

# Australian chef seeks recipe for coexistence in Galilee

Paul Nirens believes food can serve a larger purpose than only satisfying appetites. His Galileat venture aims to bring together the parts of Israeli society that normally don't mix.

By Rotem Maimon | Feb. 23, 2015 | 3:20 AM



Olives and Labaneh prepared by Suhalia Ghanem, a Druze cook in the Galilee village of Maghar. Photo by Rotem Maimon

It's 11 A.M. on Shabbat, at the gas station by the entrance to Maghar (a Druze-Muslim-Christian village in Galilee). Four Canadians, two Americans and four bleary-eyed Israelis are standing around, listening to a smiling tour guide who enthusiastically briefs them with a slight Australian accent.

He tells them about Suhalia Ghanem, the Druze woman we are about to meet, and the cow's tongue she cut in her yard this morning in honor of her expected guests. Suhalia invites us to sit in her living room and begins telling us about herself, her children, the leaves she collects and local Druze food, as well as a woman's role in the kitchen.

Words soon give way to action. Suhalia spreads the squash, rice and grape leaves on the table and explains the importance of stuffed foods in the Druze kitchen, the oil from the olives that grew in her family grove, and the secret of the bloom. Suhalia speaks in Hebrew and Arabic, while Paul Nirens (our smiling guide) translates the Galilean exactitudes and nuances into English.

So, what does an Australian tour guide have to do with Suhalia from Maghar?

Nirens is the driving force, guide and founder of Galileat. He was always interested in food, he says, growing up Down Under in a foodie family. His father was a chef, owning a restaurant in Melbourne, and he himself worked as a chef. Galileat's story actually begins in Umbria, Italy, at a local cooking course some five years ago. The participants at a home-cooking course there did not understand why the Israeli-Australian chef wasn't inviting people into his home to teach them cooking.



Suhalia Ghanem in her Galilee kitchen. Photo by Rotem Maimon

Everyone does Western cooking, and Nirens says he doesn't have any advantage in this area. However, teaching local food – whether it be Umbrian or Galilean – is not only tasty but also important. So, two years ago, the idea hatched in Umbria led to his new venture, at the center of which is the range of Galilean cooking. Nirens says these Galilean cooking courses essentially make participants familiar with Arab food.

According to Nirens, Galilean cuisine is both food born in the Galilee and food made in the Galilee. He is constantly expanding the circle of people with whom he works. He cites a woman who makes Ethiopian food, but notes that in the Galilee her food takes on a local character. The events began strictly with Arab food, because the Galilee's deepest roots are Arab. Nirens says that, regrettably, Jews have yet to develop authentic Jewish Galilean food.

### **Wild about wild plants**

Nirens explains that Galilean food is first and foremost food that originates in the Galilee – such as freekeh, the toasted green wheat that is grown and harvested in the Galilee and used in almost every local meal. He adds that even in his home cooking, when he puts in endive and wild spinach from his garden, it is Galilean food. Nirens says it is hard to definitively define, but to him it seems there aren't many other regions in Israel that use so many wild plants as mallow, endive and spinach as in the Galilee. One also sees it in the dishes - the mujaddara that people eat in the north only comes with bulgur and not rice, as in other places. It's probably a sign of the Galilee.

You'll find fatayer – a filled pastry with wild za'atar (hyssop) or beet leaves that Nirens considers Galilean – in every corner, even though Arabs make fatayer everywhere. Even in the Galilee the recipes change from house to house, and there are differences between villages, whether each place may reflect a Lebanese or Syrian influence.



A plate of greens, Galilee-style. Photo by Rotem Maimon

Between a tour of the stunning Arabeh souk or a tour collecting wild plants (which became prominent features during the current winter), in which participants learn about unprotected wild plants and then cook them, Nirens takes his visitors to local cooks he has met through living in the region. Druze cuisine is found in towns such as Daliat al-Carmel and Maghar, as well as Julis, Yanoah and Sajur; the Muslim kitchen is represented in Arabeh; while families in Ilabun represent the Christian side. Nirens says these food styles are not well known, and people tend to ignore or be unfamiliar with this culture. Bedouin cooking comes from Tuba-Zangariyya. From the Jewish kitchen comes the Galilean-style Tripolitanian cooking from Moshav Hazon, as well as Ethiopian cooking.

Every host demonstrates how to make local, homemade food according to the season, and at the end there is a big feast in which everyone sits around a table groaning with food.

But it quickly becomes clear that the food is just an excuse. The courses are tasty and interesting, but serve an entirely different purpose, believes Nirens. It is essentially a bridge, a means for people from the outside to see a culture they are not familiar with. He started out as a foodie interested in local food – from the farm to the table, as it's called today, where everything grew within a radius of 15 kilometers – but now sees he was wrong: cooking is a means of bringing people closer together.

What Nirens did not expect was bringing people together from opposite sides. He sees that all his hosts – those from the villages, not the big Arab cities – are suddenly in contact with John from New York or Avi from Tel Aviv, and they sit and talk: firstly about food; later about politics and society. It opens a world for them, and the learning goes both ways, he says.

In a conversation with Suhalia, our host in Maghar and one of Galileat's regular cooks, it becomes clear that an added-value of the venture is female empowerment. Women who raised children their whole lives and barely finished 12 years of school run many of the courses, and are suddenly fonts of knowledge.

People on both sides get to see Israeli society's heterogeneity, and Galileat even contributes a little to local economic growth. Still, Israeli society being what it is, the meal cannot be completely divorced from politics. Nirens says he doesn't discuss politics and openly tells his participants as much. He says he is interested in showcasing his and his neighbors' homes in the Galilee. But, he admits, it could be that if he were right wing, all his courses would look completely different.

Nirens struggles to say how recent political events and protests in Arab villages have influenced his participants or hosts. Ultimately, he says, he meets many people who tell him they want to go to a Druze home, but won't accept going to an Arab village – an attitude he finds hard to accept. Instead, he believes that now is the perfect time to hold a food course in Arabeh. "Until now, I have treated Galileat as a business, and I don't mix business with politics. However, when I started getting too many of these reactions – and I really am a businessman, not a political animal - I started to say no to such clients," admits Nirens.