



DAFNA HIRSCH

The Open University of Israel

“Hummus is best when it is fresh and made by Arabs”:

The gourmetization of hummus in Israel and the return of the repressed Arab

ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the “cultural biography” of hummus in Israel from the Mandate period to the present, focusing on the changing place of Arabness in the signification of the dish. Contrary to accounts that regard food consumption as metonymic of political relations, I argue that, because food items move in several fields, both their consumption and signification are overdetermined processes. Rather than taking hummus to be the essential “food of the Other,” I show that the Arab identity of hummus functions as a resource, employed by social actors embedded in various political, social, and economic projects. [*food, national food, hummus, Israel, Arab–Jewish relations, cultural transfer, Middle East*]

Nine o'clock on a chilly Saturday morning. A group of 25 Israeli Jews is waiting in front of the Jerusalem municipality building for a tour to start. This is not an ordinary tourist excursion, however, but a tour of Palestinian *hummusiyot* (hummus joints; sing. *hummusiya*) in East Jerusalem, organized, curiously, by Beit Shmuel—the Jerusalem branch of Progressive Judaism. Our friendly young guide looks more like the backpacker type than the average gourmet type. But like many other Israelis, he is a self-appointed hummus expert. The tour opens with a question: “So . . . who does hummus belong to? Is it *ours* or *theirs*?” Except for a couple of dissidents, group members agree that it is “theirs.” “Hummus for Arabs is a different matter than it is for us,” explains our guide. “We would describe any hummus as delicious. The Arabs have developed a taste for it for 2,000 years. In their mind, one has to keep high standards.” By citing the number 2,000—a constitutive number in the Zionist narrative of exile and return—our guide invokes the semiotic function of hummus as a signifier of locality. The tour progresses as a pastiche of history, mythology, folklore, and hummus lore. Accompanied by an armed security guard, we walk from one Palestinian hummusiya to the next, sample the hummus, discuss its qualities, and compare it to the others we have tasted.

I begin with this tour of East Jerusalem hummusiyot because it exemplifies two interconnected processes: the recent “gourmetization” of hummus in Israel and the reemergence of its Arab identity after a decades-long submergence. At the same time, the “hummus craze” of which this tour is part owes much to the perception of hummus as “the most Israeli dish of all” (Zakai 1997). How has an Arab dish come to function as a foremost signifier of “Israeliness,” an identity associated in Israel with the Jewish majority? And how has this symbol of Israeliness regained its Arab identity for the Jewish Israeli public alongside its Israeli one?

The case of hummus—a dish adopted by Jewish settlers from Palestinians and made a central element of the Israeli “national food” repertoire—raises questions about how the social life (Appadurai 1986) of food items that move across ethnic or national boundaries is shaped by these items’ cultural identity. What is the role of this identity in shaping consumption

patterns? Does this identity cease to be significant once items are “naturalized” in the target repertoire? (Even-Zohar 2005). It also raises questions concerning the role of traveling food items (and items of material culture, more generally) in producing and reproducing notions of identity and difference in shared or connected spaces.

In this article, I examine the cultural biography (Kopytoff 1986) of hummus in Israel, focusing on one aspect of this biography in particular: the place of “Arabness” in the signification of the dish. I identify three broad chronological stages in this biography. In the late Mandate and early state periods, when Jews first began to consume hummus, it was considered part of a repertoire of Arab food, which Jewish nutritionists presented as worthy of adoption by Jews. Beginning in the late 1950s, in the context of its industrial production and of attempts to forge an “Israeli cuisine,” hummus was gradually “nationalized” and its Arab identity suppressed, with Jewish immigrants from Middle Eastern countries acting as intermediaries. Finally, since the late 1980s, the Arab identity of hummus has gradually reemerged in culinary discourse, development due to the interaction between social transformations and political processes, as they articulate in the culinary field.

My argument has two parts. Firstly, contrary to accounts of food consumption that regard food as metonymic of political relations, I argue that, because food items move in several fields, both their consumption and signification are overdetermined processes. Secondly, rather than taking hummus to be the essential “food of the Other,” I argue that the Arab identity of hummus functions as a resource employed by actors who are embedded in various political, social, and economic projects. Thus, whereas accounts of intercultural consumption often take for granted the identification of items with their source culture, my analysis draws attention to the construction of this identification in social practice and to the processes of mediation it involves.

Is the Other what we eat?

Just as the museum has emerged as a privileged symbol of intercultural relations of travel, exchange, and appropriation (e.g., Clifford 1988, 1997; Coombes 1994; Thomas 1991:125), so should the dinner table. As many studies have shown, food travels, and unlike most museum items, it travels in all directions (e.g., Cook 2008; Cook and Crang 1996; Gabaccia 1998; Pilcher 2006). Moreover, whereas museum items remain exterior to the visitor, aloof, often placed behind glass, food is swallowed, internalized, and transformed into a part of the self. Although food has become one of the most potent symbols of Western cultural imperialism, the complicated routes it follows challenge any exclusively top-down accounts of cultural flow.

To explain the travel of food against the current of the sociosemiotic logic of distinction, various scholars have adopted frameworks like “eating the Other” and “food colonialism,” mainly in the context of Western consumption of “ethnic food” (e.g., Bell and Valentine 1997; Goldman 1992; Heldke 2003). Following bell hooks (1992), who formulated her ideas in other than specifically food-related contexts, “eating the Other” refers to the commodification of difference—manifested in “ethnic cuisine”—for white consumption. Whether the Other is consumed in an effort to signify pluralism and the overcoming of white prejudice or as an assertion of power and privilege—an act of incorporating and thereby mastering a threatening yet alluring Other—it is always meant to serve the ends of white desire. This position is often accompanied by a critique of consumers’ lack of knowledge of the cultures from which the food is taken and the original forms and contexts of its consumption (Heldke 2003). In a similar fashion, sociologist Liora Gvion has argued that Jewish Israelis’ attitude toward Palestinian cuisine reflects the political, social, and cultural marginalization of Palestinian citizens of Israel. According to Gvion (2006a, 2006b), this attitude has resulted in the Jewish appropriation of only certain items of the Palestinian food repertoire—those easily adjusted to Jewish eating habits—without acknowledging their origins and ignoring items not easily adopted as unworthy of interest.

The frameworks of “eating the Other” and food colonialism seem particularly relevant to the Israeli case, in which the Jewish appropriation of certain Arab dishes can be regarded as yet another instance of Israel swallowing Palestinian resources and claiming them as its own. At least in certain contexts, these frameworks have explanatory power, as I show below. At the same time, they have been subjected to several critiques. Firstly, as Uma Narayan (1997:180) argues, the commodified interaction with an Other culinary culture seems preferable to the complete lack of acquaintance that permits the food of the Other to appear as a mark of strangeness and Otherness. One could argue with the notion that acquaintance facilitates acceptance. However, this critique points to the possibility of more than one relation to the food of the Other and therefore raises the question of why some items of the Other’s food repertoire are rejected and others are seen as acceptable and are even appropriated. This question calls for historical investigation.

