Preparations began the evening before the feast. Dishwashers in the restaurant’s kitchen passed word to their friends from the neighboring alleyway stalls, inviting them to come and see the amazing spectacle—a thirty-three-pound pig, specially ordered from a slaughterhouse in the North. As the spectators watched, a doctor used a surgical scalpel to cut open the pig’s belly and extract its bones. He removed the inner organs to grind for a sauce. Early the next morning, a restaurant cook lifted the pig from the refrigerator, gently cradling its deboned carcass against his chest, and laid it on the kitchen table.

“It’s like an artist’s canvas,” the doctor told the cooks gathered around him, watching as he anointed the pig’s belly with a scarlet sauce made from the pig’s innards. “The perfect base for absorbing any flavor.” He ground thigh meat from a second pig and seasoned it with fennel and red wine to make eleven pounds of plump sausages. The doctor packed the sausages into the pig’s gaping belly and stitched up the entire package with his nimble surgeon’s hands. After trussing the stuffed pig, he placed it in the altar of the oven to roast.

As evening approached, waiters set a baronial table under heavy interior stone arches built in the nineteenth century to honor Jaffa’s Ottoman governor. The restaurant hosting this special event normally offers a whole range of ingredients that are considered aphrodisiac—oysters, truffles, caviar, and champagne jelly. But this evening’s twenty guests were particularly stirred. At the appointed hour the kitchen doors swung open to reveal the doctor, smiling like a proud father as he presented the porchetta— the stuffed pig— roasted to golden perfection, with crispy cracklings. Applause broke out as the doctor again plunged a sacrificial
Eli Landau was born in Tel Aviv in 1949, a year after the birth of the Israeli state, to Polish-Jewish parents who had survived the Holocaust. That year the impoverished fledgling state announced an austerity regime, including the rationing of food and consumer products. Coupons could be traded at grocery stores for bread and the live carp necessary for making gefilte fish. Everyone who could grow vegetables in the backyard or breed chickens for eggs, as well as turkeys and geese. “In my childhood Tel Aviv was a kind of outpost of Lodz, where Polish, Yiddish, and German were spoken,” Landau recalls. “My father was religious, with strict beliefs. Simple to apply, they principally addressed eating customs. Morning and evening, he held, a Jew should eat a slice of bread, lebeniyah (yogurt drained through cheesecloth), and herring. Lunch—which inevitably began with boiling-hot soup and a shot of schnapps—was the main meal.”

Much has been written about Judaism’s proscription against eating pork, which the philosopher Maimonides maintained was in response to the pig as a disease-carrying animal (Guide to the Perplexed, 3:48). By contrast, in The knife into the pig, exposing the hidden treasure of sausages inside. Set on a tray, the pig’s head became the centerpiece of the long table, its bronze snout presiding over the feast in its honor. The pig, nature’s gift to humanity.

If the porchetta dinner had been held in central Italy, the birthplace of this traditional dish, it would not have been considered exceptional or worthy of documenting. But this porchetta was prepared in Israel, where most people consider eating pork taboo. The feast was held at Yoezer Wine Bar in Jaffa—a Muslim-Jewish town, home to the two great religions that prohibit the consumption of pork. Here, the pig’s meat, head, and skin are more than just cookery ingredients. They are loaded cultural symbols that for thousands of years have sparked religious, social, and political disputes. They still have the ability to set this volatile region alight.

Guests at the dinner, all friends of Dr. Eli Landau, had come to celebrate the launch of his new book, the first collection of pork recipes ever published in Hebrew. Israel’s major publishers had unanimously refused to print the book, so in January 2010 Landau published it himself (even then some of the chain bookstores declined to sell it). Its title, The White Book, is a play on words: “white meat” is the colloquial Hebrew term for the forbidden meat, while “white paper” refers to the restrictive regulations issued by the British when they ruled Palestine in the 1920s.
Sacred Cow and the Abominable Pig anthropologist Marvin Harris ascribes the Jewish dietary regulations to practical economic and ecological reasons. In The Bible Unearthed, archaeologists Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman argue that the prohibition was a reaction against the encounter with other Middle Eastern peoples and religions, the Jewish people’s attempt to differentiate themselves.

