

SAMI TAMIMI AND TARA WIGLEY, *Falastin: A Cookbook* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2020). Pp 351. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN 9781785038723.

REVIEWED BY HARRY KASHDAN, Postdoctoral Scholar in The Global Mediterranean, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, email: kashdan.3@osu.edu



Sami Tamimi and Tara Wigley's new collection of Palestinian recipes, *Falastin*, promises a fresh look at classic Palestinian dishes. Given the recent flowering of Palestinian cookbooks – for example, Laila El-Haddad and Maggie Schmitt's *The Gaza Kitchen*, Reem Kassis' *The Palestinian Table*, and Yasmin Khan's *Zaitoun*¹ – *Falastin* wisely positions itself as a chef-driven exploration of Palestinian flavors, rather than a compendium of traditional recipes. Tamimi and Wigley set out to “shine a new light on” Palestinian cuisine (12). The heavy hitters are not absent, of course: Palestinian national dishes including *musakhan* (247), *maqlubeh* (264), and *maftoul* (267) all make appearances. Still, the text continually reminds its readers of the inventive fun to be had by “playing around” with old favorites. The recipes frequently include suggestions for revision or adaptation, often by substituting grains or seasonal vegetables, or through the addition of avocado or feta. The cookbook is divided into sections for “Breakfast,” “Snacks, Spreads, and Sauces,” “Veggie Sides and Salads,” “Soups,” “Veggie Mains,” “Fish,” “Meat,” “Breads and Pastries,” and “Sweets.” At regular intervals, short narrative sections introduce readers to Palestinian cooks and food activists while highlighting elements of contemporary Palestinian culture.

Tamimi, head chef of the Ottolenghi delis in London and a partner in the Ottolenghi business, is, with Yotam Ottolenghi (who contributes the foreword to *Falastin*), coauthor of the *Jerusalem* and *Ottolenghi* cookbooks.² Wigley is also a frequent Ottolenghi collaborator, and is coauthor with Ottolenghi of *Ottolenghi Simple*.³ Readers will observe substantial overlaps between the styles and flavors of *Falastin* and prior Ottolenghi-world offerings, and three recipes are lifted directly or with minimal alteration from Tamimi's

earlier texts.⁴ At times, *Falastin* veers close to redundancy with texts previously produced by the sprawling Ottolenghi enterprise. Other recipes, however, push dishes readers have seen before into entirely new territory; the three tabbouleh recipes in *Falastin* (102–4), for example, differ substantially from one another and from the tabbouleh presented in *Jerusalem*.⁵ Such examples live up to the text's mission of refreshing Palestinian traditions and staples for contemporary palates – including, perhaps, those molded by previous Ottolenghi cookbooks.

Where *Falastin*'s promise to make the old new again truly comes to fruition is in the “Breads and Pastries” and “Sweets” sections at the volume's end. The “Sweet Tahini Rolls” are an exciting spin on pastries like cinnamon rolls (287), and the “Sumac Onion and Herb Oil Buns” gorgeously showcase traditional sumac onions on a new canvas. The “Sweets,” many contributed by Bahraini chef Noor Murad, are deliciously inventive. The “Chocolate and Qahwa Flour-Free Torte” (317), “Labneh Cheesecake with Roasted Apricots, Honey, and Cardamom” (322), and “Muhallabieh with Cherries and Hibiscus Syrup” (327) remix core flavors from the Palestinian pantry in playful new forms.

Midway through *Falastin*, a narrative section introduces us to two Palestinian restaurateurs in Israel, one in Akka, the other in Nazareth. The narration suggests two political poles for Palestinians working in the food industry: one chef adamantly refuses to discuss politics; the other openly rails against the bureaucratic and political obstacles his business faces. The juxtaposition of the two chefs' stories raises the question of where *Falastin*, an English-language cookbook whose first author is an expatriate Palestinian living in London, falls along this continuum of Palestinian political speech. In the introduction, the authors seem to shy away from politics, writing, “Our aim with *Falastin* is to tread the fine line between paying heed to the situation on one hand and remembering, at the same time, that our book is first and foremost a celebration of the food and people of Palestine” (11). A brief note before the “Glossary: The Pantry and Politics of Palestine” with which the book concludes is similarly careful in its promise to “quickly and briefly inform; it does not do justice to the amount that can be said, from all perspectives, on all the various matters” (334). This hesitancy is perhaps a function of the commercial impulse which drives cookbook sales. Especially in its framing as a culinary exploration, *Falastin* remains somewhat ambivalent about the degree to which it wishes to address the

