

# Israeli cookbook traces a culinary journey

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**A**wash with color, photographs from Israeli author/editor Janna Gur's sumptuous new cookbook, *The Book of New Israeli Food: A Culinary Journey*, flashed across the screen in the culinary lab at Mercer County Community College in West Windsor.

The scenes shifted from a hallah bakery in Mea She'arim to an open-air

market in Jerusalem to a dairy farm in the Negev to an olive grove in the Galilee. In a feast for the eyes, pictures of signature Israeli foods filled the screen: pomegranates, falafel, olive oil, goat cheese, tabouli, baba ghanoush, charred eggplant.

"Israel is a tiny country, with 70 ethnic communities coming from all over the world, and you'll see how it bears on Israeli food," Gur told her audience of some 50 students, faculty members, and visitors.

"For 2,000 years, Jews lived all over in corners of the world and they preserved their national identity through food," she said. "Whereas Jews lived in Morocco, Spain, France, Russia, and Ukraine, a different, unique cuisine was created that was similar to their neighbors', but different.

"Today," she said, "every ethnic group cultivates their heritage, and this is actually a very good thing for food. There are 70 cultural influences, and the more you mix them together, the better or more interesting it becomes. Together, good agriculture, the diverse cultures, and the dynamism of

## Return to Jersey

Within a few months, Janna Gur's book tour for *The Book of New Israeli Food: A Culinary Journey* will bring her back to New Jersey, according to Andrea Yonah, executive director of the New Jersey-Israel Commission. However, she said, the next time, Gur will be accompanied by a chef who will demonstrate several of the recipes in the book. "We want to do a program again for culinary schools and also for some Jewish community organizations that are interested," Yonah said.

For information, call the NJIC at 609-292-5263.

Israelis are responsible for the revolution in Israeli cuisine."

Gur's mid-November program was

arranged through the Consulate General of Israel in New York and coordinated by the New Jersey-Israel Commission.

"I would like people to realize that Israel is a great place with a great lifestyle and a lot of fun," said Sharon Regev, consul for public affairs, as she arrived for the program.

"I think our cuisine reflects our society," she said. "Our cuisine is really a fusion, and it reflects the fact that we are an immigration country."

Commission executive director Andrea Yonah expressed pleasure at bringing Gur to MCCC. "The objective is to create cultural awareness," she said, "and to do so in a public forum — especially for culinary education students."

Doug Fee, coordinator of MCCC's hotel, restaurant, and institutional management program, said that Gur's visit dovetailed perfectly with the curriculum of the class in international food and culture, as he stood near a table piled with copies of Gur's 304-page coffee-table cookbook. One copy, open to a recipe for Flourless Chocolate and Pistachio Cake, flanked a plate offering moist slices of the cake that Fee had baked that morning.

MCCC president Patricia Donohue said she had been thrilled to work with the consulate to bring Gur to her students. "This is such an outstanding foods program, and to connect the author with these students is marvelous," she said.

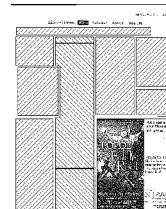
## 'Something lovely'

Gur, who is the founding editor of *Al Hashulchan Gastronomic Monthly*, a leading Israeli food and wine magazine, is the very embodiment of diversity. Born in the Soviet Union, she immigrated to Israel as a teenager in 1974.

She conveyed her message at MCCC through 30 mouth-watering photographs from her book by Eilon Paz.

In one of those images, a spinach-laden omelet, a dollop of yogurt cheese, and marinated red peppers mixed with thinly sliced cucumbers and greens rested on a slab of toasted bread.

"This is the Israeli breakfast, which is considered the most famous contribution of Israel to the world," Gur told the gathering. "It's very strange for you to have cucumbers



and tomatoes for breakfast; it's very strange for us not to."

Showing the image of an olive grove, Gur noted that the Israeli food revolution began with the olive, "one of the symbols of Israeli culture since biblical times. The olive is a symbol of peace and harmony. Today, we have varietal olive oils; we have boutique olive oils."

The second ingredient in the food revolution is cheese, she said. And, in the late 1980s, another revolution started — the tradition of handmade sourdough bread. Also in the late '80s, the Israeli wine industry was born.

"Until the late '80s, Israeli wine was — how shall I say it? — a joke. It was sweet, cloying wine. They called it 'hammer wine,' because it gives you a headache.

"Today, Israeli wine is not at all a joke anymore at all. We have 100 boutique wineries."

The images rolled past — wine barrels, chickpeas, coriander seeds, dates, preserved lemons, and the Israeli toasted pasta known as "p'titim."

When a photograph of string halvah appeared, Gur said, "This is something lovely. It's like eating sweet clouds. You put it in your mouth and it melts."

"Is there an Israeli cuisine? It's too early to know," she said. "We've been around 50 or 60 years, and it takes much longer. But if you go to an Israeli restaurant, the food you will find is always a certain variation — a fusion, I should say — of Middle Eastern traditions and Jewish ethnic cuisine.

"We are talking about a cuisine that is happening but changing all the time," she said. "The book, for me, was also an attempt to capture the moment — what it is now."

In a separate interview after the program, Gur laughed about a friend on his first trip to Israel who was crushed when he discovered that he had not arrived at "pas-trami paradise."

"Jewish food in the world — especially in the United States — is associated with Jewish Ashkenazi food, because the ingredients are from Russia and Poland," she said. "Israeli food is a mixture of foods from all over the world. It has Middle Eastern influences, so it is quite different."

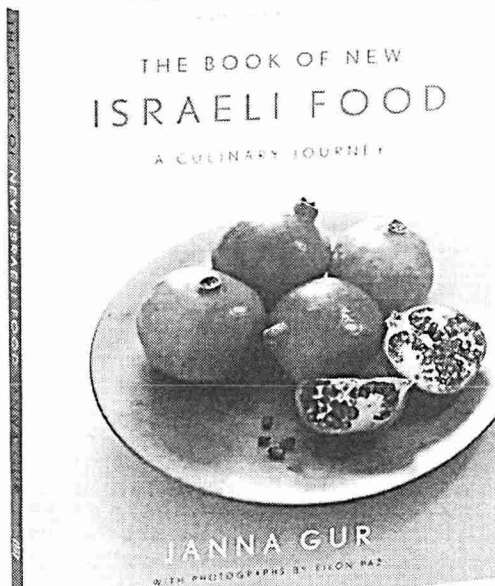
All in all, Israeli food is a fusion of its Middle Eastern origins, the multicultural

Jewish ethnic tradition, and the nation's great openness to modern culinary trends from all over the world, according to Gur.

Her quest to capture the taste of that fusion in a cookbook was "cooking on low fire for quite a while," the author said.

"It was in my head for a long time, and when I started to write it, I knew what I wanted to do," she said. "It was an amazing journey and, I must say, it still goes on." ■

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Author Janna Gur is celebrating the revolution in Israeli cuisine.

Photo by Marilyn Silverstein

Printing imperfections present during scanning

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