Secondly, some scholars have argued that any stable notion of “the food of the Other” is predicated on an essentialized concept of culture, in which local, ethnic, or national “cultures” are seen as distinct, bounded, and static units (Cook 2008; Cook and Crang 1996). Yet identities and “cultures” are always formed and reformed through contacts so that individual cultures are at no point free from the dynamic flow of cultural interchange (Ashcroft 2001:24;

Clifford 1997). This critique points not only to the fact that “the food of the Other” is often a product of earlier exchanges but also to the work involved in asserting cultural purity—in marking certain foods as “theirs” and claiming others as “our own.”

The third critique concerns the subjection of the culinary to the political that these frameworks entail. Food (like any other commodity) moves in several fields, including the culinary, the economic, and the political, making both its consumption and its signification overdetermined processes (Appadurai 1981; Mintz 1996). As the case of hummus demonstrates, the culinary field neither reflects the field of politics nor is wholly independent of it. Rather, the two fields interact in significant ways, and processes and mechanisms that are specific to each shape their interactions.

Rather than look at food consumption as a way of dealing with pre-given Otherness, in this article I examine the role of food in producing identities and notions of alterity within a shared space (Cook and Crang 1996:140–145; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). I look at how the meanings of hummus were historically constructed and reconstructed through the practices of groups of actors embedded in different political, social, and economic projects. These constructions took place in an open cultural field, where changes in production, consumption, and signification patterns within one group affected production, consumption, and signification patterns within the other.

The critique of essentialized constructions of national cultures notwithstanding, as Nicholas Dirks (1996) points out, the consequences of emphasizing the constructedness of “culture” are not the same for the colonizer and for the colonized. Moreover, at least in its early stages, if not later as well, the Jewish appropriation of certain Palestinian dishes seems to have been tightly connected to Jewish colonization of Palestinian land. To avoid the pitfalls of essentialism, I suggest replacing the politicized concept of “origins” with the anthropological concept of “source.” “Source” refers to the cultural repertoire from which a certain item was adopted (Even-Zohar 2005), regardless of whether this item originated in the group associated with the repertoire or is the product of earlier transfers. Even as the origins of hummus continue to be grounds for symbolic struggles, Israeli Jews’ adoption of hummus from Palestinian Arabs usually goes uncontested. Moreover, at several points in its career, hummus gained symbolic currency from its association with Arabs. In other words, its association with Arabness is inscribed in its cultural biography.

Following Anne Meneley’s (2007:679, 2008) discussion of the qualities of olive oil, I regard the “Arabness” of hummus as a Peircian qualisign, that is, a quality that is a sign. This does not mean that this quality is simply given; rather, the ways it is interpreted (e.g., what aspect of “Arabness” will be brought to the fore in which context) and whether

it is made salient or is repressed are the products of social and cultural action, “the making and remaking of identities” (Clifford 1997:7) as this action articulates with various discursive fields. Constituting the value of “Arabness” in a specific context are both political ideologies (e.g., whether Arabs are constructed as “dirty” or “close to nature”) and what Webb Keane (2003) terms “semiotic ideologies.” The latter determine, for instance, whether appropriation of Arab items of material culture may confer on their consumers qualities associated with Arabness. In the case of Arab food consumed by Jews in Palestine, the most important of these qualities has been an “authentic tie to the land.”

Food and national identity

Hummus—a mush of cooked chickpeas, tahini, lemon juice, garlic, and spices—has long held a secure position in the Israeli “national food” repertoire. Yet the title of “national dish” does not fully capture the position of hummus in Jewish Israeli culture. Falafel, too, has received this title, and at times also gefilte fish, but neither has become the object of as much emotional investment as hummus. In the current Israeli discourse, hummus is referred to as an indispensable dish and one of the main things that Israelis miss when they go abroad. Many people describe themselves as “hummus addicts,” and everyone has his or her favorite hummusiya. The love of hummus often functions as a sign of a newcomer’s integration into Israeli society. Israelis, together with the Lebanese and the Syrians, are the world’s largest hummus consumers, and the dish is consumed by a broad cross section of society (Har’el 2002).

As Arjun Appadurai suggests, the emotional charge of food and its essential yet perishable nature make it a “marvelously plastic kind of collective representation” that “can signal rank and rivalry, solidarity and community, identity or exclusion, and intimacy or distance” (1981:494). In a beautiful section of *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (1984:183–193) describes how a group’s preference for certain foods is related not only to income and gendered division of labor but also to embodied dispositions and habitus. In this sense, the Israeli manner of eating hummus (referred to in Hebrew as “wiping,” distinct from Palestinian “dipping”), the entire bodily hexis involved in its consumption, and also its amenability to being shared, eaten from a common plate, manifest the main qualities that Israelis like to associate with “Israeliness”: informality to the point of rudeness but also sociability. At the same time, the logic of associations and dissociations that food promotes seems to be more complex than Bourdieu allowed for when he distinguished food preferences along the axes of social position and gender alone. Tim Edensor (2002:88–89) has extended Bourdieu’s notion of “the habitus” to the national field, arguing that class, ethnic, and gendered forms of habitus intersect

with national dispositions. However, at the same time that a liking for certain foods embodies national belonging, no less embodied notions of how, where, and when to consume it often divide the national community. As I show below, Israelis' passion for hummus has made it a favorable terrain for distinction practices, resulting in mutual reinforcement of social distinction and national belonging as well as, paradoxically, the return of the repressed Arab.

In early Zionist discourse, food habits had already appeared as one component in a wider repertoire of Jewish habits that had to be corrected as part of a general project of reform. However, food never received much institutional attention in the Zionist movement. Attempts to reform the eating habits of Palestine's Jews were undertaken mainly by medical and welfare organizations, predominantly women's organizations like the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO) and North America-based Hadassah. Since the 1920s, physicians, nurses, and nutritionists working in these organizations had tried to inculcate the Jewish population with models of "correct" and healthy living, including eating habits (Raviv 2002; Tene 2010). They presented Jewish eating habits as unadjusted to the conditions of the Palestinian land (Helman 2003:76). "In no other area of our lives does conservatism reign as in the area of eating-habits," lamented Dr. Yosef Me'ir in the pages of the labor newspaper *Davar*; "the herring and the conserves are not getting off our table" (1932). In the medical discourse on nutrition, some real or imagined Arab cooking and eating habits, like roasting meat instead of frying and patient chewing, were presented as healthier than Jewish ones (Brachya/Borochoy 1925:126; Zass 1929:58).