Once Israeli society began to crystallize, the issue of eating pork became central to the task of creating a national identity. For thousands of years pigs had been raised—chiefly by Christians—in the geographic region now occupied by the Israeli state. In the 1950s, following several tempestuous parliamentary and public debates over preserving Jewish heritage and the democratic principles of freedom of religion and occupation, Israel’s parliament, the Knesset, gave local authorities jurisdiction over the problem. Most cities hastened to pass bylaws restricting the raising of pigs and the sale of pork; Tel Aviv, today the proud symbol of Israeli secularism, was the first to do so. In her book Outlawed Pigs, Daphne Barak-Erez notes that although the lawmakers belonged mainly to religious parties, the initiative was supported equally by secular Israelis, almost all of whom had been brought up with the historical Jewish taboo against the pig. Israelis of all political and religious persuasions sought to unite around this national ethos.

“One morning in the early 1950s,” Landau writes in the low-key introduction to his book, “a young man with a blue number tattooed on his forearm knocked at the door of my parents’ home. He’d come to thank my mother, who had rescued him in the Lodz Ghetto, years before. Mother now had her own child, who because of the austerity program, or poverty, or maybe just genetics, was especially small and scrawny. The next day our visitor was back, with a small package tied with string. ‘It’s sausage for the child, to help him grow,’ he mumbled with embarrassment. ‘It was sausage that saved me there.’ Nobody ever mentioned the name of the sausage, which the religious young man sent every week to help the child’s development.”

It wasn’t until the early 1960s that the grown child discovered the ingredients of that mysterious sausage, which he had been fed in measured doses every week. “In a rundown events hall, where my bar mitzvah was being celebrated, the messenger bent down and whispered the secret of the sausage in my ear: ‘It’s cooked ham,’ he murmured. A couple of years later, when I was acquiring the joys of the palate, I roasted the crummy meat bars of the period, the taste of that sausage still engraved on my taste buds, hoping to recapture my childish gastronomic joy. I would order a ‘pork steak,’ but to no avail. Until one evening, a restaurant grill man took pity on me: ‘Hey kid, just ask for white steak’—and there my obsessive search ended.”

The code name “white meat” allowed the Hebrew language to remain unsullied by pork. Throughout the 1960s “white steak” usually meant filet or neck of pork, served in pita bread with tahini sauce and sliced tomatoes. For many secular Israelis it was a culinary dream. Good-quality beef was hard to find, and the ban on pork simply intensified the aura of secrecy and longing surrounding it. After all, thousands of years ago a biblical scribe had commented that “stolen waters are sweet.”

Israeli legislators did not fail to notice the increasing demand for pork. As lawmakers debated the Pork Law in 1962, the mood in the Knesset turned stormy. Opponents described the legislation as “an attempt to assassinate law and conscience,” but Knesset member Menachem Begin, later to become prime minister, remarked that conscience is not located in the stomach. Conscience has nothing to do with eating, he declared, or with one sort of meat or another. Begin used gastronomic pleasure as a way to invoke national consciousness, the collective memory that had taken shape over centuries, and the struggle for the young nation’s survival. To sway his fellow parliamentarians in favor of a pork ban he summoned the spirits of Moses and Ahad Ha’Am, the Hasmonean Revolt against the Romans, pogroms in the shtetls of Europe, and every Jew who had ever sanctified the Holy Name through blood and death. The Pork Prohibition Law passed. It banned the raising and slaughter of pigs throughout Israel, except for in a few localities with a Christian majority, and in scientific research institutes. Several existing pig farms on kibbutzes managed to redefine themselves as “scientific research facilities,” but for the most part the law was rapidly, and strictly, enforced.

Some years later, in 1970, Eli Landau left Israel to study medicine in Italy. Destiny—some would say divine intervention—took him to Modena, the city where U.S. troops had brought his mother back to life after rescuing her from the Mauthausen death camp. Landau’s encounter with Italy’s great culinary traditions and its magnificent ingredients—pasta, Parmesan cheese, and prosciutto—were transformative. Seven years later, back in Israel, Landau began working as a cardiologist in a major Israeli hospital. At the same time, the gastronomic knowledge he had acquired in Italy propelled him into a second career as one of Israel’s first food writers.

For many Israelis the Pork Law was not stringent enough, and over the decades there were repeated attempts to enact a total ban on the raising, slaughter, and sale of pigs and pork products in Israel. The 1977 political revolution that
thrust right-wing parties to power intensified the pressure that religious parties brought to bear on the various legal institutions. Tensions over the pork issue and legislation based on the halacha (Jewish law) sought by the religious parties exacerbated the previously quiescent divide between secular and religious groups. A small minority of religious Israelis used violent methods to make their point, such as demonstrating and setting fire to stores that sold pork.