situation on the ground in Palestine, rarely equaling the direct political engagement of Laila El-Haddad and Maggie Schmitt's *Gaza Kitchen*. Still, naming Palestine, as the cookbook's title clearly does, is a vital political act and a notable corrective to charges of cultural appropriation leveled against Tamimi and Ottolenghi's coauthored *Jerusalem*. Interpolated narrative sections in *Falastin* offer regular reminders of the harsh restrictions on Palestinian daily life. Tamimi and Wigley write compellingly of *sumud* (resilience) and defiance in Palestine, tell stories about cooking and eating in refugee camps, and directly encourage readers to "buy Palestinian olive oil" (253). The tale of Battiri villagers' successful battle against Israel's plan to run the separation wall through Battir is described as "a real David-and-Goliath story (59), with Israel tellingly cast in the role of Goliath.

Absent from *Falastin*'s narrative sections is much information about Tamimi's and Wigley's own experiences of Palestine. The introduction to the text sets up a host and guide framework, with Tamimi as the former and Wigley as the latter. In the remainder of the cookbook, however, Tamimi and Wigley's personal perspectives are generally absent. After explaining that *Falastin* is Tamimi's "love letter to his country and also to his mother" (15), Tamimi's own voice largely disappears from the text, except when recipes are described as his childhood favorites. Wigley's personal impressions of Palestine and its food are similarly missing following the introduction. Clearly aware of this sense of distance, Tamimi and Wigley write, "When it comes to all things Palestinian, questions about legitimacy, ownership, and who gets to tell the story are very close to the surface. It's one of the reasons why we wanted to tell lots of stories – through the profiles – rather than 'a' story or 'the' story (or even 'Sami's' story)" (16). Readers looking for personal narratives about Palestinian food might be better served by Reem Kassis' *The Palestinian Table*, which continually returns to Kassis' own story of migration.⁶ In contrast, *Falastin* offers a kaleidoscopic perspective on Palestine, including stories of Palestinians from "the yogurt-making ladies of Bethlehem" (53) to fishermen struggling to earn their livelihoods in Gaza (196).

Like many contemporary cookbooks – and, especially, cookbooks from the Ottolenghi enterprise – *Falastin* is a visual treat. Jenny Zarins' food photography is vibrant and enticing, and her landscape photography warmly observes Palestine through a dusty filter. Olive trees are omnipresent, and a particularly affecting group of photographs documents the intimate connections between natural

and urban landscapes (e.g., 2–3, 17, 60–61). A shot of the Israeli separation wall following the book's final recipe finds two boys playing handball against the barrier, which is decorated in several places with graffiti reading, in English, "make hummus, not walls" (332–33).

Falastin explores the possibilities for innovation within a largely standardized national cuisine, and succeeds in finding such novelty especially in its recipes for breads and pastries. Although the lack of overtly personal or political content is sometimes frustrating, careful readers will find compelling stories of *sumud* and resilience in contemporary Palestine within this chef-driven cookbook. At its best, *Falastin* prompts us to think critically about the definition and evolution of national dishes in a unique context, and suggests exciting new culinary terrain to explore within the traditional Palestinian pantry.

NOTES

¹ Laila El-Haddad and Maggie Schmitt, *The Gaza Kitchen: A Palestinian Culinary Journey* (Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2012); Reem Kassis, *The Palestinian Table* (London: Phaidon, 2017); Yasmin Khan, *Zaitoun: Recipes from the Palestinian Kitchen* (New York: Norton, 2018).

² Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi, *Jerusalem: A Cookbook* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2012); Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi, *Ottolenghi: The Cookbook* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2008, 2013).

³ Yotam Ottolenghi and Tara Wigley, *Ottolenghi Simple: A Cookbook* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2018).

⁴ See "Hummus," 36, cf. *Jerusalem*, "Basic Hummus," 114; "Na'ama's Buttermilk Fattoush," 99, cf. *Jerusalem*, "Na'ama's Fattoush," 29; "Cauliflower and Cumin Fritters with Mint Yogurt," cf. *Ottolenghi*, "Cauliflower and Cumin Fritters with Lime Yogurt," 50.

⁵ Ottolenghi and Tamimi, *Jerusalem*, 85.

⁶ Kassis, *The Palestinian Table*.