

On Raw Food and Prejudice

A Conversation with Israel Aharoni

The conversation with Israel Aharoni, a famous chef and possibly the name most identified with the Far Eastern cuisine in Israel, was held toward the opening of the exhibition "Raw and Cooked" with the participation of Ruti Direktor, the exhibition curator, and Tal Shochat, one of the participating artists, an amateur cook with a profound interest in food. Aharoni opened his restaurant "Yin Yang" on Rothschild Blvd., Tel Aviv, in 1982. He has since written books about Chinese cuisine and hosted cooking shows on TV. In our meeting we wanted to clarify several facts and clichés about raw food.

Ruti Direktor: Today, when sushi bars are opened on every street corner, it may sound a little strange to ask, but nevertheless – can you recall the first time you ate raw fish?

Israel Aharoni: It was on my first trip to the Far East twenty-five years ago. I studied Chinese cuisine in Taiwan, and was taken to a Japanese restaurant. I knew nothing whatsoever about Japanese cuisine; or rather, I was only familiar with the stereotypes. I knew that the Japanese ate raw stuff, and I imagined them simply holding onto a live fish and eating it... I went full of fear, but also ready for an adventure, and within four minutes I experienced an amazing transformation: what I saw was twisted slices of fish, incredibly beautiful and very tasty as well; nothing like what I had in mind.

R.D.: The stereotype you are talking about is based, among others, on the assumption that raw meat is connected with primitivism, that raw is repulsive and disgusting.

I.A.: It has to do with the perception of the other. In all of the rituals intended to exclude the other, food plays a major role. The other's food is perceived as having a strange taste and smell, as being made of strange materials. The ultimate exclusion is that the other's food is regarded as immoral; for example, "they" slaughter horses and dogs for food, whereas we slaughter only sheep and cows... Food is one of the most conspicuous components of culture anywhere. It is interesting that in Israel food was one of the only identity components that remained intact after the melting pot pressure of Israeliness. Still, I remember from my childhood in downtown Haifa, that each child was embarrassed of his mother's food, whether it was Moroccan, Bukharan or Bulgarian. As children, we were captivated by the doctrine of shedding identity elements, and the desirable food was the Israeli food as it crystallized at the time: Hummus, tehina, pita. There was great devaluation of ethnic food back then; there were no fresh fish, so they used frozen codfish instead; there was no olive oil, so they used vegetable oil; and the right spices were not available either.

Tal Shochat: The shock I experienced in a cooking course I took in India involved the spices. First of all they open all the spice containers, and throw a handful of each into the oil. Then they add the vegetables or other ingredients, and once again sprinkle a generous amount of each spice, and finally, once everything is cooked, more spice is thrown in. Everything blends into a mixture of flavors, until the constituent elements are hardly identifiable.

I.A.: Indian cuisine is the diametric opposite of Japanese cuisine. When I shot a documentary series about Jewish cuisine, I visited a family from India. There were about thirty people around the table, from two-year olds to elders. When I started eating, I felt a cardamom bomb explode in my mouth. My mouth was on fire, but everyone around me, including the children, ate naturally, as if it was nothing, and I realized that the limitation was mine; my palate is encoded differently. It is the same with colors: in India they freely put these and other colors side by side, blue next to green, for example. My painting teacher once told me that blue and green don't go together, but in India everything goes: cardamom next to curry, a surplus of flavors. I have difficulty with Indian cuisine precisely because of the multiplicity of tastes. My palate has been shaped in such a way that it cannot contain more than a certain amount.

R.D.: Your predilection is for minimalist taste?

I.A.: I suppose so. Japanese cuisine is certainly minimalist. When you take a bite of raw fish, you reduce the spectrum of flavors to a single flavor. Like a single line on the canvas. The wealth of flavors is obtained through the minimalism of the ingredients and via utmost reduction. Indian cuisine, on the other hand, achieves a wealth of flavors through the multiplicity of ingredients. These are two poles: both contain the spectrum of flavors, albeit in antithetical modes.

R.D.: When you mention Japanese cuisine, the raw appears to be associated with the minimalist. This is also my feeling about art: that the manifestations of the raw in art are often connected with manifestations of minimalism. In both art and food, it takes a refined palate to identify what you call a "spectrum of flavors". Since when, do you think, has raw food become associated with refinement?

