


Book Review: Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National Identity in Israel by Yael Raviv

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Raviv, Yael. *Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National Identity in Israel*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. xiv + 281 pages. Hardcover, \$34.50.

An international adage could be summed up in a couple of words: “Hunger is the best seasoning.” Whether it’s the United Kingdom’s ‘fish and chips,’ Japan’s sushi, or some other delicacy, a nation is sometimes known by its food, and Israel is no exception. When one thinks of Israeli cuisine one might consider Mediterranean flavors such as hummus, olives, dates, grapes, pomegranates, wheat, barley, pita bread, fish, and other vegetation and meat that grows or is accessible in the area. Similarly, looking at *kashrut* or religious dietary restrictions in a place like Israel—the forbiddance of pork, shellfish, and other animals of the Jewish and Islamic faiths (both of which figure heavily in Israel’s population)—has an astounding impact on the food culture of the nation. In Dr. Yael Raviv’s book, *Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National Identity in Israel*, she analyzes the role of food within Israel, and how it relates to the moral dilemmas and power struggles, as well as the religious and ideological affiliations of different ethnic groups that make up “the Jewish state” (p. 1). Ultimately, Raviv explores the change in relationship between Israelis and their food as mirroring their search for modern Jewish nationalism.

Raviv, a Food Studies and Nutrition Professor, notes a change from religion-centered to secular-centered Israeli ideology. Studying the periods between the immigration movements of 1905 to the Six Days War in 1967, she states that the Jewish people were greatly influenced from Eastern Europe and Marxist teachings. Therefore, although there was a pervasive Zionist movement of religious Jews to take back the Promised Land, there was also a contingency of Jewish secular pioneers that sought Israel to be a modern nation, not just a religious community. Interestingly, *kashrut* laws were still deemed an essential factor in the national identity. The State offered what Raviv calls a “seal of approval” legitimizing the cause of the Zionists because the religion of the Jews provided a banner that all Jews, spread out in Diaspora or otherwise, could rally under. The cuisine became an emblem of the new Jewish identity that the secularists sought. Thus, different foods, central to one’s perception of home and identity, became unifying symbols, and Raviv traces this transformation over the course of more than a century.

The author, incorporating psychological, sociological and historical research, covers a wide array of topics including—but not limited to—the establishment of nationalist roots; the use of agricultural products and commercial foods as devices for government propaganda; the use of the school cafeteria as a vehicle for the development of a national cuisine; and the history of women as army cooks, home cooks, and other vital roles women played in establishing the identity of Israel through cuisine. Throughout the book, Raviv emphasizes that cuisines are seldom fixed, but they are constantly adapted as times change.

Dr. Raviv’s work is intricately woven and historically accurate. Painstaking research is evident in the facts and knowledge that *Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National*

Identity in Israel displays. This book is an excellent cultural and culinary history in the making of Israel's modern day identity, and how religious and secular ideologies surprisingly worked together to unify the nation. The reviewer recommends this book to any person keenly interested in food, or any serious Israeli or Middle East sociologist or historian, as Israel's cultural history is illuminated through excellent writing and thorough research.

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