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# Eating Wild: Hosting the Food Heritage of Palestine

*This article examines the strategic use of an event of hospitality celebrating the Wild Foods of Palestine as part of a form of fertile activism. Artist Mirna Bamieh presented the dinner as a "live art" event where the positive power of food and Palestinian culinary distinction was highlighted more than victimhood. In a moment of pleasurable pedagogy, the guests learned about the preservation of knowledge about foraging precious wild plants and their preparation. They enjoyed traditional and innovative spins on Palestinian cuisine, absorbing the wild tastes of the land. By eliciting embodied responses, a moment of pleasurable convivial pedagogy was produced to inspire the guests to engage with activism against ongoing dispossession under Israeli settler colonialism. The wild plants themselves and the knowledge of how to process them were envisioned as a type of cultural heritage to be preserved as an archive for potential transformation. The event raised important possibilities for the futures of this particular kind of Palestinian activism: edible, fertile, aesthetic. [wild plants, foraging, cuisine, hospitality, settler colonialism, Palestine/Israel]*

"Does your mouth tingle?" asked Mirna Bamieh, our chef and host at a Wild Plants dinner at the Palestinian Museum in Bir Zeit, close to Ramallah, on a lovely spring day in April 2019. We had just been served a dish, *loof*, that to my eyes looked like sautéed Swiss chard. This was not a question I expected from a chef. The dish looked so ordinary that Mirna's announcement that loof is so poisonous in its raw state that it can make one's throat close surprised me. This fact, delivered to the guests just after we had consumed our first bites, made the point of this dinner – the importance of local knowledges and the craft of wild food preparation – very effectively. Highlighting that "Palestine" is in its scientific name, *Arum palaestinum*, Mirna told the story of how "our grandmothers" knew how to change loof from a dangerous plant to a healthy dish by an overnight soaking with salt and slow cooking with plenty of olive oil. Here *teta* (grandmother) stands for knowledge that risks generational loss, highlighting the urgency of its transmission. Mirna's voice was drowned out temporarily as laughter and conversation erupted. Two guests at our table gave funny descriptions of their botched loof cooking attempts, while a third said she had given up trying because she did not want to poison anyone. It tasted delicious, and while I did feel a mild tingling, it hardly felt life-threatening. The fact that everyone ate it with alacrity indicated that we all trusted Mirna's absorption of the teta's knowledge. There could hardly have been a more persuasive argument for the urgent need to learn about the wild plants of Palestine from those who know how to successfully transform a dangerous plant into a delicious, nutritious delight. It also led us all to reflect on what it means for such vitally important cultural knowledge to be lost.

As I argue in this article, this Wild Plants dinner is but one illustration of the move toward treating food, from recipes to edible plants to seeds, as another form of Palestinian heritage under threat because of the dispossession of Palestinian lands. Preserving Palestinian plant and food heritage has become a site of activism. In this respect, the Wild Plants

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dinner brings together two critical nodes in the Palestinian struggle: food/agro-activism and cultural heritage preservation. The dinner combined art and pedagogy related to the envisioning of plants and foods as another form of "cultural heritage," like the embroidery and architectural restoration described so thoughtfully by de Cesari (2019) in her book *Heritage and the Cultural Struggle for Palestine*.[1] Like these other spheres of distinctive Palestinian practices, the edible domain is being reenvisioned as one that needs to be preserved and protected, although it has long been valued as a mode of connection to lost land. In *Palestinian Village Histories*, Rochelle Davis discusses how edible plants for displaced Palestinians become an essential part of remembering what was once theirs. She notes how it is commonplace for them to visit their former villages to gather herbs and grape leaves, thereby "ingesting the place by consuming the land's produce" (2011, 172). Eating becomes an act of momentary repossession and comfort. For artist and chef Mirna Bamieh, hospitality becomes her specific instrument of food activism via the Palestine Hosting Society. The "live art" dinner was a way to hospitably bring people together to celebrate, educate, and appreciate the culinary distinctiveness of Palestine, reminding participants of the power of an embodied politics of taste and smell of the landscape itself, a landscape continually under threat. For Mirna, what needs to be stressed are not Palestinians mourning their loss or presenting themselves as miserable victims but the celebration of their rich culinary traditions as the material for positive change. She conveyed to her audience the importance of learning how to identify the plants and learn through consuming them as an embodied way of absorbing the knowledge of their landscape and rejecting the colonizer's appropriation of their food. As an artist, she wants to demonstrate the creative potential of this domain of Palestinian cultural heritage.

