An Interview with Erez Komarovsky, Erez Breads, Israel

Few people have influenced the way Israelis eat as much as Erez Komarovsky, whose bakery, namesake restaurant, and ubiquitous Erez Breads shops and cafés have made “Erez” a household name. In the late 1980s Komarovsky, an Israeli-born classically trained chef, landed in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he embraced the ethnic foods and organic garden-to-table approach that infused the local culinary scene. Back in Israel, in 1996, Komarovsky opened the Erez Breads bakery in Herzliya, just north of Tel Aviv, introducing an expansive selection of artisanal breads that immediately captivated a nation accustomed to standard commodity loaves. Soon afterwards, he launched the Erez Breads restaurant and cafés, as showcases for his highly personal interpretation of California cuisine. For his menus Komarovsky drew from the bounty of healthful, indigenous ingredients and local ethnic cuisines available in Israel, securing for them, for the first time, a place in the contemporary culinary canon.

Today, the Erez Breads bakery produces about fifteen types of whole-grain and organic handcrafted breads, with seasonal offerings that might include fresh garlic in the spring, fig and Roquefort in the summer, and Jerusalem artichoke in the winter. His signature breads, along with cakes, cookies, and a handpicked selection of boutique olives, cheeses, and Israeli wines, are sold in over thirty Erez Breads shops throughout the country. The shops are often paired with Erez Breads cafés that offer light fare, such as a sandwich of lamb kebab, tahina, grilled tomato spread, rashad (cress), and tomato salad wrapped in a large pita; a goat cheese and sabra (cactus-fruit) salad with date honey and pistachios; and a glass of freshly squeezed pomegranate juice. His single restaurant, also in Herzliya, is equipped with a tabun (wood-burning clay oven) and offers full meals throughout the day and into the evening. Offerings on last summer’s menu included zucchini/Parmesan fritters with pistachios, sprouts, and goat-milk yogurt seasoned with garlic and mint; and a melon soup with almond cream semifreddo and yogurt sorbet.

Komarovsky recently moved to a small community in the Galilee, at Israel’s northern border, where he cooks, teaches, and tends his expansive organic garden of Mediterranean delights. The morning we met, he was surveying with dismay the damage wild pigs had inflicted on his garden the night before.

AR: Erez, eleven years after opening your bakery, and with branches located in nearly every corner of the country, you’ve left it all behind to move to a mountaintop in the Galilee. What prompted such a pivotal change?

EK: I haven’t entirely left the business, I’m just keeping my involvement to a minimum. I still develop the menus for each season, as well as the breads. We’re just opening a new branch in Beer Sheva, and I’ve been involved in that. But at a certain point other things became more important. I fulfilled one dream, and it was time to replace it with another. The Galilee—with its olive oils, handcrafted goat cheeses, and village markets—has always been the place I drew my inspiration from. I wanted to renew my involvement with food on an intimate level—between me and the cauliflower I pick from my garden.

AR: As a young man, you trained in France and Japan, then worked in California for many years. What were the experiences that most influenced your culinary style?

EK: The Israel I left in the early 1980s for France was a culinary wasteland. Suddenly, I was exposed to the big world and its fabulous variety of produce, seafood, cheeses. My virgin palate tasted oysters for the first time, and I drank fine wines. In France I learned the language of classical cooking, but I also realized that it was too rigid for my Middle Eastern temperament.

After returning to Israel, I understood that I couldn’t cook French food here—it wasn’t relevant. We didn’t have the butter, the cheeses, the quality of meat or poultry. If I
wanted to do something that wasn’t mediocre, I would have to create something new. I set up the Futurist Cooking Studio—after the Italian Futurist Marinetti—where we aimed to break every convention and be as provocative as possible. If beer and apricots tasted good in the summer, we would combine them in a soup.

At the time I was writing a newspaper column in the Tel Aviv equivalent of the Village Voice and was already known as an enfant terrible. I think I reached the height of provocation when I published a Yom Kippur recipe for a suckling pig in the style of the Rabbi Admor of Vishnitz [Yom Kippur is a day of fasting, and eating pork is prohibited by Jewish law. – AR]. That column elicited the most letters to the editor the newspaper ever received—overwhelmingly negative of course. But I love to tackle sacred cows, particularly when it comes to food. Food is part of culture, and culture changes when you push at its borders.