Until WWII, discussion of Jewish eating habits was sporadic. Following the food rationing enforced by the British government in 1939, food became an object of more enduring attention. Nutritionists published instruction materials to help women make do with the available products. And it was the nutritionists of WIZO and Hadassah, most of them immigrants from central Europe and North America, who, in the context of WWII food rationing, first lent scientific authorization to the adoption of dishes from the Palestinian menu. Dishes like tahini salad and various lentil dishes were recommended as substitutes for missing meat. According to these nutritionists, the Arab (and, sometimes, also the Jewish Sephardi) diet, albeit deficient in some respects, was the most suitable for times of emergency, as it was the cheapest, most nourishing, and best adjusted to the conditions of the land (Cornfeld 1939b).

One of the most prominent advocates of the introduction of Arab dishes into the Jewish menu was Canadian-born nutritionist Lilian Cornfeld. A nutrition advisor to various British and, later, Israeli bodies, Cornfeld published many cookbooks and numerous articles on nutrition and cooking in the English and Hebrew daily press. In her 1942

book *How to Cook at Times of War*, she included a recipe for hummus. In January 1950, she wrote in the Hebrew daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*, "Why is it that the Arab cuisine is so much better than ours? Especially that the Arabs use the simplest materials at our disposal. I have recently dined at the table of the mayor of Nazareth and all the dishes which were served deserve that we try to imitate them and compete in their preparation" (Cornfeld 1950).

Evident here is the irony involved in cultural transfer under colonial conditions, with European settlers striving to constitute themselves as "natives." Writing on Israeli architectural discourse after 1967, Alona Nitzan-Shifan discusses the colonizer's dependency on the culture of the colonized to define an "authentic" national identity "of visceral ties to the place" (2007:227). This dependency, she writes, "is manifested in the Israeli desire to embody and appropriate the Arab native status, which was perceived as the ultimate expression of locality and of intimate ties to the landscape, the stones, the tastes, the smells and the light of the place" (2006:155).

Once the appropriated item entered into the more official registers of culture, its Arab identity was usually suppressed, allowing the item to be presented as a relic of biblical times. Moli Bar-David, for instance, refers to hummus as a biblical dish in her 1964 *Folkloric Cookbook* when she includes it in a suggested menu for Independence Day. She writes, "Many Israelis hold a picnic on Independence Day—they roast shishlik [shish kebab] on coals, according to the custom of our ancient forefathers . . . many people hold a special dinner at home . . . falafel, hummus, and other favorite lentil dishes from biblical times will not be absent from many tables" (1964).

However, as the case of hummus demonstrates, appropriated cultural items retained their identification with the source culture as a semiotic potential. As I show below, this potential could be "activated" in specific historical contexts and made to signify in unexpected ways.¹

The "Israelization" of hummus

In Palestinian society today, hummus is consumed either as a whole meal—breakfast or lunch—or as one of several vegetable dishes served alongside the main course. Hummus consumed at home is more often than not purchased in a hummusiya, although Israeli industrial hummus has made inroads into Palestinian kitchens (Gvion 2006b). During the Mandate period, hummus was usually prepared at home. In his extensive ethnography of Palestinian rural life during the 1920s, Gustaf Dalman (2001) mentions hummus as a beloved dish yet not one eaten on a regular basis. In the poorer villages, hummus was often prepared without tahini, which was the more expensive ingredient (Dalman 2001:271).² Restaurants serving hummus, and sometimes other dishes as well, like *fool* (cooked fava beans) or

roasted meat, could be found in urban commercial centers like Haifa, Jaffa, and Jerusalem and were often intended to cater to visitors from out of town.

According to Yehuda Litani, a journalist and coauthor of a guide to Israel's best hummusiyot and olive oil producers, the first Jews to have consumed hummus in Arab restaurants were members of the Palmach—the combat units of the Jewish military organization during the Mandate period—who patronized such restaurants in the early 1940s as an act of heroism.³ Yet accounts written by Palmach members suggest that more than “heroism” was at stake in the consumption of Arab food. As one Palmach member writes of the famous coffee ritual, preparing and drinking coffee “according to the habits and manners of our Arab neighbors” (“rhythmic swallows and smacking lips”) expressed “an unconscious desire to integrate into the nature of the country and the nature of its inhabitants” (Gilad 1955:225). Consuming Arab food, then, facilitated the performance of a certain kind of self (Cook and Crang 1996:140)—one “naturally” rooted in the land.

Palmach members apart, prior to the second half of the 1940s, hummus was largely unknown to most Jews in Palestine. In a piece titled “Oriental Gourmet: Lamb, Tehina, Humas,” journalist Dorothy Khan Bar-Adon lamented that “since the outbreak of war domestic science institutions have been advocating the use of local products, popular with the Orientals, and cheap, nourishing and tasty. But probably only the sheerest necessity will make a dent in the wall of resistance. Food habits cling. There are many Eastern Europeans who have never learned to eat olives!” (1941).

Despite Khan Bar-Adon's lament, several ingredients from the Palestinian repertoire did penetrate many Jewish kitchens by the early 1940s, mostly vegetables like olives, tomatoes, eggplants, and squashes (Helman 2003:78; Raviv 2002:59). Prepared dishes, however, were rarely adopted, except for falafel, which became a popular street food in Tel Aviv by the late 1930s (Cornfeld 1939a). Excluding consumption by immigrants from Arab countries, both falafel and, later, hummus seem to have been adopted mainly by the first generation of Jews born in the country (Cornfeld 1958; Raviv 2002:60).

After WWII, more Jews started to patronize Arab restaurants, especially in mixed cities like Haifa or on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. However, given the tensions between the two communities, the practice was still relatively rare. After the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, and especially after the inauguration of an austerity regime in 1949, Jews began to travel to conquered Arab towns like Nazareth and Acre or to Arab neighborhoods in Haifa to look for foodstuffs unavailable in Jewish markets, particularly meat (Nahum 1949, 1950). They did not always find meat, but they did find hummus, which was a filling and nutritious substitute.

