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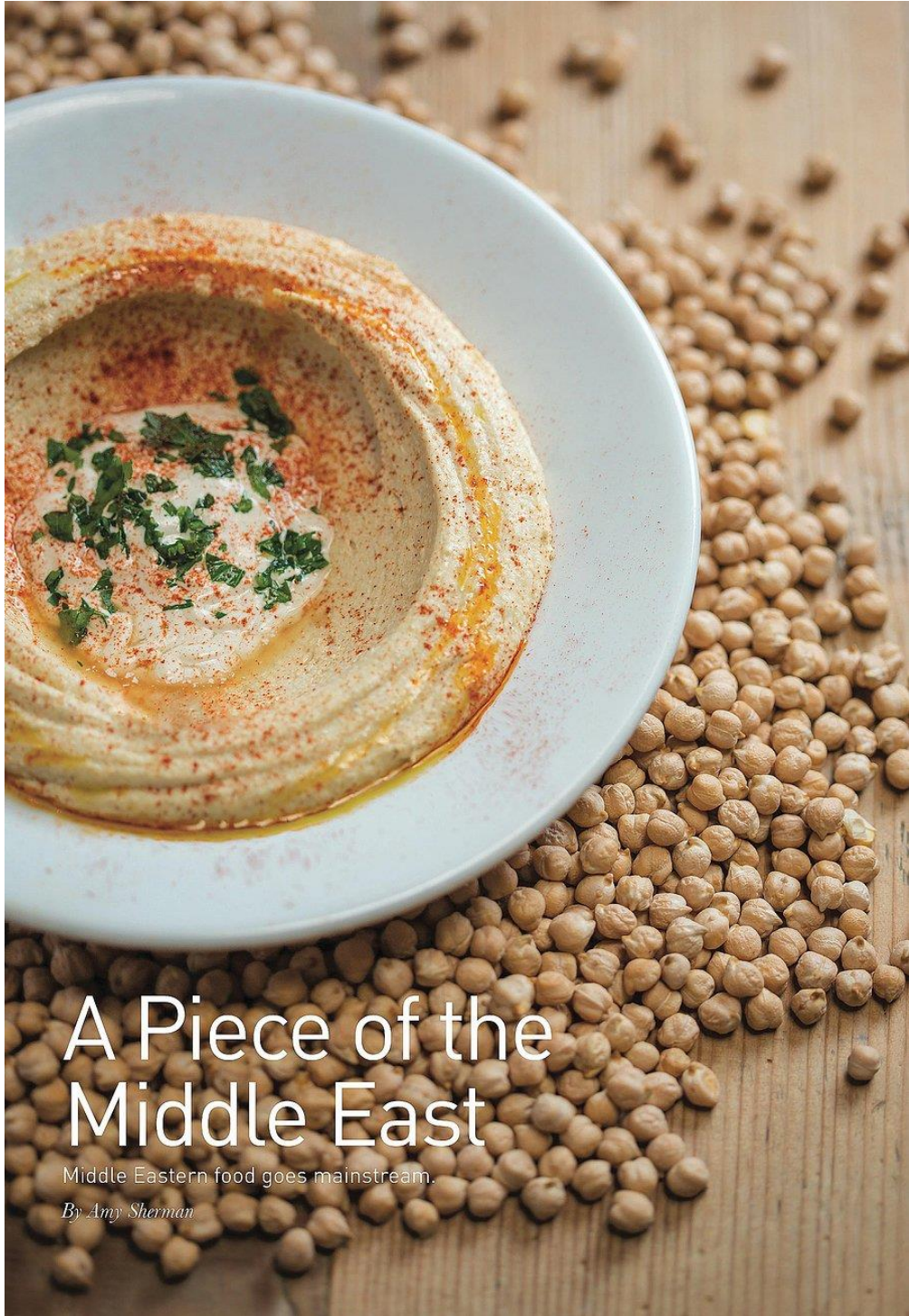
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THE MANY FLAVORS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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A Piece of the Middle East

Middle Eastern food goes mainstream.