AR: What took you to Japan?

EK: One day I took a catering job for a client who was hosting the president of a Japanese seaweed-processing company. I served canapés that included seaweed and small pieces of raw fish, which was absolutely unheard of in Israel at the time. The Japanese guest came to me afterwards to express his appreciation, and being completely ignorant of Japanese etiquette, I told him that I would love to study Japanese cooking. The next thing I knew, I was a guest of

Above: Erez Komarovsky in his garden in the Galilee.
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his company in Gifu, Japan, enrolled in a course in kaiseki cuisine. Japan opened my culinary sensibilities even further—I felt like Alice in Wonderland wandering through the markets there. But cooking there was even more constricting than in France.

AR: You were in California during the late 1980s, probably one of the most exciting times for a person expanding his culinary horizons. What sent you West?

EK: After four years back in Israel, it felt too provincial and stifling. I’m also very leftwing, and it was hard for me to reconcile with the political situation at the time. Also, I wanted to fully experience my gayness. My partner had just been accepted at University of California, Berkeley, to do his doctorate, and that certainly influenced my decision.

California was revelatory. In San Francisco I fell in love with sourdough bread, with Nancy Silverton’s pizza and Acme breads. I ate Japanese food in Japantown, fresh pasta in North Beach, had my first exposure to Mexican food in the Mission. It was amazing to me how restaurants grew their own vegetables and greens—even in France you didn’t see that.

In Las Vegas I worked as a stylist on a desserts cookbook for Wolfgang Puck, and then spent three months in Sonoma with Hugh Carpenter and his wife, working on their first fusion cookbook. Hugh’s style of fusion was too complicated for my taste, but I loved the way he played with flavors. The professionalism of the chefs I met in the United States made a deep impression on me.

AR: What did you bring back to Israel from California?

EK: The realization that fusion was happening right here, among the Moroccan, the Polish, the Lebanese—all the different ethnic cuisines that already exist here—in the most natural, organic way. And I knew that despite all my training, I am above all an Israeli chef—that couscous, olive oil, and goat cheese are the ingredients closest to my heart.

When I came back I missed sourdough bread so much that I decided to create a bakery. For that, I needed to train as a baker. I went to study in Paris with Lionel Poilâne, and then back to Berkeley, where I trained at the Acme and Metropolis bakeries. It took a year before I was ready to open my bakery, and it was an immediate success.

AR: You have used your position as one of Israel’s leading chefs to advance certain political causes.

EK: A chef is also a citizen, and I’ve often felt the need to express my political beliefs through my profession. We produced a line of hand-shaped breads to benefit a human-rights organization. I was also part of a coalition that succeeded in legally banning force-feeding of geese, which effectively ended production of foie gras in Israel. I’m not a vegetarian, but I oppose the torture of animals, just as I oppose the torture of people. I won’t eat veal for the same reason.

But the achievement I’m most proud of was overturning the law prohibiting the sale of bread during Passover. We took that one all the way to the Israeli Supreme Court. This particular battle had nothing to do with provocation—it was simply an expression of my desire to live in a free and democratic country. I felt like the representative of the sane, secular sector of Israeli society.

AR: During the second Intifada, when Israeli Jews avoided patronizing Arab businesses, you came to Nazareth in solidarity and started your now-famous collaboration with chef Duhoul Sfadi of the Diana Restaurant. I was at one of those first dinners and remember how powerful it was to come to Nazareth and break bread during those difficult and fraught times.

EK: I decided that some act had to be initiated to restore trust. Diana is one of Nazareth’s oldest traditional Arab restaurants, and Duhoul grew up in that kitchen under his father’s training. He is a tremendously gifted chef, and I suggested to him that I come and cook with him. We did a week of special dinners that were a collaboration between our two cooking styles—a real meeting of the minds, and of the palates. He made Palestinian-style hummus, and I made my own version. He made his legendary kebab, and I did lamb stuffed in eggplant. The restaurant was full every night, and after a week I hosted Duhoul for another week at my restaurant in Herzliya. I think these dinners not only helped people overcome their trepidation but also raised an awareness and appreciation of the complexity and variety of traditional Arab cooking. For three years we continued this tradition, after the olive-picking season and when the wild-herb season began.