At the same time, hummus made its way to the Jewish-owned “Oriental restaurant” (*mis'ada mizrahit*). These restaurants gained popularity during the austerity period, primarily because of their reduced reliance on meat compared with European ones (Weinstock 1951). It was these restaurants, more than Arab-owned ones, that mediated hummus to the Jewish public. The number of Oriental restaurants increased significantly in the second half of the 1950s, in the wake of massive immigration of Jews from Middle Eastern countries. Hummus became a staple on the menus of Oriental restaurants, alongside falafel, tahini, shishlik, and kebab. It is significant that hummus was not a part of the culinary repertoire of most Mizrahi Jews prior to their immigration to Israel in the 1950s, as it was consumed mainly in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Palestine rather than in North Africa, Yemen, and Iraq, from which most Mizrahi immigrants hailed. The spread of Jewish-owned Oriental restaurants serving hummus supported its “Israelization.” Its Arabness was subsumed under a more encompassing category—“Oriental”—which could then be identified with Mizrahi Jews rather than Arabs.

No other field of Mizrahi cultural production seems to have enjoyed as much success in Israel as food. Israel has always aspired to constitute itself as a stronghold of Western civilization in the Middle East (Raz-Karkotzkin 2005; Shohat 1988). Thus, the cultural production of Mizrahi Jews, who were considered “the Orient within,” was generally degraded and marginalized by the hegemonic Ashkenazi (European) elite. At the same time, as I note in the previous section, Arab cultural items could function as signs of organic ties to the land. Although Mizrahi immigrants served to “Judaicize” appropriated Arab dishes, their own food repertoires were ignored and elided from the public sphere. It was only in the 1980s, with the emergence of “ethnic cultures,” that these repertoires began to be “discovered” and consumed by Ashkenazi Jews as well.

With a dire economic situation, massive immigration from countries deemed “backward,” and lack of international recognition for Israeli sovereignty in the territories acquired in the 1948 war, the first decade following Israel's declaration of independence witnessed great uncertainty concerning the viability of the new state. By the late 1950s, however, Israeli confidence had grown. The austerity regime was officially lifted in 1959, and the economic situation ameliorated. Israel became more open to the world. The exit permit, which limited citizens' ability to travel abroad, was abolished in 1961, and more emphasis was placed on the tourism industry. This period saw the development of professional cooking in Israel, and food became more oriented toward leisure. In this context, various attempts were made to shape a symbolic Israeli “national cuisine” (Raviv 2002:206–246). At the same time, it was becoming clearer to policy makers that the “melting pot” policy toward immigrants from Middle Eastern

countries had not yielded the expected results (Lissak 1999:72–74). Although Westernization of these immigrants continued to be a desired goal, in 1958, policy advisers addressing food consumption among Mizrahi immigrants recommended that their traditional ways of eating be preserved. The popular adoption of “Oriental food” reverberated in state policy, and Arab dishes—predominantly hummus and tahini—began to infiltrate institutional settings of nationalist education like schools and the army, where, hitherto, Ashkenazi food had predominated (Raviv 2002:171–178; Rozin 2006:70–71).

Part of the effort to standardize a “national cuisine” came from independent food writers and cookbook authors. This effort was manifested, for example, in suggestions for holiday meals, especially for nonreligious holidays like Independence Day. In 1957, an anonymous item in the column “For the Woman and the Family,” in the daily newspaper *Davar*, included hummus, together with tahini, falafel, and “spicy fish,” in one of two suggested menus for Independence Day—a menu for an “Oriental-style meal”: “The dinner we offer you is at once festive and informal. It is meant to create the special atmosphere which would lift the spirit of the diners but not chain them in festive formality” (Anonymous 1957). Not only did Oriental food stand in contrast to the food of the Diaspora but in the emerging Israeli culinary repertoire it was also seen as best suited to occasions that were both festive (because it was not yet food consumed regularly in Ashkenazi homes) and informal (because it was considered relatively “low” in status).

A further sign in the late 1950s of the naturalization of Oriental food, in general, and of hummus, in particular, in the Jewish Israeli menu was the industrialization of hummus by the Telma food company. Telma’s hummus, first marketed in 1958, enjoyed spectacular success: By 1968, the company had advertised the production of its 15,000,000th can! (Israel’s population at the time amounted to no more than three million people.) And it was Telma that first defined hummus as a “national dish” in the framework of its publicity campaign: “Knish or veronikas. Not all your guests are familiar with these Eastern European dishes. But everybody eats hummus enthusiastically—hummus, the Israeli national dish.”

The industry has served as an important agent of Israelization of hummus, not only by rendering it a national dish but also by facilitating its penetration into official presentations of “Israeli food.” Alongside Israel’s self-image as a stronghold of Western civilization in the Middle East existed another image, of Israel as a meeting point between East and West. Thus, “Israeli cuisine” was presented as a combination of European and Mizrahi elements (e.g., Namir 1968; White 1964). Since the late 1950s, industrial hummus, falafel, and, sometimes, gefilte fish have represented “Israeli cuisine” in food exhibitions and “Israel weeks” held in various countries (Bloch 1966; Namir 1967),⁴

and they have figured in presentations of “Israeli food” at home.⁵

According to Litani, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 was a watershed in hummus consumption in Israel (see Litani and Araidí 2000:25). Writing in the year 2000, Litani identifies “hummus” with “hand-made Palestinian hummus.” Yet many sources testify that, by 1967, hummus was extremely popular in Israel, its symbolic “Israelization” having been completed. An article on the food provided to the athletes at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, for instance, stated that “if anyone will wish to dine his heart in *pure Israeli dishes*, like hummus, tahini and falafel—he will be able to fill his stomach” (Special Reporter 1964, emphasis added).

After the 1967 war, Israelis flowed into the occupied territories in search of touristic excitement and cheap consumer goods (Meshulach 1967). Two weeks after the war ended, Amos Keinan—writer, artist, and early pioneer of Israeli gastronomic discourse—ironically wrote, “When we arrived to Bethlehem we saw the whole of Dizengoff Street [at that time, the trendiest recreation district in Tel Aviv] eating hummus with pickles. How did they [i.e., Bethlehem’s Arabs] know that it was our national dish? And so quickly?” (1967).

While Israelis were traveling to the West Bank to spend money, Palestinians were traveling to Israel to earn it. During this period, the number of Oriental restaurants in Israel increased, partly thanks to the entry of tens of thousands of Palestinian laborers into the country, who provided cheap labor for the restaurant industry (Almog 1998:13; Svirski 2005:32). East Jerusalem became the country’s hummus capital.

The economic prosperity following the 1967 war boosted Israeli consumer culture; however, it was only in the 1980s that a full-fledged gastronomic discourse developed. With inflation increasing during the 1970s and skyrocketing in the first half of the 1980s, for most Jews, the highly popular Oriental restaurant was the only affordable option for family dining out. In the late 1970s, more Jews began to patronize restaurants in Arab towns and villages, where food was relatively cheap (Azulai 1979). Media references to Israeli Jews dining in Arab restaurants became more frequent. These reports, however, were usually prosaic. Food had not yet become the object of elaborate and sensual discourse it was to become a decade later.

