



seek out new ways of expressing the culinary traditions passed down by their ancestors. All this has created a fascinating and thriving local restaurant scene, signaling to the world that the flavors of the Middle East are every bit as complex and laudatory as those of culinary stalwarts like France or Italy. Israel's cuisine never really lost its "fruit-of-the-land" qualities—it just grew up a bit. In spite of its myriad origins and far-reaching past, new Israeli cuisine is still seeking out its direction and language, feeling out new flavors and pathways. Perhaps in response to the heavy historical baggage—or appropriately for the Middle Eastern climate—it is generally a light, Mediterranean cuisine, intuitive and creative, prepared using methods that underscore and highlight the dominant flavors of local ingredients. It is a cuisine still in its infancy, and yet its prospects are multifold; great expectations made greater by the weight of the many cultures symbolized by and carried within every dish. It is this cuisine that we will share together in the pages that follow.

Israel sits at the junction of three continents: Asia, Europe, and Africa. Throughout history, it has served as a key intersection of trade routes from China to Spain. Though one of the world's smallest countries (approx. 20,000 km²), the land provides a rare geographical and climatic diversity. Cold weather prevails on the highest peaks in the North, which are covered in snow come winter. The Jordan Valley, stretching down from the Jordan River, is the lowest place on earth, with a warm, eerily calm climate that finds its nadir down by the salt-encrusted banks of the Dead Sea. The coastal regions and the central hills offer a temperate Mediterranean climate, while the southern deserts—the Negev and the Arava—are dry, arid, and otherworldly.

The freedom with which culinary traditions mix in Israel makes it difficult to categorize dishes by their home regions, but distinct areas with geographical, cultural, and culinary singularities are slowly emerging. For the purposes of this book, we have divided the land into four chapters, reflecting four distinct landscapes and the corresponding properties of their local cuisines: the mountainous, rural North, demarcated by the borders between Israel and Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan; Jerusalem, Israel's historic capital, and the mountains around it; Tel Aviv, the Mediterranean shore and the central region; and the cultivated deserts and settlements of the South.

In each chapter we discuss the history, culture, and context of each region. We have done our best to capture the unique spirit of each one by translating the aromas, sounds, and tastes in a vivid and authentic manner. Ultimately, each region—and its cuisine—is a product of its people; the colorful, brash, and bold kin and connections that bring this whole orchestra to life. Every country, every town, and every market has its legends, its kings and princes, its queens and mothers. Without intimately knowing them, you have barely scratched the surface. We have made many friends while making this book. Without them we would have nothing.

With the ongoing conflicts in the region, above all, we wish for this book to bring forth a vision of a better future; one in which we can return to simplicity, and to what really matters: **Life. Food. People.** A shared, divine hope.

Israeli and Palestinian chefs sought new ways of expressing the culinary traditions passed down by their ancestors.

Opposite page: Iris sells spices, nuts, and seeds in Tel Aviv's Levinsky Market. Below: Colorful sweets arranged to catch the customer's eye on the way out.

