

How a Tel Aviv Cook Who Never Went to Culinary School Became Philadelphia's Top Chef

Ari Miller moved to Israel to become a soldier and a politician, but found himself bouncing from kitchen to kitchen in Tel Aviv. Now the man behind blood matzo balls and bacon-wrapped hamantaschen is garnering acclaim in Philadelphia



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“Do Israelis eat lung?” The question appeared in my email inbox last winter. An old acquaintance, Jonathan Reisman, an American pediatrician, was on his way to visit Israel and was seized by an unaccountable appetite. When we met, a few months later, I discovered that the question wasn’t related to his personal taste but to a singular culinary show in which he had taken part.

The story was that Reisman and a chef friend had given a series of talks in late 2018 at the Free Library of Philadelphia, where he lives. The library has a well-equipped kitchen in its “culinary literacy” section. Each talk and demonstration focused on one of

the body's systems. Reisman explained how the system worked, the chef cooked and served a three-course meal suggested by that system. The talk about the skeleton was accompanied by a portion of calf's foot jelly, the circulatory system was reflected in ox-heart tartare, and to illustrate the muscles the chef served steak and beef tendon stew. Lungs are banned for sale as food in the United States and the respiratory system was never presented, so Reisman remained curious.

For me, the chef's name, Ari Miller, evoked a memory simultaneously pleasant and painful. About 10 years ago, Miller worked in a series of Tel Aviv kitchens. From one of them emerged the spiciest dish I had ever eaten: fried chicken. Miller, who had immigrated to Israel from a Philadelphia suburb, was part of a small community of new immigrants with whom I became friends. He was the group's bohemian gourmet, the kind of wayward urban guy who liked to make tartare from a sacred cow's heart. One day he baked a hamantasch – the triangular pasty associated with Purim – filled with pig's blood and wrapped in bacon. On another occasion he was a judge in a testicle-cooking competition.

I encountered Miller's name again this past autumn. His small Philadelphia eatery, Musi BYOB, was listed as one of the "16 best new restaurants in America" by the prestigious website Eater. At the end of 2019, Philadelphia magazine hailed Miller as the city's best chef.

How did a cook from Allenby Street, where most of his jobs ended up being, become the coolest goldfish in such a demanding aquarium? Why hadn't he stayed on to grow and become "the best chef in Tel Aviv"? What does his story – of making aliyah, reimagining Israel, and then returning to the

States – say about this generation of American Jewry? To answer those questions requires a journey and a fork, and a capacity for unusual culinary indulgences.

Corned beef and siddur

“Firing Line INC, where shooting is still affordable,” declares the sign on a gun shop above a quiet intersection in South Philadelphia. Besides rifles, the tranquil neighborhood also offers a car wash and a sandwich place that’s sealed up with plywood boards. Only an avowed optimist would look for something to eat around here. But this is the location of Musi, a restaurant named for a fishmonger named Musi Penster from Tel Aviv’s Carmel Market.

“I named the place after him because he was the first (monger/purveyor/supplier) that I had a significant relationship with. Even before I got into the professional kitchen, I was going to Musi for my fish and seafood. From him I learned the value of that relationship, to work with the best people, to get the best product, to make the best food to serve to your guests. And beyond that, I loved what Musi’s market stall represents in terms of family business and dedication – that he took the shop from his parents and that he runs it with his wife Ayellet. And that his kids are now the third generation involved, both in running the shop and creating art based on this family business and history.”

Miller, 43, wearing a jersey inscribed with the name of the Philadelphia Eagles in Hebrew, was standing in the restaurant’s kitchen, fashioning dark, appealing balls – kneidlach (matza balls) made of regular matza flour and blood-matza meal. The blood is stored in an innocent-looking plastic container in the

refrigerator, and is topped with pink foam. Miller explained that he had to whisk it so it wouldn't clot.

It's not the blood of Christian children, but also not blood usually used in cooking. Pig's blood is readily obtainable in Chinese-owned grocery stores, but Miller passed that up in favor of chicken blood. "I have a good source for blood of free-range chickens," he noted, adding, "To use pig's blood is laziness. If you want to come out with a brazen declaration about a Jewish kitchen and you chose pig, you've said 'F--- you,' with no grace or elegance."

The delicacy is not on the restaurant's menu. Miller was planning to serve it from the stage of a fringe theater during an evening last December titled "Irreverent Jewish Deli." On the evening itself, after telling the audience the story of the blood libel and feeding them kneidlach, he also served chopped liver of rabbit and knot pretzels dipped in butter, accompanied by salmon he cured himself. Miller said he chose a non-kosher ingredient "for the shtick, which is also Jewish." The pretzel reflects the chutzpah of preferring butter over cream cheese. "Butter and mayonnaise are non-Jewish spreads," he asserts, "in contrast to cream cheese and mustard, which are Jewish spreads for dairy and meat, respectively."