The wild plant theme of the dinner connected it to the wider forms of plant activism in the West Bank, familiar to me from my own field research. My first introduction to the occupied West Bank of Palestine was a continuation of my work on olive oil, which I began in Tuscany in 2000. While I loved studying olive oil, I missed working in the Middle East, where I studied the competitive hospitality in the Yemeni town of Zabid in 1989 and 1990. Olive oil was hardly used in Yemen, but I was drawn to Palestine after hearing of the counterintuitive marketing of elite "extra-virgin" olive oil as a fair-trade product. The olive harvesting solidarity groups were the first agro-activists I met when I began my research on olive oil in Palestine in 2006. Since then, I have engaged with various kinds of olive activists, as well as olive oil professionals and the marketers of fair-trade olive oil (Meneley 2008, 2011, 2021a). Through my olive networks, I met many agro-activists and food activists with whom I have done ethnographic work, such as seed saver Vivien Sansour and her Palestine Heirloom Seed Library (Meneley 2021b); and farmers like Fareed Taamallah who practice "fertile resistance" through encouraging boycotts of Israeli industrially farmed produce and instead supporting local farmers through local markets (Meneley 2014). In attendance at the Wild Plant dinner were many of the agro-activists involved in Um Sleiman farm, a community-supported agricultural cooperative near Bil'in, a place famous for its protests against the Separation Wall. Along with participating in the Wild Plants dinner described here, I conducted interviews with various coparticipants during the event and with Mirna and other Palestinian chefs and food activists over the last four years. During the course of another project on quantified walking in the Holy Land (see Meneley 2019), I took part in foraging walks in the West Bank in 2017, 2018, and 2019, where I was taught by Palestinian guides how to identify edible plants and discovered the true joy of making a foraging "find." I have also taken tours of the food markets in the Old City of Jerusalem with Mirna and in Bethlehem with chef and author Fadi Kattan. Many of the above themes were also discussed during the online Food Sovereignty panel

discussion, featuring Bamieh, Sansour, and cookbook author Laila El-Haddad.[2] I also did two Zoom participant observations: one was the Toronto Palestinian Film Festival (2020), where Mirna gave a presentation on her Palestine Hosting Society, and the second was her live workshop on Facebook for Thinking Food Futures (Bamieh 2020c).

The Wild Plants dinner was a moment in which the positive power of food and Palestinian culinary distinction was highlighted more than victimhood and suffering. Mirna places the Palestinian narrative about the riches of their wild plants first. While the context of Israeli settler colonialism is always there, she notes that the time has come for Palestinians to put the richness of their own culture at the center. The participants consume distinctively Palestinian foods, absorbing the wild tastes of their land. The live art method is a way of embodying and conveying her food activism through a hospitable event, producing a moment of pleasurable pedagogy to inspire the guests to engage with activism against land dispossession. The event raises important possibilities for the futures of this particular kind of Palestinian activism: edible, fertile, aesthetic.

