Can the Food of Our Enemies Become Good Food?

How did Palestinian food become good food for Israelis?

There is no question that the relationship Israelis have with Palestinians is complex, to say the least. Yet, dishes like falafel and hummus, which have undoubtedly Arab roots, are now considered part of the Israeli culinary repertoire; sometimes they are even labeled as Israeli national dishes. How can the food of an enemy become edible, and even a source of national pride?

As pointed out in the introduction, good food is not only defined in terms of nutrition but also in terms of morality and, therefore, of ownership. Palestinian food went through a process of denationalization and appropriation in order to become good food for Israelis. In other words, Palestinian food became good food by losing its label of Palestinian, and by simply becoming “Arab” food. In order to become good food for Israelis, it changed its national and moral connotations. Palestinian food was given a regional label instead of a national one, making it edible for those Israelis who were not willing to accept the existence of a Palestinian nation.

This process of “reinvention” not only denationalized the food, but also the cooks who have to possess certain characteristics that make them acceptable and good in order to successfully sell their food.

The relationship between Palestinian and Israeli food began even before the State of Israel was established. The first Jewish settlers to arrive in Pre-Mandate Palestine from Europe not only attempted to build a new nation, but also to construct a unique and collective Hebrew identity that highlighted their connection between the land and their new inhabitants, as well as among the different Jewish communities that were arriving. The new immigrants had different diets that corresponded to the historical trajectory of their community and they had only religious dietary restrictions in common. In order to construct a national culture and identity, the authorities used different tactics to homogenize the population, including their diets. The authorities tried to avoid the inclusion of Arab local traditions, but the admiration the pioneers had for the locals’ culinary traditions, and the need to learn to cook with new local ingredients, made this impossible.

The inclusion of Palestinian dishes and ingredients in the Jewish-Israeli diet was a violent, complex process. This complicated path, by which local Arab food became good food for Israel, is what Richard Wilk denominates a process of creolization. Wilk applies the term to the case of Belize, to describe what was “hardly a smooth blending process. Instead, it was work, compounded of appropriation and resistance, full of ambivalence and ambiguity” (Wilk 2006: 106). In Israel, the enemy’s food became good food by substituting ingredients and disguising others, making them kosher, changing the names of dishes and their national belonging, in some cases not only by denationalizing them but by giving them a new Jewish character.

This creolization process is ongoing. Although many left-wing Israelis will now frequent Palestinian restaurants (managed by Jewish Israelis or Palestinians), others continue to prefer calling it Arab food. In this case, Palestinian food only becomes good food by hiding its national origins and giving it the more neutral, although still controversial, label of “Arab” food. Therefore, in order to label Palestinian food as good food its moral dimension becomes fundamental. For example, to be considered good food, cooks and restaurateurs should be perceived as friendly toward the State of Israel. Aboulafia’s, a Palestinian-owned bakery established in Jaffa in 1879, is particularly popular among Jewish Israelis who visit the area. The bakery’s popularity resides in the perception of some Israelis—including most of the participants of my research—that the owners of this bakery are loyal to the State of Israel. According to one of my interlocutors, the owners were not only loyal during the Palestinian intifadas (uprisings), but they are also Christian. In fact, Aboulafia is owned by a Muslim family, but in the eyes of my interlocutor, it is easier for a Christian Arab to be a “good Arab” than for a Muslim one (Mamdani 2002).
Although the political preferences and the religion of a cook, or owner of a food business, are not the only aspects that mark the transformation of Palestinian food into good food for Israelis, they play a key role for part of the population. Through a process of creolization that goes as far as to disguise religion, what were once considered national dishes by Palestinians came to be Israel’s national dishes and, with time, perhaps even their origins will be forgotten.

REFERENCES