The Jewish kitchen was always irreverent, Miller says. "It was irreverent back when it was still kosher, because it supplanted the synagogue. It was the gathering place of Jews in the new world. Corned beef supplanted the siddur [daily prayer book]; pastrami was the rabbi."

The fact is that while Israeli culture sometimes rejects the flavors of East European Jewish cuisine, it's been adopted heartily by young American Jews, among whom it is enjoying a

revival. On the counter in the kitchen of Miller's restaurant is Jeffrey Yoskowitz and Liz Alpern's cookbook "The Gefilte Manifesto: New Recipes for Old World Jewish Foods." The authors are about Miller's age; he calls the book "the bible."

Perhaps in order to return to one's roots it's necessary to get away from them. But that isn't what Miller thought when he relocated to the Jewish state in 2001, at 24. "At college I was very nerdy, very hyper-focused," he says. "I came to Israel in order to be a soldier and then a politician."

He lived for a time on Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael, on the Mediterranean coast south of Haifa, and afterward joined the army. The heroic image he'd built up in his mind about the Israel Defense Forces gradually crumbled. When he was ordered to man a room filled with screens displaying the feed from surveillance cameras in Hebron, he reported to the mental health officer. He rejects the explanation that he had developed a left-wing consciousness. "It's not that. And it's dangerous to call it that. It was a general consciousness, an understanding that this thing, which was supposed to be brimming with morality, is exactly the opposite."

After his discharge he enrolled in a master's program in Middle Eastern studies at Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva. He resided in Tel Aviv, where he hobnobbed with other young American immigrants, who were far from their families and cooked together on the holidays. "Including Christmas," he notes.

He wrote for and was an editor of the leisure section of The Jerusalem Post, in some cases reviewing restaurants, and when budget cuts led to his being laid off, he got a job at a small deli on Hashomer Street in Tel Aviv's Carmel Market. "On the first day,

the manager gave me the keys, told me, 'The stove is in the back, don't burn the place down,' and left. I started to do what was in the realm of possibility. I prepared peanut butter, then peanut butter with honey, then peanut butter with ras el hanout [a North African spice mix]. In the end I went to the oven and baked pretzels."

The deli was opposite, and also owned by, the Habasta restaurant. Itay Hargil, Habasta's chef, stuffed Miller's soft pretzel with pickled salmon, crème fraiche, onions and capers, and concocted a sandwich that immediately placed it on a "10 best sandwiches in Israel" list that appeared in the daily Yedioth Ahronoth. Miller's culinary career was one-month old at the time.

Afterward, he went on to work at a pub called Haminzar: "The only question I was asked in the interview was, 'Are you capable of drinking during a shift?' They would give me money and send me to the market, just to find what they had there and work with it. It was exactly the same approach, of 'Don't burn the place down.' Chasers were going out all the time and if a mistake was made mixing a drink, it would go to the kitchen. I'd drunk before, but Haminzar took it to a new level. There was a danger that I would become even more of an alcoholic."

Miller looked for a new horizon, a learning framework and a challenge, and found them in the person of another American immigrant, Rima Olivera. At the time, she cooked for private clients in her apartment in the south Tel Aviv Florentin neighborhood. Miller offered Olivera his services as a dishwasher. A bite into one of the items on the menu shook him up: "It was duck in a lettuce wrap with strawberry vinaigrette, an item that's French on the one hand and Asian on the other. I took

a bite and had to hold onto the counter. The whole world shrank when I tasted that dish. I'd never eaten anything that was so fresh and put together so meaningfully.”

After they had worked together for a time, Olivera recruited Miller to fulfill an ambitious dream: creation of a chef restaurant in Tel Aviv. “Rima talked about how she would get the city’s first Michelin star,” Miller recalls. “She didn’t really think there would be a star on the window, but she did believe that that was the experience we were going to provide, and for that she needed a sous-chef with experience.” He himself didn’t fit the bill. The tension involved in making her dream come true – in the form of a restaurant called Oasis – the absence of guidance, and the hard drinking created a “pressure cooker and a disaster” inside him, he recalls. The partnership fell apart.

“I didn’t know where I was going from there,” Miller recalls, adding that Olivera had been so critical of Tel Aviv’s better-known, highbrow chefs that going to work for them seemed like a regression.

Just about then, Hamas missiles started to flash across the skies of Tel Aviv during Operation Pillar of Defense, in 2012. Responding to a request from his mother, Miller went back to Philadelphia for a visit.

Not all that glitters

At the time of Miller’s visit, in 2012, Philly’s most celebrated restaurant was Zahav, owned by Israeli-born Michael Salomonov, whose menu is inspired by Mizrahi-Israeli cuisine. A mutual friend brought the two of them together. “I met Mike in Zahav during my home vacation,” Miller relates. “He invited me to apprentice at Zahav for a week. I told him I had brought no

cooking shoes on the visit and he said: You can wear mine.”