**The Occupied West Bank**

While both food activism and cultural preservation of Indigenous architecture and craft are practiced in many parts of the world (and these international discourses both shape Palestinian activism and make it legible for foreign, activist allies), the specific conditions of Palestine under Israel's ongoing settler colonialism need to be highlighted. In Palestinian food talk, the *land* on which the food is grown is always highlighted because so much of their land itself has already been confiscated or is under threat of confiscation. Framing this particular event is the inescapable context of the material effects of loss and displacement of Palestinians abroad and for those still in the West Bank: disappearing access to their lands, disruption and loss from *al-Nakba* (the catastrophe), the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and the occupation of the West Bank by Israel in 1967. These events continue to shape Palestinian lives. Despite the Oslo Accords (in 1993 and 1995) and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (in 1995), the dispossession continues. The term "ongoing Nakba" is how food activists refer to the contemporary times, as land grabs and restrictions on Palestinian agricultural and foraging practices continue. As de Cesari notes, the Palestinian Authority "desperately tries to look and act like a state" (2019, 133), but not many Palestinians find this performance convincing (153). Abu-Lughod captures this sentiment in her recent reflection on the construction and envisioning of the goal of the Palestinian Museum – the site of Mirna's Wild Plants dinner – under ongoing settler colonialism:

> The political goal was to be recognized as a national entity with a place at the table and to regain their lands and their sovereignty, liberating Palestine and exercising the right of return. The Palestine National Authority that governs in Ramallah is the abject remnant of that bold national dream. (Abu-Lughod 2020, 12)

As Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2019) notes in her discussion of the politics of environment and waste management, this "phantom state" has an undeniable presence, but it is by no means one of sovereign control. The administrative divisions created by the Oslo Accords continue to shape Palestinian possibilities for movement in accomplishing quotidian but life-making practices such as education and work. With the exception of Jerusalem, which is now under Israeli control, the major Palestinian cities of Ramallah, Bethlehem, Nablus, and Jenin are under the civil and security control of the Palestinian Authority; these are referred to as Area A. About 24 percent of the West Bank is considered Area B, and it

contains smaller towns and villages. It is technically under joint Israeli and Palestinian security control, with the Palestinian Authority having civil control. Area C, where well over 60 percent of the Palestinian land is situated and three hundred thousand Palestinians live, is under full Israeli civil and military control. Along with the key expulsions in 1948 and 1967, the rapid expansion of the settlements result in what Hanafi (2009) calls "spaciocide," or the exclusion of Palestinians from their own land. In the ongoing Nakba, the land itself is not disappearing but Palestinian access to it is, as the settlements expand into the West Bank and settler-only highways, plus time-wasting checkpoints also dramatically curtail Palestinian movement. Because the Israelis control the air space, the land borders, and even the highways in the West Bank, they can shut them down quickly. Lori Allen, noted for her insightful work on human rights in Palestine, observes that even Human Rights Watch (2021), which had been quite restrained in their criticism, described Israel as an "apartheid state" in their report of April 27, 2021.

The rapid expansion of illegal Israeli settlements continues, threatening Palestinian olive groves, agricultural land, and lands where Palestinians have traditionally gathered wild plants. The work of Irus Braverman has been important in elucidating how the Israeli concept of "nature" and the obligation to protect it has serious consequences for Palestinian *movement*. Braverman (2009) describes the strategic use of the Israeli planting of pine trees to both obscure the sites of Palestinian villages, compete with Palestinian olive groves, and create "nature reserves" from which Palestinians are excluded. Braverman's (2021b) recent article in this journal exposed how the Israeli nature authorities' commitment to "Judaizing" the landscape of Palestine through reintroducing Biblical animals like the wild ass has serious consequences for Palestinian movement and that of their animals. The question of "environmental justice," including issues of plants, animals, water, and waste in this specific settler colonial context is explored in Braverman's special edition of *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* (2021a).

As Manna (2020) notes, Israeli laws that focus on prohibiting the foraging of *za'atar* (wild thyme) and *'akkoub* (wild thistle) for "environmental" reasons is more of a means of curtailing Palestinian movement because foraging is a process of selective gathering of the wild plants, not uprooting or eradicating them. Wild plants are not cultivated as are agricultural plants, and foraging has been a part of Palestinian culinary practice for as long as agriculture, another practice that the Israelis have circumscribed. She argues:

> When it comes to plant foraging, increased demand and unsustainable overharvesting are contributing factors, but are rarely primary causes. Professor Nativ Dudai, a botanist who has researched za'atar, confirms this in an interview:
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> "No one talks about the fact that we, the Jewish [Israelis], destroy much more za'atar than the Arabs pick. Do you know how many great za'atar populations were uprooted by bulldozers? In Har Adar or Elyaqim interchange – locations with beautiful amounts of za'atar, and all of it is now gone. But the Arab? He picks five kilograms and gets a fine."
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> Negotiating the politics of plant extinction with an occupier is always complicated, especially in the context of Palestine, where over the past seventy years Palestinians themselves have been treated as an invasive species in urgent need of elimination and control. The protection of one form of life – nonhuman life – has been used as an extra tool to suffocate a people who have survived attempts at cultural erasure and ethnic cleansing (Manna 2020, 11).

