

Hummus, Tahini and Other Tastes of Home in Jerusalem's Old City

A local provides a throw-away-the-map food tour of the Muslim quarter, offering a window into the city that tourists rarely see.

By Reem Kassis

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There is perhaps no other city in the world where you can hear three languages spoken by the locals to a soundtrack of church bells, the voice of the muzzein and the chatter of tourists from every corner of the globe. But Jerusalem, where I grew up in a Palestinian family, is also two universes within each other: one inhabited by its residents, another reserved for those briefly passing through its arched alleyways.

And while locals happily share the city's famous landmarks with visitors, we tend to guard its less familiar treasures, particularly when it comes to food, for our own enjoyment.

As a traveler, there is nothing I like better than to have a friend who grew up in the area I'm visiting take me to its real food spots, like the hole-in-the-wall restaurant, maybe even lunch counter, whose owner doesn't speak a word of English, and whose regular patrons include the 10th-generation neighbor who lives down the street. Then, every pit stop and meal feels like being ushered into a place, which, even if many get to visit, few really get to experience in its full glory. This guide to Palestinian food spots in Jerusalem's Old City is that friend.

The Old City is divided into four quarters — Muslim, Christian, Armenian and Jewish — although the streets often intertwine and overlap, making it hard to delineate exactly where you are. The majority of these food stops are in the Muslim quarter (best entered through Damascus Gate), with some bordering the Christian one. Most do not have addresses and there's even disagreement about the names of the streets they are on. A map application will not serve you well in the winding paths of this millennia-old town. Your best guide? The vendors seated outside their store fronts. Simply ask for one of these places by name and they will tell you exactly where to walk, where to climb stairs and how many left or right turns to make.

Start at Damascus Gate

You do not need directions to find the women farmers seated on the ground flanking the entry through Damascus Gate. Up by the crack of dawn, they make their way from surrounding villages with seasonal produce they harvest from their fields. Depending on the season, you might be in luck with the sweetest summer figs, cactus pear and mulberries you'll ever taste. In the late fall and early winter, you have raisins and a delicious nut-filled grape leather known as malban, but you also enter olive harvest season and might get lucky with freshly preserved olives and pressed oil. After the first rain, the foraged herbs — like mallow and dandelion — start to pop up as well.

Stop for tahini

At the bottom of the stairs leading from the gate to the Old City, and about a two-minute walk to the left, is [Al Jebrini Tahini](#), one of the oldest tahini mills in Jerusalem, dating back a century and a half. Walking in, you see a tiny unassuming shop with staples like dried legumes, flour, sugar and milk, but peek through a small doorway and you'll find the stone mill where the sesame seeds are ground. "We only produce 15 to 20 kilograms of tahini a day," Abu Ibrahim Jebrini, the current owner, proudly explained (that translates to about 35 pounds). "It only comes in four variations," he added, — "hulled, unhulled, toasted red and nigella seed." If buying a jar is not in the cards for you, then at least get a slice of the halaweh (halvah) and simsimiyeh (a sesame-seed confection) he produces in-house.

A two-stop breakfast

If you've started the day early and breakfast is what you're after, then the most filling and nourishing meal will require only two pit stops. First, make your way to Makhbaz Al Razim, the bakery I have been frequenting since I was a few years old for ka'ak-al-quds (the oval ring-shaped sesame-studded breads for which Jerusalem is famous). Tucked away on a side street near the Ethiopian patriarchate, the bakery has no sign. You find it through graying metal doors and a few stone steps descending into a room lined with piles of wooden trays. At the back is a wood-fired oven, over a century old. Grab a couple of ka'aks (if you like hard-boiled eggs, you can also get a couple of eggs that have roasted in a box of wood shavings for six hours in that same wood oven) and head a few steps down to the best-kept hummus secret in the Old City.

Abu Shukri hummus may be the most recognized name for hummus in Jerusalem, with the well-known restaurant near the Via Dolorosa featured on countless online travel message boards and in TV shows. But the real gem is this hole-in-the-wall shop where Ziyad Abu Shukri, a bald man with a small patch of white hair on each side and smiling green eyes, still grinds his hummus by hand with a mortar and pestle the way he has since he took over from his father 30 years ago. "Those are my brothers," Mr. Abu-Shukri said of the owners of the well-known restaurant. "Everyone is good, everyone does what they like, but this is the original shop my father opened up 82 years ago."

Locals refer to his shop by his name or as Abu Shukri el Falafel (and sometimes jokingly as Abu Shukri el Aqra'a — the bald Abu Shukri). With just five tables, the space is tight,

and you might find a line of residents picking up their breakfast to take home, but the delights within are worth the wait. His offerings are simple: hummus; msabaha (a deconstructed hummus made from whole warm chickpeas mixed with a tahini sauce and topped with a lemon garlic chili sauce); ful (cooked and spiced fava beans) and falafel. Everything you order is brought out with pita bread and a plate of sliced tomatoes, onions and pickles. If you're in a rush, you could grab a falafel sandwich to go, but if you have the time, sit down. Just make sure to ask for shatta, his homemade hot sauce that I could eat with spoon.

On to lunch

If you manage to digest this all after some walking, then sit down for lunch at Kabab al Sha'ab located at the entrance to the spice market, or Suq el Atareen as it is locally known. There is only one thing on the menu here: kebab, served either as two skewers in a sandwich or as five skewers on a plate. Owned by the Kirresh family — famous butchers — it is frequented almost exclusively by locals. The 150-square-foot restaurant has only four tables positioned across from the coal-fired grill, which churns out the ground lamb-beef kebab mix nonstop throughout the day. The meat is served with grilled tomatoes and onions and pita bread. The most you can order on the side is a drink, including a yogurt one.

Dessert stop

I assume most people find a meal incomplete until it ends it with a sweet bite. While many places offer baklava, for a true taste of Palestinian sweets, opt for helbeh, a fenugreek-flavored semolina cake whose bitter pungency is punctuated with the sweetness of aniseed and sugar syrup. Or try hareeseh, an orange blossom semolina cake that crumbles in the mouth. And if made fresh, definitely go for knafeh, a crunchy kataifi (shredded phyllo dough) or semolina crust filled with slightly salted cheese and soaked in a floral syrup. Al Aseel Sweets on Al-Wad Street, just off the Via Dolorosa, has been making these kinds of sweets for more than 50 years, and you can see the kitchen at the back of the store where everything is churned out fresh daily. Knafeh, however, is only made on Fridays and Saturdays. "If it has cheese in it then you need to eat it on the spot to get the best flavor," said Ramadan Abu Sbeih, a grandson of the founder who now run the shop. "That's why we only make knafeh on the weekends."

And a late-night snack

If a late evening stroll in the city is what you prefer, then you may uncover a well-hidden local tradition. Urs Beid, an egg and sujuk (spicy sausage) flatbread, is prepared in a few bakeries, but only after 6 p.m. Traditionally, it was made to sustain the ka'ak-al-quds bakers who started the process at night and baked well into the early dawn hours, but local families also pick these pastries up for late-night snacks or supper. The most basic and, in my opinion, one of the best places for this bread is Makhbaz Abu Shadi, near the Sheikh Reihan Mosque. It's one of the oldest bakeries in the city and a few minutes' walk

from the Via Dolorosa. It's the only thing on the menu and is prepared from 6 p.m. until midnight.

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