I.A.: Raw food has undergone many processes. Initially, it was indeed carnivorousness. Prehistoric man, as far as we know, tore off chunks of game and ate them. Moving on to more advanced forms, we are familiar, for example, with the Tatar method after which the famous steak Tartar is named. The Tatars were nomadic combatant tribes who used to put chunks of meat under their saddles, using the riding time to process it.

R.D.: And it was still considered raw?

I.A.: Entirely raw. As long as it hasn't been subjected to a thermal process, it is considered raw. Several centuries later one finds the *kibbeh nayeh* in the Arab Lebanese cuisine, and even today in the Galilee – raw meat ground with pestle and mortar together with spices, which the women later knead lengthily. The prolonged kneading and the hands' heat "cook" the meat slightly, but still there is no fire or flame involved. We can also talk about dried ingredients as another form of raw food – drying which is, in fact, intended for preservation. In Scandinavia they dry fish and vegetables; and also in Southeast Asia. Chinese cuisine is a drying champion – meat, seaweed, fruit, seafood, fish. They dry everything. And there is another example of raw food: sometime in the early 20th century, at Harry's Bar in Venice, they invented a dish comprising ultra-thin slices of raw beef, which reminded someone of Carpaccio, probably because his paintings contain red and white stripes, and the dish was named after him. Today when people say "Carpaccio" they refer to thin, raw slices of anything: meat, fish, mushrooms, beets. The Japanese, on the other hand, have eaten raw food in the finest gourmet, and not the least primitive sense for centuries.

R.D.: How do you explain the fact that in a certain place an entire culinary culture has evolved around raw food, whereas in most other cultures the cuisine was based on cooked food?

I.A.: Japanese culture is very aesthetic and meticulous, based on strict aesthetic values. There is no deviation from the rules. It also has to do with the use of chopsticks, an eating technique which dictates the form of cutting and the type of food. With a knife and fork you can take larger and cruder chunks. All Chinese and Japanese art is about imitation and mimicry. Years-long imitation and preservation generate a process aimed at deepening rather than expanding. It's like electronic music which is compacted into short temporal units, in layers, as opposed to classical music which is linear.

R.D.: We are familiar with Japanese influences on art from the early 19th century, especially in France. When did Japonaiserie in food begin?

I.A.: Only in the mid-20th century. The first to introduce raw food into modern gourmet cuisine were the French, and it happened in the 1970s. French chefs introduced raw fish into their cuisine, lending a beautiful interpretation to the Japanese sushi / sashimi. You have to realize that French cuisine is very rich and intricate, a very precise gourmet cuisine, which is also highly conservative and chauvinist. Provence, Normandy – each region has its own cuisine with its own local pride. And all of a sudden, not only were they influenced – and by such a remote cuisine, rather than by another region of France, but they also assimilated the new values as if they had always been there. They didn't simply copy the raw fish; they gave it a fascinating creative interpretation. For instance, they took a very fresh raw fish, sprinkled it with olive oil and basil leaves, sea salt and pepper.

R.D.: Parallel to the Japanese influence on food, there was also great influence on fashion, of course. It is interesting to see that in the 1970s, simultaneously with minimalism in art, a similar taste evolved in food – a preference for reduction over multiplicity.

I.A.: The French chefs adopted the Japanese perception regarding the secret of reduction. They realized that the ingredients must be at their prime, impeccable – the cleanest and freshest.

R.D.: When you describe the new raw foodstuffs, you stress the importance placed on freshness, quality, and cleanliness. Can the raw food trend be deemed part of the new health awareness?

I.A.: The health aspect is one part of a whole. Recent years have indeed seen a transition to philosophical-nutritious perception. Raw or live food is food that has not undergone a thermal process. We already know by now that all the vitamins are lost in cooking. The intention is to consume the fish as it is. To be attentive to the truth of the matter.

R.D.: This already sounds like art talk – the truth of the matter...

I.A.: Because I'm also a DJ in clubs, I am often asked about the affinities between music and cooking. I believe that cooking is a type of remix. Even the greatest chefs remix things that others have done. Each one gives his own interpretation to roast chicken. Just as a DJ takes musical pieces and reassembles them. If you want to use art terms, think of a Lea Nickel painting...

