

# HOW A COOKBOOK TRANSCENDS POLARIZATION



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I could feel the jetlag creeping in. I had just come back to the States from winter break and taking advantage of online classes, I immediately traveled to Boston to visit a friend who I had not seen in months. Soon after my arrival, my friend took me to a house party where I did not know anyone—boredom and lack of sleep overshadowed my normally sociable personality. Exhausted, I traversed my way to the kitchen to sit on the counter. I lifted a cookbook to make room for myself, ready to toss it aside before its cover caught my eye. *Jerusalem*, it read, blue words bolded over a colorful dish with red tomatoes, eggs, and green herbs, co-written by chefs Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi. Flipping through its pages, I was quickly intrigued by the delicious recipes and fascinated by the cultural experiences of its authors.

In 1968, both Tamimi and Ottolenghi were born into strikingly different yet parallel lives in Jerusalem. Ottolenghi was an Israeli citizen born to a Jewish family in the Ramat Denya neighborhood of the predominantly Jewish West Jerusalem, while Tamimi lived just eight kilometers away, born to a Muslim family in the predominantly Palestinian Old City of East

Jerusalem. Ottolenghi studied comparative literature in Tel Aviv and worked as a journalist, traveling across Israel and the world. On the opposite side of town, Tamimi left his home at the age of 17, working as a porter at a West Jerusalem hotel and eventually taking on chef roles in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

They both moved to London in 1997, where Ottolenghi began studying French pastry cooking at the esteemed culinary school *Le Cordon Bleu* while Tamimi worked in the kitchen at the West London deli and bakery *Bakers & Spice*. Despite living such parallel lives, the two did not meet until one fateful afternoon in 1999, when Ottolenghi happened to walk into *Bakers & Spice* looking for a job. The two bonded over their shared hometown and “incomprehension of traditional English food” in comparison to Middle Eastern cuisine.<sup>1</sup> Soon after, Ottolenghi started working at *Bakers & Spice* in pastries while Tamimi worked in savories, and a decades-long culinary partnership was born, leading to five highly popular London restaurants and two critically acclaimed cookbooks.

*Jerusalem* is the second cookbook co-authored by this duo; it gained notoriety and critical

acclaim, winning a number of awards, including the esteemed James Beard Foundation Award in 2013. *Jerusalem* is an homage to the partners’ shared hometown and parallel experiences; most importantly, however, it is a testimony to the uniquely diverse melting pot of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities that comprise the city. Drawing upon their own pasts and their neighbors’ stories, Tamimi and Ottolenghi share the parallel narratives of East and West Jerusalem through each dish. The authors preface each recipe with a short paragraph explaining its personal significance and their source of inspiration behind its creation.

Rather than acting as a mere compilation of various traditionally Israeli and Palestinian recipes, it draws upon stories of cultural significance for shared star ingredients in order to construct the dish. For example, in their introduction to the “Roasted Sweet Potatoes and Fresh Figs” recipe, they discuss how the fig trees of Jerusalem belong to nobody and everybody simultaneously and in their introduction for a poached pear dessert, the importance of cardamom spice in the region. Instead of focusing on divisive sociopolitical issues within Jerusalem,



Ottolenghi and Tamimi re-center the narrative of their city on shared cultural and historic experiences, particularly the ways in which they come together to create a harmonious culinary experience.

Jerusalem is often mentioned in discussion of contemporary politics, followed by sentiments of hopelessness and concern regarding the future of Israel-Palestine and whether there is potential for a fair agreement. Polarization, both internationally and regionally, plagues the involved parties and cultures; however, Ottolenghi and Tamimi’s decades-long partnership evades this grim description. Amidst the constant and harrowing battle of property rights driven by various political and religious interests, *Jerusalem* serves as a refreshing reminder of the rich cultural treasure shared by all residents of the city. Rather than highlighting polarization, Ottolenghi and Tamimi switch focus to human experiences within Jerusalem, drawing on the most natural of human interests: a love for food.

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