As the Israeli botanist cited above notes, the Israeli infrastructure and settlement project has destroyed far more plants than Palestinian foraging practices ever could. Mirna began her dinner with stories of how she learned about these Palestinian foraging practices from elderly Palestinians who shared with her their distinctive culinary uses of these wild plants.

**The Palestine Hosting Society**

The Palestine Hosting Society was started by Mirna in 2017.[3] It is funded by the A. M. Qattan Foundation, a major Palestinian philanthropic institution in the cultural sphere, which is dedicated to addressing cultural erasures of various kinds. (Although most of the costs were covered by the foundation, each guest paid 60 shekels [US$18] for a ticket). The event was one of the moveable feasts celebrating Palestine's food traditions via Mirna's Society. Although a sudden cool breeze meant that the dinner had to be held indoors, the initial plan was to serve it on the balcony overlooking the terraced hills of the Palestinian Museum, an apposite site because these terraces feature the plants distinctive to Palestinian food, medicine, and trade over the centuries, including some of the plants, like the famous herb za'atar, that we were about to consume. The sixty guests were seated at tables adorned with fresh wildflower centerpieces. The elegantly presented dishes, all sixteen of them, flowed with Mirna's narration about the wild plants, some of which are still gathered every day on foraging walks and some, like loof, that have fallen out of use.

In a telling comment in an interview with the online art magazine *Hyperallergic*, Mirna notes the specific problem of the contemporary Palestinian condition, in which Palestinians are too often the refugees or the recipients of foreign aid: "To have this mobile hosting society, is to create those tables where we, as Palestinians, offer something [to others]. It also takes us out of this passive role of guest or refugee. Instead, we become the ones who host" (Kay 2019).

Mirna's Palestine Hosting Society combines food, activism, and art. In interviews with me, Mirna was at pains to point out that the politics of her practice are not of the type of "politics" associated with the Palestinian Authority. The pamphlet describing the Society notes that it "develops culinary interventions that unpack social concerns and limitations vis-à-vis contemporary political dilemmas, reflecting upon the conditions that characterize contemporary Palestinian communities." Food and hospitality are envisioned as embodied "interventions" to reflect on contemporary political dilemmas, like the loss of Palestinian food traditions and preparations in the face of Israeli settler colonialism. These dilemmas are quotidian and so is her embodied activism. Mirna presented wild plants as something to be preserved but not reified, to be consumed in celebration with those who are familiar with the tastes and those who needed to be reminded of them. As Lisa Heldke (2016) discovered when she shellacked her mother's last frozen homemade piecrust into an unsightly dysfunctional object, her mother would have been better honored through intended use of her last piecrust – to fill, bake, and share it —instead of objectifying it. Sometimes, particularly with food, it is better to savor the ephemeral product and preserve instead the *knowledge* that allows one to reproduce it, and to remember the power of sharing and enjoying food together.