The Russian immigrants who arrived in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union again woke the lion from his lair by opening dozens of nonkosher delicatessens throughout Israel. For decades these newcomers had been cut off from Jewish traditions in their homeland. They were used to eating pork and continued to do so in Israel as an unremarkable, everyday act. Because their impact on established Israeli society was limited, the Russian immigrants did not cause a cultural or gastronomic revolution in Israeli eating patterns. Nevertheless, pork and pork products became more widely available than ever.

In response, religious political parties sought to outlaw the sale of pork and close down the delicatessens, but they were stymied by a 2004 Supreme Court ruling. The religious parties had greater success with the Meat Law, which they pushed through the Knesset in 1994. This law prohibits the importation of nonkosher meats into Israel. Although locally made pork sausages are available at delicatessens and local restaurants, and foodies can occasionally delight in smuggled prosciutto di Parma, jamón, coppa, and salami di Milano, the importation and sale of delicacies remains illegal—yet another absurdity in the chronicles of the pig in Israel. For decades these newcomers had been cut off from Jewish traditions in their homeland. They were stymied by a 2004 Supreme Court ruling. The religious parties had greater success with the Meat Law, which they pushed through the Knesset in 1994. This law prohibits the importation of nonkosher meats into Israel. Although locally made pork sausages are available at delicatessens and local restaurants, and foodies can occasionally delight in smuggled prosciutto di Parma, jamón, coppa, and salami di Milano, the importation and sale of delicacies remains illegal—yet another absurdity in the chronicles of the pig in Israel.

Israel currently has twenty-eight pig-breeding farms, most of them under the jurisdiction of the Christian villages Ma’ilya and Iblin in the North. Although it is legal to raise pigs in this region, the farms are hidden away behind high walls and coils of barbed wire. The farmers say they are protecting their herds against theft, but it is hard not to wonder whether a policy of “out of sight, out of mind” is at work here. In contrast to practices on pig farms elsewhere, these farmers use primitive methods, and the farms are intolerably overcrowded due to the limited space they have been allocated. Although authorities at the Agriculture Ministry speak of reform, they admit that the only reform possible in today’s political climate is to reduce the number of animals raised. Off the record, breeders accuse government agencies of methodically harassing them and erecting countless obstacles in terms of insurance, waste removal, and infrastructure. Since pig farmers have no powerful lobby, as other kinds of farmers do, it is close to impossible to improve their situation. “We are an oppressed minority,” one farmer says. Most refuse to be interviewed, out of fear that even mentioning their existence—so disputed in Jewish and Muslim populations—could set off a new wave of protests.

These farms supply the entire amount of pork consumed in Israel, which comes to 160,000 to 170,000 pigs a year; despite the growth in the pork-eating population (due to Russian immigration), the consumption rate remains stable. Even though the national consensus around the Pork Law has weakened somewhat, and some people take issue with the law’s implicit antidemocratic coercion, the taboo against pork is not tied solely to a religious context. Many Israelis perceive the pig as a symbol of hatred of the Jews and refuse to consider it an acceptable source of food. The story of Hannah and her seven sons, who preferred to die at the hands of the Greeks and sanctify God’s name rather than taste pork, as well as Holocaust survivors’ testimonies of Nazi soldiers forcing them to eat pork as an act of humiliation, are embedded in the school curriculum and have become part of the Israeli heritage.

Illustrating the exceptional attitude toward pork is the fact that while many secular Israelis eat seafood or meat cooked with milk (two other biblical prohibitions in kosher law), they refuse to eat pork. In high-end celebrity-chef restaurants, most of which are not kosher, menus feature seafood flown in from around the world—but not pork. The old steak bars have vanished from the local restaurant scene, along with pork steak. In contemporary Israel, eschewing pork remains a mark of Israeli identity. And until now no one has ever dared to consider a book of pork recipes.

On the face of it, the respectable Dr. Landau seems like an improbable trailblazer, hardly someone expected to enter this fray. At the beginning of the new millennium he had joined forces with Haim Cohen, an extremely popular and groundbreaking chef in the new Israeli cuisine. Together they wrote two bestselling kosher cookbooks, as well as a weekly recipe feature for the weekend supplement of Haaretz. Despite the newspaper’s image as the bastion of Israel’s secular left, their joint column, like their books, features only kosher recipes. So why would Landau write a guide to the various parts of the pig and create seventy-five recipes based on them? The recipes in his White Book draw inspiration from European culinary traditions, especially those from the Mediterranean, which feature ingredients and flavors similar to those in the local Israeli cuisine. “My book is a whisper,” says Landau, “not a shout, not some sort of provocative defiance. It’s simply based on love of meat, and the belief that culturally and commercially, this book has a place in the Land of Israel.”