



AD Thank you so much, Mirna, for the opportunity to speak with you. Could you introduce yourself and your practice, including your work on reactivating forgotten recipes?

MB I am an artist and chef from Jerusalem/Palestine. My work attempts to understand the politics of disappearance in their relation to the ever-shifting landscape, while also questioning notions of land and geographies of in-between temporality. Three years ago, I went to cooking school and obtained a diploma in Professional Cooking. This made me develop works that use the mediums of storytelling and food for creating socially engaged projects through my art practice, through which I aspire to create artworks where food/eating/sharing create an innovative and fresh way for people to experience themselves and their surroundings. Such projects include: *Maskan Apartment Project*, *Potato Talks Project*, and for the past three years, a full focus on *Palestine Hosting Society*, a live art project that explores traditional food culture in Palestine, especially those that are on the verge of disappearing. The project brings these dishes back to life over dinner tables, talks, walks, and various interventions. When I present a table, I focus on one topic and go deep into it. I create the menu to tell a story based on that research and I present it slowly to the people. I perform it as I talk. My menus are made of disappearing recipes, and the stories that I bring are almost lost. I bring them from the past, bring them to the table, and observe this encounter. At the same time, I don't limit myself to the space of the physical table: I am very active on social media and that is also part of the project — activating the archives and creating a narrative of reappearing. So, there are the tables in Palestine for Palestinians, and I am also working on tables outside of Palestine, also with a focus on presenting vanishing food practices. Having traveled and shown my work

in many different places, I am able to create a narrative that retains its local essence even when presented in another place.

JZ We are interested in how recipes became forgotten in Palestine. Is forgetting caused by an inaccessibility of certain ingredients — maybe certain grain varieties or crops were no longer available?

MB For me, it is about reminding Palestinians about what we have lost due to the construction of geography. For example, each part of the West Bank is secluded from the others, and the people living there cannot go to Gaza, cannot go to Haifa, etc. There are physical borders that we can't escape, and the result is people not knowing about each other's practices. At the same time, the loss of land has made us lose many crops that were central in some recipes that then stopped being cooked. So, I bring those stories, not just the recipes. It enables us to look at ourselves in a new way — one that has roots in the past but is also empowering to create change in the future. Definitely the seed in Palestine — as in the rest of the world — has gone through a lot of changes and modifications. Luckily, not as much as genetic modification and GMOs as in the rest of the world, so you still can find seeds that have not been, you know, GMOed to the same extent, but there are many heirloom crops that have been forgotten, that have been lost — especially wheat varieties. Now there are many people who are reclaiming those heirloom seeds and they are gathering those seeds through seed libraries, making them accessible to farmers, and many farmers now — especially the younger generation of Palestinians — are going back to the land and reclaiming this knowledge by planting the land again and creating food sustainability for themselves and their communities.

AD How about the fertility of soil in Palestine? And could you introduce some of the bread variations?

MB It's fertile, the soil is very fertile in Palestine. The region was one of the first civilizations in the world that planted wheat. Unfortunately, due to the wrong methods of agriculture the soil has been exhausted to some extent. But now, with going back to permaculture, to the right methods in farming, there are more and more Palestinians who are reclaiming this knowledge and spreading it. So, there are many farms that are using the right methods in farming, that are focusing on the taste, on the seasons, on the right seeds and not just opening a market. I am not the best person to talk about agriculture and seeds actually. I will be talking about that from the food aspect, from my work and what I know from my humble knowledge in farming and what I hear from friends. But I am not a connoisseur in that topic just to make that clear. And to your question about bread variations, I would like to include the yellow bread, the print bread, or ftut as it is called in Nables. They use it to celebrate the woman — a girl, when she first becomes a woman and gets her first period. It has many seeds in it, like anise, fennel, sesame, nigella some people add cheese to it and lots of olive oil. It's very nourishing. One of the occasions for which this bread is baked is the first period, but as well for the first day of Eid which is the day of breaking the Ramadan fast. In the morning they have it for breakfast — it's for the beginning of the winter, the end of the olive oil harvest season. And there are different other kinds of bread.

We have the mkhamart, which is a bread that rises and also has many seeds in it. We have the taboon, which is cooked in the ovens over fire, we have the shraq which is a very flat bread cooked over saj. In the Palestinian kitchen, many dishes rely

on bread, like our national dish, the musakhan — taboon bread topped with onion and sumac and chicken. We have many, many recipes that use left-over bread, like all the fatteh. All kinds of dishes that use fatteh — it's basically left-over breads — that are soaked in liquid and then topped with something like fattet makdous which is a recycling of the old bread soaked with yoghurt and tomato sauce and fried eggplants. There are meat dishes that use left-over bread like fattet djaj which is the bread soaked in chicken broth and then rice and topped with yoghurt and tahini and chicken. There are many desserts also that use left over bread, like an ancient recipe called khoya which is old taboon bread soaked with cinnamon sauce topped with nuts and tahini. There is also eish il saraya that use the bread that is more white, the name of this dessert literally translates to "life of the palaces", because, you know, it uses white bread that was not affordable for many people, so they would take this bread and then recycle it with caramelized sugar syrup and then top it with clotted cream and nuts and boiled water.

JZ Within your practice, what symbolism does bread have in relation to giving and sharing?

