail starter with baladi cucumbers and an assortment of summer greens in a sour loquat juice, and tuna toro skewers served with okra, coriander, and sliced lemon.

Our first of many cheat deserts was a chocolate sesame bar garnished with abadi caramel, sesame ice cream, and coffee anglaise. We strolled back to the Mamilla Hotel to end our first full day of adventures in Jerusalem.



Tuna Toro at Machneyuda in Jerusalem



Yellowtail Starter at Machneyuda in Jerusalem

Restaurants



Spicy Tuna on toast at Chakra in Jerusalem

Chakra

Another one of Jerusalem's culinary treasures is Chakra. While this restaurant is just as popular as Machneyuda, the tempo is more relaxed, and the background noise is minimal.

After sharing two Mediterranean inspired appetizers— a spicy tuna on toasted bread starter and a tuna kabob labaneh and tomato salsa starter, we both ordered a soy caramelized salmon fillet with broccolini and mashed potatoes. We couldn't resist sharing another chocolate desert. This time, we savored every bite of the Valrhona nemesis, a dense dark chocolate cake dusted with cocoa powder and complemented with two scoops of homemade vanilla ice cream.

Manta Ray

One of our favorite restaurants in Tel Aviv is Manta Ray. Delicious seafood combined with a beachfront location makes this place a top choice for romantic pescatarians. However, trying to find this restaurant when there was an enormous number of people attending a beach festival was a bit of a challenge, especially when Google Maps decided not to cooperate. Luckily, the restaurant honored our reservation that was slightly before sunset.

While watching surfers try their luck and families walk along the shoreline as the sun dipped into the horizon, we reviewed the menu. Before our main courses were delivered to our table, we were able to select several vegetarian and fish starters from a tray brought to our table. To leave room for our sea bass and grouper entrees, we narrowed down our choices to three starters.

Our love for fresh fish was more than satisfied at Manta Ray.



Sea bass entree at Manta Ray in Tel Aviv



Tray of starters at Manta Ray in Tel Aviv

Restaurants

Mitzpe Hayamim Spa Hotel

Hotels perched above a rural countryside are rarely within walking distance of restaurants. With a captive audience, these destinations assume that most guests will be dining onsite. After experiencing the breakfast buffet, we were happy to eat meals with ingredients harvested from the onsite organic farm.

The evening buffet showcases an abundance of seasonal vegetarian dishes, foods made with dairy products, and numerous fish options. Guests seeking lighter fare can request made to order foods at the reception desk in the lobby.



Section of Dinner Buffet at Mitzpe Hayamim

Beresheet Resort

In the Negev Desert, restaurants are in short supply. But if you are staying at The Beresheet, your hunger will be easily satiated at either their meat or dairy restaurant. After making a few stops in Sderot to learn about what it is like to live adjacent to Gaza, and then spending time with Yaron Bob at his Rockets into Roses workshop, we didn't arrive at the Beresheet until late afternoon. By then our appetites were soaring.

Sitting on a patio overlooking the Makhtesh Ramon, we chose to have an early dinner. We ordered a hearty salad along with a margherita pizza while we stared into the amazing crater. A generous-sized fresh fruit platter balanced out this meal.

After a full-day of activities—an energizing early morning hike, an educational two-hour jeep tour into the crater and time swimming in the award-winning infinity pool—we enjoyed a leisurely buffet dinner in the Rosemarine Restaurant. In addition to an abundance of self-serve items, we ordered our main course, a mushroom burger made from a combination of mushrooms and lentils and topped with a chipotle aioli sauce. It was accompanied by a portion of shredded potatoes and house pickled vegetables. This vegetarian burger had both a wonderful texture and favorable taste. Our last sampling of the hotel's cuisine occurred when we ordered nutrient-dense fish sandwiches from the weekend lobby menu before departing for the airport.



Vegetarian burger at The Beresheet in the Negev

Highlights from our 12-day trip to four regions captures an overview of Israel's diverse cuisine. To maximize your culinary experience in Israel, visit more than one city, eat in a variety of restaurants, try local food vendors, and participate in food workshops and tours.