R.D.: Well-done painting, in our context...

I.A.: Right, like a good dish. When it works, it works. What's so incredible about her painting? The unique interaction of color, movement, composition. I guess it is similar to what I try to create in a dish with stratified flavors. I work intuitively and at the same time, I rely on broad knowledge, and when I fail, it is usually due to a surplus, rather than a lack, of flavors. Cooking is a dynamic process all the way through. You can always add sauce or change something. That is why I prefer cooking to baking; in cooking you can intervene in the process in every phase, as opposed to baking where, from a certain point, you no longer have a say. When you create a composition of flavors – say I put ten flavors in a dish – it works well when you feel the totality. In cooking as in art, there is applied-graphic art, and there is applied food. But there is also food in the culinary sense: hedonism, experience, a thrill that goes beyond the need to be fed.

T.S.: Judaism seems to have neglected the epicurean taste. Something prevented it from valuing anything not functional, regarding delight in good food as gluttony...

I.A.: Actually, Judaism encourages and praises good food, although this food is usually harnessed to religious needs. It was rather the nascent Israeliness that made "modest behavior" into a national value. In the years following the establishment of the state, Gourmet food was not a top priority. Hypocritically enough, this was stretched far more than necessary, thus rendering the ethos of "acting modestly" self-righteous and sanctimonious. This was true until the culinary revolution of the 1970s. Fortunate for me, I started my career at exactly that point. The public was thirsty for innovation and thrills.

T.S.: The closest thing to art in food I saw was in China, when I arrived in a monastery's vegetarian restaurant. The menu included rats and snakes, an ape's brain, a fish with eyes – but all the dishes were sculpted in tofu. It was a perfect imitation of the animal shape, yet vegetarian. The "truth of the matter" was concealed.

I.A.: Twenty years ago a company producing kosher shrimp and calamari was established in Israel. It was an absolute fiasco. The Orthodox didn't want to eat fish in the shape of shrimp or calamari; they found it disgusting. Disgust has to do with fear of the other and with the other's exclusion as a way of defining the self. Mankind needed time to realize that there is

room for the other as well, that it can expand its scopes. Once we legitimize the other, we legitimize ourselves as well. Indeed, today the tables have turned, and people seem to be proud of their mothers' ethnic dishes, as if they were a breed apart. Ethnic food has come out of the closet. Chefs do variations on it; each chef cooks his granny's food.

R.D.: On the one hand, the ethnic has come out of the closet; on the other hand, you describe a situation where cuisines combine influences from various sources. Don't we run the risk that "globalization" of taste may flatten, homogenize, lead to the loss of singularity?

I.A.: To be frank, there is no such thing as ethnic food. Until 350 years ago, there were no tomatoes in Italy. Italian cuisine was tomato-less. Can you imagine Italian food today without tomatoes? Indian cuisine was devoid of hot peppers. This is the beauty, I think, when layers are added and new statements are created, a cross of a cross. The Western attempt to discover pure authentic forms is irrelevant. There is no pure Chinese cuisine, and no pure Italian cuisine. Everything is full of influences that have arrived in various ways. In the past it happened at camels' and donkeys' pace, and today – at Internet speed. Fusion always existed, it only moved more slowly. In the past the link may have been more logical; today the speed possibly leads to inaccuracy. "Sushi Samba" is a wonderful example of this "mix-and-match" – a Mexican Chinese dish. By the same token, the most Israeli food is to put something in a pita: schnitzel (Viennese), a little tehina (Lebanese), pita (Arab), and eggplant salad (Turkish). It is a quintessential metaphor for the people living in Zion – a mosaic of cultures.

[Legend]

Sushi – A traditional Japanese dish based on vinegared rice, combined with such components as edible seaweed, raw fish, vegetables, etc.

Sashimi – Slices of raw fish or other fresh seafood.

Fusion cooking – Mixed cuisine merging culinary influences from various sources, which at its prime generates a new, differentiated culinary statement.

Remix – Disassembly and reassembly, usually of a musical piece.

Japonaiserie – A term referring to Japanese influences on French culture in the 19th century.

Sushi Samba – The name of a restaurant offering culinary variations centered on sushi of sorts.