MB I mean, bread has a very strong significance in all cultures of the world, Palestine included, and we have many kinds of bread that we use on a daily basis, but others that are for celebrations. On my tables at *Palestine Hosting Society* there is always the ftout bread, the yellow bread with a very beautiful design that uses wooden moulds. They were designed a long time ago by Palestinians to signify the welcome of the new season, of the rain season, of abundance, of the celebration of the harvest. This bread is made at the end of the harvest season and for other festivities but mostly for celebrations. The mould of the ftout has those circular forms on it. Each circle signifies the first moment the raindrop touches the soil, how it creates a circle on the ground. So, it reflects this sensibility and attunement with our ancestors to the land and the seasons and the farms and how that was reflected in forms and then on bread. This looping and continuity from the farmer planting the earth, planting, creating, the wheat coming, the wheat growing and then harvesting it, using it to make flower and finally the bread, nurturing the body to go back to the land and farm again. There are other moments at my dinner performances where I use bread as a gesture, which is the breaking of the bread. I use this ancient recipe of khobz smeede, it's an olive oil bread, hollow from the inside and stuffed with bulgur or wheat mixed with cinnamon and sugar. It's super tasty, it has so many seeds and it's really delicious. This kind of stuffing is so ancient, people don't know about it anymore, it's from the Jenin and Tulkarm area.

JZ What role does the collective idea play in your work, or what unifying effect does food have on community?

MB I find the challenge of addressing diverse audiences exciting. What I want to achieve is for people to have an encounter with a part of themselves they didn't know existed. History, for the longest time, has been written by the nations and gender holding power, which usually eliminates female power from the equation. I do believe that in the last decade there has been more energy going through collective voices to reverse this suppressive narrative and discourse that was never written by the less voiced. But for collectivity to work, each person needs to be aware of themselves as part of the group rather than dissolve into it. The moment we dissolve, it becomes enslavement, leading us to forget ourselves and what we can offer as individuals that is different and unique. It is a question of equality as well. I believe that collectivity created by women is different than that created by men — the way we cook the food, sit and eat and talk together, the way we communicate and analyze things, the way we respect each other. There is less ego in the process and the actions. That's why for me the kitchen is a space of empowerment. The way we move through it, process and respect the food: we channel energy. So, I believe

in collectivity, but one that is not patriarchal, one that is not selfish, one that does not have a loud voice, is not black and white. It is more tender and simple, it keeps reinventing itself. Our bodies are changing all the time. We create, share, and love. When I collect recipes — and I collect, especially since my work is on disappearing recipes, the recipes that are cooked less frequently — there are so many reasons why those dishes stopped being cooked the way they were before. Some of them are due to the fact that the map is reconfigured and people were forcibly exiled to other cities in Palestine or outside Palestine. But even at the current time there are restrictions on peoples' movement. Palestinians from the West Bank cannot move freely throughout the map, they need special permits. People in Gaza cannot leave Gaza. Although I have a Jerusalem ID under Israel, I cannot go to Gaza as a Palestinian and I need to apply for a visa every time I need to leave the country, for instance. And that has affected how recipes move. And you know, how much do we know about the food that is cooked in Galilee for instance? Or what is cooked in Gaza? And that led to many recipes becoming less known and, in time, they were forgotten. Another reason those recipes disappear is the fact that some recipes need community, they need a whole family to prepare it together, maybe they need a special occasion. Maybe it would be prepared around one big table, they all do it together, like, you know, stuffed turnips or carrots, the wine leaves, the seasonal plants... Like, before they just used to go in groups and collect wild herbs and plants and then cook together. This knowledge about plants, and this active walking, you know, is less than before. One reason is because walking is not as safe as before, because now we are surrounded by settlements and you never know when you trespass and you get shot or threatened for example. So many recipes are less cooked because of this community aspect. The extended family is a concept that is vanishing, the situation of a family sitting around one table is less and less relevant than before. At my tables, I try to reclaim the space of the table and invite people to gather to create curiosity around dishes. And, especially when I present them for Palestinians, I create those openings or those moments of encounter where a Palestinian is encountering a dish that he didn't or she didn't know, that is part of their identity. With long years of colonization and occupation, usually what the colonizer or the occupier does to the nation that they are overpowering and colonizing is to render their identity flat and make them feel that they don't have culture, that they don't have richness to create this power dynamic and this loss of identity and roots, so you can't stand for who you are because you feel in fear. And one way that has happened for the Palestinian is in the kitchen. That is why we lost so many of our recipes. So, what I am trying to do in this project is to excavate all this richness that over the years and in the constant uprooting we have lost, and we are trying to bring it to the table. So, when Palestinians are at the table, and they are presented different dishes of the Palestinian kitchen that they didn't know existed, somehow they touch those aspects of their identity and there is a sense of pride and reclamation. Somehow you become more curious of your Palestinian-ness because the Palestinian kitchen is one thing, and then you realize that there is whole layer of knowledge that is part of your ancestry. This moment of curiosity and exploration becomes empowerment. And at that moment, the Palestinian identity expands, because there are aspects of it that they didn't know existed. And for me, it's through one dish or one food story or one food practice — one way of reversing colonialism — that can be a way of reclaiming one's culture and reclaiming the richness — expanding the way you see yourself, your culture — that the occupation has flattened while at the same time appropriating and stealing those dishes without saying that those dishes belong to people. And that those people — Palestinians — have stories around it.