Hummus regains its Arab identity

In 2007, one of two leading Israeli industrial hummus brands—Tzabar—opened a makeshift hummusiya for Jordanian hummus chef Nehad Al-Han in a bona fide stronghold of fabricated authenticity: the artists’ colony of Old Jaffa. This improvised and highly publicized hummusiya, whose opening event included the staging of an

“Arab *chafila*” (party), complete with belly dancer, was part of a wider campaign to publicize Tzabar’s new line: “The hummus of Nehad the Jordanian.” The campaign included successful TV spots showing Israeli Mizrahi actor Jacques Cohen fetching Al-Han from the Jordanian border crossing and receiving his words of gratitude for giving him “the greatest adventure of his life” (the two converse in Arabic). Significantly, Al-Han was not a known figure in Israel (or, apparently, in Jordan) at the time. Rather, he was chosen by a Tzabar team, which sampled dozens of Jordanian hummus restaurants before crowning Al-Han “the king of Jordanian hummus” (Promo Media Forum 2007). More hummus products bearing the names of Israeli Arab hummus chefs were to follow.

Tzabar’s employment of Arab chefs to sponsor and promote its products responds to, and at the same time advances, the trend that considers Arab-made hummus to be better and more authentic than Jewish made. This trend, which was incipient in the second half of the 1980s, increased in the 1990s and even more so in the 2000s. It resulted from interaction between processes occurring in the culinary field and those occurring in the field of politics.

The first major breakthrough of “Arab hummus” into Jewish Israeli consciousness seems to have occurred at the time of the Lebanon war in 1982. The Hebrew press reported on soldiers and politicians flocking to restaurants in the Christian section of Beirut after it came under Israeli control and celebrating “terrific hummus” and “real olive oil” (Amikam 1982; Haber 1982). It is in such instances, in which food consumption appears as a means to “domesticate” an otherwise threatening space, that the framework of “eating the Other” seems most pertinent. At the same time, it was because, by 1982, hummus (and other Arab foods) had become an established part of Israeli self-identity that a news item about Israeli soldiers and civilians eating at the Emile restaurant in Beirut could describe them as feeling “at home” there (Haber 1982).

Gradually, Arab hummus received the mark of authenticity. Earlier occasional references to “real” or “authentic” hummus in the Hebrew press did not refer to Arab-made hummus, in particular, but, rather, contrasted handmade with industrial versions of the dish (e.g., Gal 1985; Keinan 1964; Lokulus 1976). In 1988, journalist Lea Etgar described how, in the previous five years, dozens of Arab restaurants had cropped up in Israel, bearing their Arab owners’ names: “The assumption was that authentic dishes like hummus, majadra, tabule and fried fish are better and tastier there, and perhaps even cheaper” (1988). However, the first Palestinian intifada of 1987 reversed this trend. All Israeli restaurants saw a decline of 50 percent or more in revenue, with Arab restaurants being the hardest hit (Etgar 1988). It is difficult to tell whether patrons were, indeed, looking for authenticity in Arab food or whether Etgar, writing in 1988, was projecting the categories of culi-

nary discourse on choices primarily motivated by other factors (such as price). In any case, in the mid-1980s, one began to find occasional references to Arab-made hummus as categorically better than Jewish-made (e.g., Arnon 1988; Bar-Kadma 1984).

The 1980s were a decade of deep transformations in Israeli society and culture. The transition in Israeli political and economic policy, from state developmentalism to liberalization (Carmeli and Applbaum 2004:1), went hand in hand with the erosion of the ideology of cultural unification. In this context, two interconnected processes are particularly relevant to my case. One is the rise of a new urban middle class. This relatively wealthy middle class developed a cosmopolitan cultural orientation with a strong emphasis on consumption and leisure. Out of this class emerged the agents of a new culinary model, which eventually restructured the entire Israeli culinary field. Following similar trends in Europe and North America, this model emphasized refinement, professionalization, and “cosmopolitan authenticity” (Calò 2005:61–65). It constructed food as an object not only of sensual but also of intellectual engagement. Food became a source of identity construction and self-expression (Tene 2002:93). A gastronomic field developed in Israel, with its own experts, institutions, discourses, and practices. Since the 1980s, the number of chef restaurants in Israel has steadily increased and so has the discourse surrounding food consumption. Food continues to be a growing component of Israeli leisure culture, with cooking-related TV shows flourishing and famous chefs becoming cultural heroes.

The second process is the rise of identity politics and the search for authentic “ethnic cultures.” Following decades of structural oppression of Mizrahi Jews in Israel (Shohat 1988), the 1970s witnessed a rise in ethnic tensions and ethnic revolt. The 1977 election brought to an end the political and cultural hegemony of the Labor Party. Traditionally an opposition party, the right-wing Likud gained control of the government, presenting itself as a champion of all hitherto marginalized Jewish groups, most notably, Mizrahi Jews. Although the new government did not effect a real change in resource allocation along ethnic lines, it lent legitimacy to the discourse on ethnic discrimination (Shafir and Peled 2002:90). Those in the second and third generations of immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, most of whom had grown up in an atmosphere of contempt toward everything Oriental, articulated their sense of difference through a set of cultural practices and products (Regev 2000:235), conceptualized either as part of an encompassing “Mizrahi” identity or as part of specific cultures of (ethnicized) descent. In this process, the cuisines of Mizrahi immigrants were rediscovered, and food became central to the definition of the ethnic culture.

As Ofra Tene has shown, “ethnic food” became a resource for the construction of nostalgic identities and

authentic selves for members of marginalized ethnic groups. Simultaneously, in the new elite culinary culture, “the ethnic,” “the foreign” (Chinese, French, etc.), and “the local” became commodified options in a repertoire available for the construction of the new bourgeois “cosmopolitan self” (Tene 2002).

If, at first, the gourmet discourse was applied mainly to high-class restaurants and highbrow cuisine, it soon came to be applied to “ethnic food” as well, including hummus. For instance, in 1997, Israel Aharoni, a celebrity chef and one of the leading agents of the new culinary discourse, described the hummus in the Nazareth restaurant A-Sheikh in the following terms:

The hummus, it should be stated immediately, was the best hummus I have ever eaten in my life. A pure hummus, very fresh, which had never seen a refrigerator, light and tasty—I have almost forgotten how tasty a good hummus can be. In the center of the plate was a pile of fool, which wasn’t cooked to a mushy texture . . . and the puddle of excellent olive oil on the plate completed the whole affair. [1997]

The Israeli omnivore was born. Here is Aharoni again: “I can’t stand it when somebody says ‘a simple hummus is much better than delicate goose liver.’ Why either this or that? Why not this and that? I want to eat a wonderful hummus, and a great sandwich, and delicious pasta and delicate goose liver” (Shir 1998). As Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann (2007) have shown in their analysis of U.S. gourmet food writing, the switch to omnivorousness does not mark the end of food consumption as distinction. Rather, distinction is marked by other means, mainly along the axis of “authenticity” (which itself stands for a range of other values, like geographic specificity, “simplicity,” personal connection, and “historicism,” or food grounded in tradition).