AR: You are a child of Tel Aviv. How did you become so connected to the Galilee?

EK: When I was small, my father owned an almond orchard, which was harvested by Druze families from the Galilee. During the summers I used to visit them, play with their kids, eat their food. It opened my horizons to the beauty of nature, to Druze cooking, to the Galilee. This became part of my internal culinary mythology.
AR: The Galilee has so much in common with other Mediterranean regions—the olive trees, vineyards, herds of sheep and goats. Yet the Middle Eastern influences in the region make it a true meeting point between East and West. Can you characterize the cuisine of the Galilee?

EK: I live seven hundred meters from the Lebanese border, and Lebanese cuisine is one of the finest in the Middle East. My Druze neighbors have families in Lebanon, and they stuff zucchini in exactly the same way. Until a few years ago, the border between the two countries was open. During the great immigration of the 1950s many Moroccan Jews settled here along the northern border, along with Iraqis, Kurds, and Libyans. These people of the East were familiar with olives and olive oil—they knew about gathering the plants that grow wild—and they adapted the local ingredients to their own cooking. Then, in the 1980s, a new wave of people settled in the Galilee looking to live closer to nature—this is when the boutique goat-cheese makers got their start. I think what is in common here in the Galilee is a deep connection with nature that, unlike in other parts of the country, hasn’t been lost. I have neighbors who grow their own wheat and then mill it to make flour, bulgur, and fariki. In winter, they forage the hills for all different types of wild herbs and mushrooms. In the summer and fall, when the fruits are at their peak, they make preserves and distill a kind of brandy, which the Moroccans call machiya and the Tunisians, bucha. Both are made from figs. There isn’t a tradition here of eating in restaurants—people still cook at home. They raise their own lambs and chickens and have a steady supply of organic, free-range meat and eggs. They eat goat, which you won’t find in the center of the country. And they still hunt here—for wild pig, partridge, and porcupines. And of course the Galilee is Israel’s own Napa Valley. The wines made from grapes grown in this terroir are some of the best in the country.

AR: What have you been serving at your table lately?

EK: I just made a soup out of beans from my garden that had dried on the stalk. I made hummus with white beans and a sauce of pickled lemons and honey. And I’m doing lentils with lamb. Eggplants are in season now, so I’m cooking those. I also like to cook with fariki—which is roasted green wheat—cooking it with chicken and maluchiya [an edible wild plant – AR]. I’ve also been experimenting with cooking baby goats from my neighbor’s herd.

AR: And what kind of inspiration is feeding the baker within you?

EK: I built a tabun here and collect oak branches from the hills to feed it. It makes a smoky bread—different from what comes out of stone ovens. When I have a lot of chard or squash in the garden, it makes its way into the bread—naturally, without my even thinking about it.

AR: What other projects are you working on these days?

EK: I have a weekly column in Globes [Israel’s financial newspaper – AR], where I write about food and cooking. Also, I’ve been teaching and would like to do more of that. I have over twenty years of experience and a deep love of cooking with vegetables. I’d like to inspire people with that—to help them see that it’s all here right in front of them, that they don’t need imported foods. After so many years in business I see it as a kind of tikkun [the Jewish concept of healing the world – AR].

And I want to cook. Most chefs, when they reach a certain level of success, don’t touch food any more. They think about concepts, PR. The business overpowers you, and you’re sucked into the system. It was a profound statement for me to come back to the basics, to my true love of food.

AR: Israel’s leading food magazine recently called you “The Prophet of the New Israeli Cuisine.” What is the vision from here on the mountain?

EK: [laughs] In the last three hundred years, there was only one “successful” French Revolution, one Russian Revolution, and one California Cuisine Revolution. The big changes are made in the beginning, and then they are followed by small, evolutionary stages. Now we will start to see more and more organic vegetable growers and organic foods. Arab and other ethnic foods will be increasingly incorporated into the Israeli repertoire. And after decades of microwave and frozen foods, there will be a return to home cooking.

Even though Israel is such a small country, I think that regional cuisines will begin to be defined—the foods people cook in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and the Galilee are very distinct. Now I am more interested in what is happening here, in Israel, than anywhere else.●