Miller spent a week at Zahav.

“I realized that Israel wasn’t as provincial as I’d thought,” he says, “and that I could use the things I’d learned in the rest of the world, too. When I got back to Israel, I felt a new type of hope. I started saving up, drinking less, going out less, tying the loose ends so I could return to the United States.”

“He’s no longer an American,” Solomonov says of Miller. “And that’s a good thing. He has a healthy – or maybe unhealthy – mix of amusement and obsession. He has a madness that shows he really cares about what he’s doing. If you’re not neurotic and full of self-criticism in this field, I can’t connect with you. He’s like that. He works very hard, he cares very much about food, and in addition he’s gifted.”

Miller moved back to the United States in 2013, and started to wander between restaurants in Philadelphia. From Percy Street BBQ, one of Solomonov’s restaurants, he moved on to the prestigious Fork and from there to the bakery-restaurant High Street on Market. That was followed by a brewery in a working-class neighborhood in the north of the city, and then he was hired by a wealthy family as a chef in their suburban estate and their vacation resort on a Florida island.

Miller left each place displeased. At the brewery he wasn’t given a reasonable kitchen; the rich family wasn’t interested in quality cuisine and expected him to purchase pre-cured salmon. The downfall of High Street was that the magazine Bon Appetit dubbed it the country’s second-best restaurant in America in 2014: “We were used to feeding 90 people a week, and then suddenly we started to get 90 people in a single evening. I asked

how we were supposed to cope with that and didn't get an answer, so I started to burn out there, like everyone."

The solution for Miller was to emerge from the restaurant space into the street, which he did in 2015. At a street corner in South Philadelphia two competing stalls were serving Philly cheesesteak sandwiches, the city's iconic dish, consisting of beef, cheese spread and caramelized onion. Miller put up a pop-up stall of his own. His "added value" was that the beef he used came from sustainable breeding, the cheese from a local dairy and the bun from a small Vietnamese bakery. His reputation soared and he also established a project of pop-up events under a rubric he called "Food Underground."

It was through Food Underground that Miller met the investors who supported his vision for Musi, his restaurant. On a pleasant December evening I went to Musi and dined on maitake and chestnut mushrooms in smoked turkey glaze, raw parsnip and parsnip soup, bagna cauda potato salad with anchovy and garlic, and mizuna greens. The desert was chocolate cake, malted fluff, cranberry and rose preserve. It was the best meal I ate in Philadelphia, and in fact the best chef meal I've ever had in the United States. It contained no blood and no chopped liver.

Flight to Mexico

During my short visit to Philadelphia I met no fewer than four other friends and acquaintances – all of whom had immigrated to Israel in the same decade and had returned to America almost at the same time. In each of the returned immigrants I detected the jolt of the double passage. The rupture is particularly visible in Ari Miller. As far as he is concerned, Philly cheesesteak will never approach Effie's sabich on Tchernichovsky Street, in Tel Aviv. The famed Italian Market of his city, he's convinced, is no

match for the Carmel Market. He admires Zahav but is also critical of it: In Israel, no one would serve a solitary plate of hummus as a first course. On the other hand, over the years he found marvelous and very special sources in the United States for raw materials.

In any event, Miller is toying with the idea of digging out his Philadelphian roots and shipping them to new shores. He and his girlfriend, chef Kiki Aranita, dream of moving to Mexico City. He mentioned this in passing, while we were walking his dog. Miller, who spotted skepticism in my eyes, was quick to mention the elite Danish chef René Redzepi, who briefly opened a pop-up branch of his famed Copenhagen restaurant, Noma, in the Mexican city of Tulum, in 2017.

During a conversation about his future, Miller also described a vision in which the status of the chef is disconnected from that of the restaurant. He spoke of dreams about a career based on pop-ups and ambitious events – specifically, pop-ups planned for Bahrain this month (at Four Seasons Hotel Bahrain Bay) and Hong Kong this summer. He doesn't believe his restaurant will become outmoded, but he wants people to come not to Musi but to him, wherever he may be.

It was only on the flight back east that it came to me that my skepticism derived from Israeli preconceptions. According to them, American immigrants in Israel are people with two homelands: two, and no more. Have you acclimatized in Israel? Wonderful. You've decided to return to your birthplace? You're a disappointment, but never mind. You immigrated to a third country or forged a cosmopolitan life? You have betrayed both homelands alike and bewildered us no end. Either live in your native land or go to Israel.

But for those whose lives are torn between two places, it is natural from the outset that they will seek to open the equation. What made Miller a riveting cook in Tel Aviv was the iconoclastic game he plays with cultural freight. Musi reflects a discipline that prefers logic and maturity over gimmicks. It can be said that he put a lid on the pot of his creativity and humor, so they will percolate in a controlled way and not spill over. It remains now to discover whether he will go on to lift the lid or clamp it down, and to see what will be folded into the hamantaschen of the future.

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