With its entry into Israeli gourmet discourse, hummus has undergone differentiation, both along geographical lines and along quality lines: that served by the standard Oriental restaurant—either Arab or Jewish owned—is distinguished from “gourmet hummus” produced by a top hummusiya, which itself is an internally divided category, with attributes like freshness, lightness, texture, and quality of ingredients the main distinguishing criteria. Finally, Arab-made hummus is distinguished from Jewish-made hummus and deemed better and more authentic. For instance, food writer Sherry Ansky (1995) describes in one of her columns how her friend Litani had tried in vain to prepare “real hummus, like the Arabs.” Shuki Galili, an Internet consultant and founder of a popular hummus blog titled “Hummus for the Masses,” writes that “hummus is best when it is fresh and made by Arabs” (2009).

Obviously, these views do not go uncontested. In many responses to Internet items on hummus—especially those

that present the Israeli appropriation of hummus as a point of contention between Jews and Arabs—readers claim a Jewish or at least a non-Arab origin for hummus or simply declare Arab hummus to be foul. However, the assumption that Arab hummus is superior to Jewish hummus has become such a commonplace in food discourse that in a 1997 newspaper column announcing an Independence Day hummusiyot tour, all seven tour stops listed were Arab (Zakai 1997).

Two other trends imported from Europe and North America increased the reputation of Arab food, in general, and of Arab hummus, in particular: One was the reevaluation of “local food” in the 1990s; the other was the growing popularity of the “Mediterranean diet” for its reputed health benefits (Meneley 2007:679). In this context, one finds left-of-center Israeli chefs and food experts proclaiming Arab food the quintessential “local” cuisine because it is adapted to the conditions of the land.⁶ For instance, food writer Eli Landau writes, “The Arab cuisine may not be as perfect as the French or Italian one, but it is perfect in its connection to the land, its climate and fragrance” (1998).

The main concept anchoring the distinction between Arab and Jewish hummus in food discourse is historicity, as is apparent in the guide’s introduction to the hummus tour that begins this article. For example, Litani writes that “a copy is never exactly identical to the source, and close as it may be, there will still be differences, sometimes even essential differences: not only in the long tradition, where Palestinians have a clear advantage over most of the descendants of various Diasporas in Israel, but in skills and patience” (Litani and Araidí 2000:27). In the context of interviewing his Palestinian coauthor, Na’im Araidí, Litani declares, “It’s a matter of generations and for this I envy you. You have ‘it’ naturally and we don’t” (2000:194). Interestingly, at the same time the distinction between Arab and Jewish food is rooted in Orientalist discourse—the identification of the natives with “tradition,” their closeness to nature, their “patience”—it serves to account not only for the Arabs’ better skills at food preparation but also, on occasion, for their presumably stronger connection to the land.

In contrast to the exclusivity implied by the elitist notion of “gourmet food,” in the case of lowbrow-food-turned-object-of-distinction strategies, apparently everyone is welcome to join the game—at least, as long as they possess the necessary cultural capital. Thus, the discourse of “authentic Arab hummus” is promoted both by food experts and by various cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984:360), predominantly of a leftist political orientation, regardless of their culinary expertise. Thus, meditations on hummus by such “hummus experts” are often accompanied by erudite discussions of the history of the dish, its nutritional qualities, or the sociology of its consumption (see, e.g., Litani and Araidí 2000; Shezaf 2007; see also Galili’s “Hummus for the Masses” blog at <http://humus101.com>).

Although some of the most valued Arab hummusiyot had enjoyed a large following even beforehand, the popularity of Arab “gourmet hummusiyot” increased significantly during the 1990s and especially during the 2000s. Even though these hummusiyot are often located in lower-class neighborhoods—Arab localities being among the poorest in Israel—they attract clientele from all strata of society. The hummusiya of Ali Karawan in Jaffa—better known as “Abu Hassan,” after the late founder—is a case in point. Karawan began selling homemade hummus from a cart in Jaffa in the early 1960s. In 1967, he opened his own hummusiya, which shifted locations several times until finally settling in Dolphin Street, near the Jaffa port (Shalom 2000). Karawan’s hummus was always popular among Jaffa’s Arab population, but it was only in the second half of the 1980s that it was “discovered” by Jews as well. In 1986, a short paragraph in the restaurant section of the hip Tel Aviv weekly *Ha’ir* referred to Abu Hassan’s hummus under the heading “Secret.” By the mid-1990s, Abu Hassan was extremely popular with Jews, and in 2000 he opened a second hummusiya in Jaffa. A third one was soon to follow. Especially at noon on Friday one can expect to find long lines in front of Abu Hassan’s hummusiyot. For years, Abu Hassan has won every poll to determine “the best hummusiya in Israel” (of which there have been many in recent years). Shortly before Independence Day 2010, *Ha’ir* newspaper, together with the Tzabar company, came up with the idea of mapping the best hummusiyot in Israel (including East Jerusalem). A group of food and hummus experts compiled a list of hummusiyot and people could vote for their favorites online. With Abu Hassan coming in first, seven out of the top ten vote getters were Arab owned.

The logic of distinction through consumption of low-brow food propels “hummus experts” to perpetually search for yet undiscovered hummusiyot in “authentic” places, preferably Arab towns and neighborhoods. Litani, for instance, writes about the hummusiya of Abu Al-Abed in Palestinian North Jerusalem:

I took Eyal Shani there, the owner of Ocean restaurant in Jerusalem [and a celebrity chef]. He finished the dish hurriedly . . . and said immediately: I prefer the hummus here to a three-Michelin-star restaurant in Provence. I took Sheri Ansky, the writer of the Ma’ariv food column, there, she dipped and exclaimed: “That’s it! This is the best hummus I have ever eaten in my life!” Writer Eyal Meged said after the first bite that he is enslaved to this place forever and ever. [1997]

If food consumption is often the main occasion for Jews in Israel to visit Arab locales, the main occasion for Arabs to visit Jewish homes is labor. As the following excerpt from a nutrition column in *Ha’aretz* demonstrates, the discourse on superior Arab hummus brings forth a new type of Oth-

ering, based on the notion that Arabs, in general, are inherently better able than Jews to produce good hummus:

For years I have been trying to prepare hummus at home, with no success. . . . And then several people came to my home to install new doors. I was in the middle of another failed attempt to prepare hummus . . . and suddenly I had a great idea, I asked which of these excellent people prepares the best hummus. They all pointed at Ibrahim Abu Al-Nasser from Yafia, the hummus champion of the area. [Evron-Gilat 2009]

The rise in the prestige of Arab hummus was also influenced by the “peace process” in the 1990s, which opened up new or old–new territories for food consumption. According to Rebecca Stein, the peace process effected a change in practices of tourism to Arab sites in Israel, including food tourism. Although Jews did not hasten to return to West Bank restaurants, visits to Arab towns and villages within the 1948 Israeli borders increased significantly. Stein (2008) specifically mentions Israeli pilgrimages to the village Abu Ghosh, until recently a hummus Mecca. Even though the prestige of “Arab hummus” has continued to rise, visits to Arab localities are strongly influenced by the political situation. Thus, after the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000, Jews refrained from visiting Arab Jaffa for some time. According to hummusiya owner Basem Jaber, at that time, many new hummusiyot were opened in Tel Aviv (interview with Basem Jaber, Tel Aviv, November 26, 2009).

It seems that more than real trips to Arab localities in Israel, it was imaginary trips to neighboring Arab countries that boosted the reputation of “Arab hummus.” The peace accord with Jordan in 1994 and the peace talks with Syria in 1999 opened up new spaces for the projection of food fantasies, hummus fantasies, in particular. As the logic of distinction determined that the more “authentically Arab” the hummus, the better it is, the Orientalist logic conferred greater authenticity on unknown regions. During the talks, items on food in Jordan and Syria appeared in the Israeli press (e.g., Aharoni 1994; Glazer 2000; Yis 1995). Writers stated that “the best hummus in the world” could be found in Damascus and Beirut (Chen et al. 2001). “Hummus in Damascus” became such a common trope for peace with Syria that several right-wing ideologues wrote that the Israeli Left was willing to forgo the material and spiritual assets of the Jewish people in return for a bowl of hummus (Alon 1999; Elizur 1999; Haetzni 2000).⁷ The idea that hummus in unknown (i.e., yet-inaccessible) regions is better carried into a recent advertisement for the right-wing newspaper *Israel Today*, which forecasts the headlines of its January 1, 2018, edition. The headline above a close-up photo of a hummus plate reads, “The victims of peace.” The subheading continues, “Tel Avivis are flocking to Nablus, Abu Hassan goes bankrupt” (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Advertisement for *Israel Today*, showing the January 1, 2018, issue. Photo by D. Hirsch.

This discourse is predicated on the Orientalist assumption that the only thing worthwhile in Nablus, Damascus, or Beirut is food (as many writers noted, one could go to Damascus, have hummus, and return home on the same day). As in the case of the Lebanon war, here too hummus seems to function as a means of “domesticating” a threatening space. It ensures that although everything in that space is different (the hummus is taken to have qualities Israelis have never encountered before), it is still familiar (and in a world where the touristic experience is structured by discourses of consumption, this may be read as a commentary on the necessity of peace).

With the advance of the “peace process,” but no less with its collapse in the late 1990s, culminating in the second intifada in 2000, various left-leaning writers promoted the Jewish taste for Arab food, in general, and for hummus, in particular, as a signifier of cultural closeness. One often reads that hummus is “the real arbiter” in the Middle East. For instance, according to travel writer and journalist Tzur Shezaf, “This dish has become the cement that connects Jews and Arabs, right-wing and left-wing, and is the real foundation on which true peace will be established—

contented, smiling, with a swollen stomach—between the Euphrates and the Nile” (2007).

Scholar Amos Noy (2001) has termed the tendency of the Israeli Left to translate any Arab–Jewish encounter into meals and recipes “the culinary left.” On another level, the well-intentioned metaphor of hummus as “the cement that connects Jews and Arabs” is predicated on the culturalization of the conflict—on turning a struggle over land and lives into a struggle between “cultures.” In this context, “culture” appears no less an agent of depoliticization than a site of struggle.

Conclusion

As a vehicle for public representations of identity, the discourse on hummus in Israel is often structured by the language of conflict and reconciliation. At the same time, the culinary success of hummus cannot be reduced to its political symbolism; it is motivated by a range of other factors, such as taste, price, and nutritional qualities, themselves mediated by various discourses of lifestyle and consumption. Further research is needed in order to establish the role of meanings versus that of material factors in accounting for the popularity of hummus, as well as the role of the food industry in shaping both consumption patterns and the changing signification of hummus over time.

I have argued here that, although in certain contexts food may serve as a metonym for political relations, both its consumption and its signification are overdetermined processes, because it moves in various fields, each with its own internal logic. I have focused on the suppression and reemergence of the Arab identity of hummus. In the 1940s and early 1950s, hummus was presented as an Arab dish worthy of adoption by Jewish settlers. The flourishing of Jewish Oriental restaurants and the subsequent industrialization of hummus in the 1950s and 1960s played an important role not only in its popularization but also in the suppression of its Arab source. I argue that the reemergence of the Arab identity of hummus in the 1980s and 1990s resulted from the interaction between processes occurring in the culinary field and in the field of politics. As a highly popular and emotionally charged “national food,” hummus became a terrain for distinction strategies, as well as for representations of Arab–Jewish relationship. The search for “authenticity” increased the symbolic value of “Arab hummus,” first promoted by various food experts and cultural intermediaries, often with a left-leaning political orientation. Turning to gourmet Arab hummus restaurants became a means of distinction from the Israeli “masses,” along both culinary and political lines.