By Amy Sherman

WITH BOLD SPICES, healthy vegetables and tantalizing flavors and textures that resonate with Bay Area tastes for all things fresh and seasonal, it's no wonder that Middle Eastern food is having a moment. Offering everything from pita and hummus to foie gras and lobster, it's a cuisine that spans a wide range of experiences, ingredients and price points. Locally, the latest Middle Eastern bakeries and restaurants are also gaining critical and national attention.

So where and when did the trend begin? Perhaps the answer can be found across the pond, with Ottolenghi, a partnership between a Palestinian and an Israeli chef who introduced London to the flavors of their native Jerusalem. After opening several restaurants, they published a series of cookbooks that quickly became bestsellers. In 2011, while the Ottolenghi books were taking America by storm, Israeli technologist and serial start-up entrepreneur Oren Dobronsky opened his first casual spot, Oren's Hummus in Palo Alto.

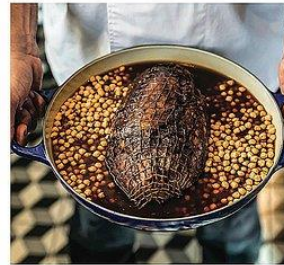
Dobronsky longed for authentic hummus, and he wasn't afraid to call his food Israeli. For a long time Middle Eastern food was found mostly in delis and hole-in-the-wall spots, and generally referred to as Mediterranean, rather than identified with a country or a more specific region or culture. Oren's Hummus now has four locations including one that opened this year in San Francisco. The focal point is rich and creamy hummus that is offered in a variety of styles and with many different toppings — some traditional and some more creative, ranging from braised lamb to mushrooms. The menu also includes other Israeli dishes such as chicken schnitzel, fatush salad and Romanian eggplant, each reflecting the varied heritage of modern Israelis. Dobronsky's partner and Executive Chef David Cohen explains that the recent popularity of Middle Eastern food is due to the chefs and restaurateurs providing an authentic interpretation of the cuisine. Says Cohen, "It's become more mainstream because it's approachable, an inherently healthy cuisine and an enjoyable way to eat."

Isaac Yosef was another Israeli missing the flavors of home, and in particular baked goods. He recounts his frustration with American bakeries that emphasize sweet rather than savory baked goods. He partnered with another Israeli, a fourth generation baker he serendipitously met

at a Hannukah party, to open Frena Bakery, offering what he found lacking in the Bay Area, including freshly baked pita bread, challah, delicate and savory filled sambusaks and burekas and Jerusalem style bagels, in addition to jam-filled doughnuts called sufganiyot, traditionally served at Hannukah. The response was extremely positive and the South of Market bakery now sees lots of locals during the week and draws Israelis from all over the Bay Area on Sundays. Because the bakery is kosher, it's also popular with Muslims who seek out familiar foods, but want something that is equivalent to halal, as well as vegetarians and vegans who find the vast majority of the menu accessible to them. Just as Oren's Hummus has expanded, Frena Bakery is also expanding after almost two years with a new cafe-style location in the Richmond.

Yet a third spot to open recently in San Francisco from an Israeli is Sababa. Guy Eshel thought his path would be in fine dining, but after graduating from culinary school and a stint at A.Q., he noticed the lack of Middle Eastern food and that no one was using high-quality ingredients. He also says that classic items like falafel are often reheated and not cooked to order. Inspired by made-to-order fresh street food, he is committed to making everything from scratch. Like Yosef, he opened his first shop in 2016 and a second shop in 2017, both of which are located in downtown San Francisco. While his customers may be familiar with hummus, pita and falafel, they are less likely to know sabik, a tantalizing pita sandwich filled with fried eggplant, hard boiled egg, hummus, Israeli salad, cabbage, tahini, pickles and a spicy fermented mango sauce they make in house. Originally he says people didn't order it but when the word got out it became tremendously popular.

In the East Bay, two Middle Eastern restaurants from star graduate of La Cocina and James Beard-nominated chef Reem



ISRAELI DELIGHTS
[From top] Some of the delicious baked goods from Frena Bakery; marinated meat from Oren's Hummus; fresh pita bread from Oren's Hummus.

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