Arab responses to the Jewish Israeli appropriation of hummus, including the “hummus record battle” between Israel and Lebanon, merit a separate discussion.⁸ One of the wittiest responses to the Israeli hummus craze I have

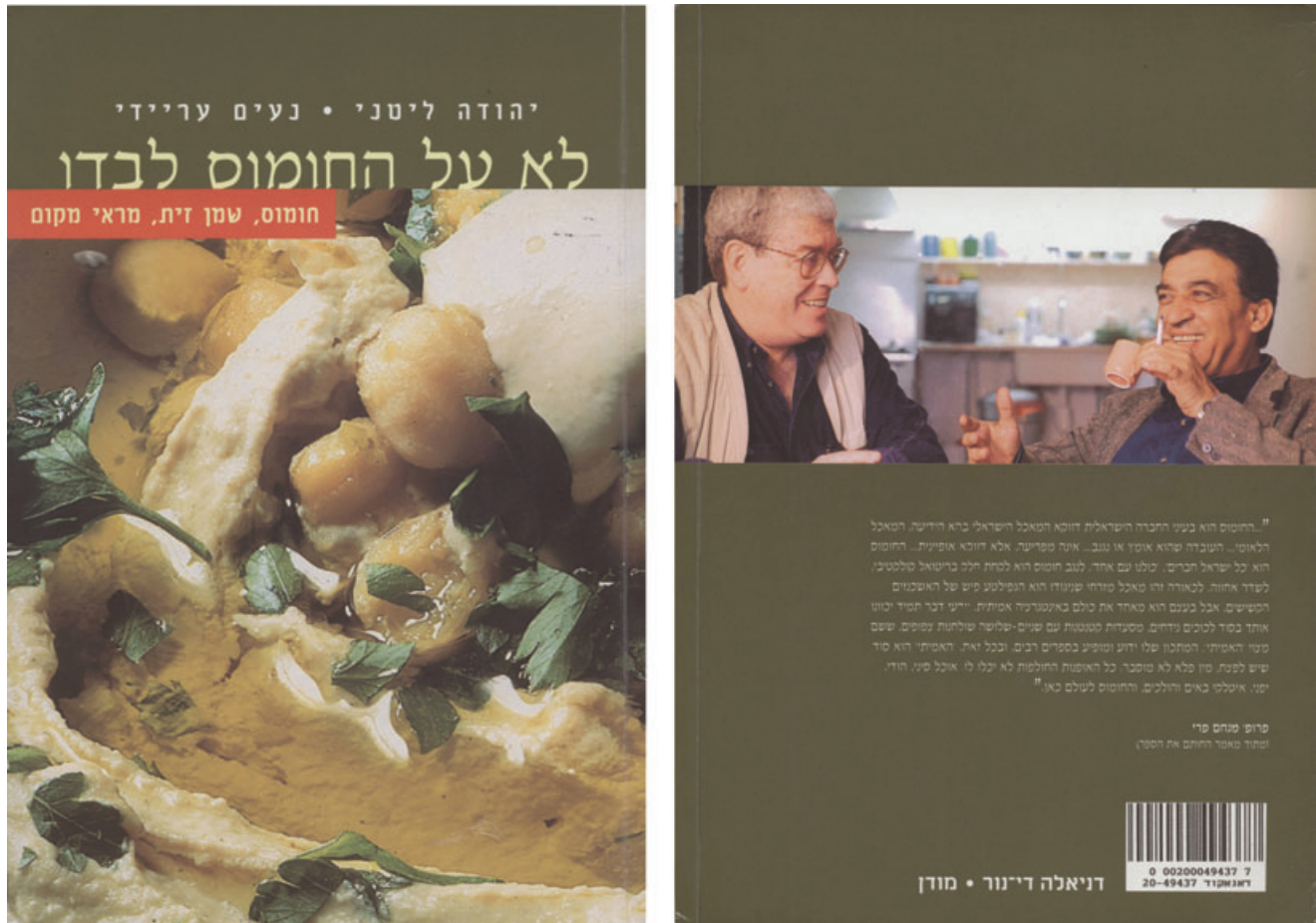


Figure 2. Front and back covers of Litani and Arad's *Not by Hummus Alone*. Photo by Yoram Aschheim, courtesy of Modan Publishing House.

come across is a short video made by writer and journalist Ala Halihal, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, showing a Jewish Israeli family visiting the Arab neighborhood of Wadi Nisnas in Haifa in search of *hummus asli* (authentic hummus). After several failed attempts to find hummus, the searchers are eventually led by a group of neighborhood people carrying signs that read “two plates for two peoples” and “let hummus win” (playing on familiar Israeli political slogans, of both Left and Right) to a restaurant where their anxieties are pacified by plates of hummus. The hummus they end up enjoying turns out to be industrial hummus, thus presenting “Arab authenticity” made for Jewish consumption as a Jewish fabrication (see Halilal 2004). Other reactions may be no less essentializing than Jewish constructions of “Arab hummus,” such as the statement by the editor of the Arabic weekly *A-Sinara*, Lutfi Mash’ur, that “you wipe hummus, we dip, and that is the difference, because we wipe something else” (Shir 1999). As these examples demonstrate, the meaning of hummus for Arab-Jewish relations is not given, but is a matter of the way in which it is used by social actors. Whether hummus is used to signify closeness or distance between Jews and Arabs, it is un-

doubtedly a “peculiarly powerful semiotic device” (Appadurai 1981:494).

Notes

Acknowledgments. In conducting this research I benefited from an Open University of Israel research grant for new faculty. I wish to thank Netta Kaminsky and Ronit Liberman for their help with the research. I am grateful to Zeev Rosenhek, Natalie Rothman, Ofra Tene, Hizky Shoham, and the anonymous reviewers of *American Ethnologist* for their critical comments on previous versions of this paper. I also wish to thank all those—whose names are too many to mention—who collected for me all kinds of hummus items or offered their insights on the Israeli hummus mania, and especially Smadar Sharon and Omer Sharon-Gabay. I am particularly grateful for all the hummus producers, consumers, and experts who were willing to share their knowledge and time with me. My deepest gratitude goes to Ofra Tene. We started this project together and continue to collaborate in various ways. Her knowledge, wisdom, and friendship have made this project all the more rigorous, complex, and fun.

1. This does not mean that the Arab identity of hummus might not lose its pertinence to Israeli discourses of identity at some point. However, as long as Arab-Jewish cohabitation is far from self-evident, this point seems distant.

2. Habib Daoud, a Palestinian chef and scholar of Palestinian cooking, also told me this (May 26, 2010).
3. Interview with Yehuda Litani, Jerusalem, March 16, 2010.
4. These exhibitions were organized by the government-sponsored Israeli Company for Exhibitions and Fairs.
5. For example, a Telma newsreel commercial shows hummus being served as an "Israeli national dish" at a dinner celebrating United Nations Day in Tel Aviv in 1962 (Herzliya Studios Archive, no. 6312).
6. I do not mean to claim that political orientation directly determines food beliefs. However, it is highly unlikely that right-wing chefs and food experts would define Arab food as "the most local food of all" (Gurfinkel 2008).
7. The allusion here is to the biblical story of Esau, who sold his birthright for lentil stew.
8. Because the record battle is related to the question of the industrialization of hummus, I discuss it elsewhere (Hirsch and Tene n.d.).

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- accepted May 17, 2011*
final version submitted March 7, 2011
- Dr. Dafna Hirsch
Department of Sociology,
Political Science and Communication
The Open University of Israel
POB 808, Ra'anana 43107, Israel
dafnahi@openu.ac.il