I had met Mirna through mutual friends a few years earlier, and I had participated in her Jerusalem food tour, "Wandering Through Flavours: The Old City of Jerusalem" in October 2018, where I was able to see one of the last remaining sesame mills and sweet shops, ending with a tasting table reception at Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in East Jerusalem. At the risk of sounding like a foodie fan girl, I was delighted when I heard that Mirna's Wild Plants dinner was happening during my visit to Palestine in spring 2019. I had begun to feel nostalgic for my original fieldwork in Zabid (in Yemen),

which had involved an endless round of hospitable social events. Some of these were daily visits to show one's respect and friendship with the host families and some were more elaborate events for weddings or the birth of babies. I know how much work is involved in the planning and preparation of a formal party, and I was intrigued to go to a similar event in in Palestine. In Zabid, the site of hospitality was the host's home; simultaneously, the hosts attend closely to the enjoyment of their guests and the guests honor the hosts with their presence. Cost and comfort are the responsibility of the host family, to whom honor then accrues. These kinds of hosting events were often intensely competitive (see Meneley [1996] 2016). In the Palestine Hosting Society events, Mirna draws on the work of architect Sandi Hilal's (2019) project *al-Madafah* (refugee hosting), where Syrian refugees in Sweden, (the permanent "guests") attempt, at least symbolically, to claim and embody the encompassing power of the host by sharing their life stories with Swedish hosts (now refigured as guests). Mirna was inspired by Hilal's use of the act of hosting as a way of drawing attention to dispossession. In other parts of the Middle East, hospitality is also used to address displacement and loss. For instance, Vivien Solano (2019) describes the strategic way that Sahrawi refugees in Algeria perform autonomy, dignity, and agency in hospitality as a way of making good their claims that they deserve sovereignty. Solano makes a persuasive case that women's work in the production of hospitality can be seen as a part of revolutionary praxis (see also Wilson 2016).

What Mirna is doing with her Society is taking a familiar and valued style of hospitality, with food at its center, and transforming it in ways that are both moral and political to address the difficulty of being a host when your territory – your land – is occupied. Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2020) offers some generative reflections on how the global platform of Airbnb operates in the West Bank, noting how Israeli guests can be refused access to a Palestinian house. This is a brief moment of power in a place where Israeli soldiers are known for nocturnal home invasions.

The public space of the Palestinian Museum during Mirna's Wild Plants dinner was where Palestinians were both host and guest in a collective celebration of their food traditions. Hospitality – sharing food together – became a place-making and place-preserving strategy, highlighting the foods that nurture and define Palestinians in an ephemeral moment of pleasurable convivial pedagogy. The hope was that the guests would, in the spirit of generalized reciprocity, engage in their own practices of culinary preservation and pass the knowledge onto their own networks.

Rather than merely mourning the loss of what was once theirs, a practice associated with older politicians, younger Palestinian activists are looking for something tactile and positive to preserve. The fact that the West Bank is under Israeli control, to a greater or lesser extent depending on whether one is in Area A, B, or C, affects quotidian life for all Palestinians living there. However, there is some Palestinian resistance to having the Israeli narrative completely dominate the narrative, not that they find the post-Oslo politics of the Palestinian Authority inspirational. Although traditional "politics" are not persuasive to food activists, their own activities are indeed political: foods and plants are viewed as possible sites for reclamation, comfort, and pride. In one verdant quote, Mirna said with spirit: "*Khallas* [stop] with the politics, we want to connect to our richness, not the misery." The power of smell and taste is particularly significant to the displaced, the dispossessed, those yearning to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. The sensual embodied pleasure of the event enhances commitment to the wider cause, allowing an inviting space of political action that seems more rewarding and potentially powerful than the politics associated with the "phantom state" of the Palestinian Authority, which is the state that people refer to and recognize is there but know is not able to do much of anything. Hosting an event celebrating

local foods seems relatively benign; however, it has subversive potential, ephemeral though it be. The Palestine Hosting Society events are announced on Facebook and Instagram, which are known to be surveilled by Israeli security.

**The Site of the Hosting**

The Palestinian Museum was an inspired site for this Edible Wild Plants dinner because in many ways it embodies the problem that Mirna's hospitality was trying to overcome: How does one address cultural and material loss and both welcome and embody a population that is so dispersed as refugees? This is true even in the West Bank because it is fragmented by checkpoints, walls, and permits. As one critic puts it, "What people call 'Palestine' is more a conceptual space nowadays, rather than a contiguous geography" (Vartanian 2017). Along with art exhibits, the Palestinian Museum, which opened in 2016, features remarkable terraced gardens that are designed to highlight the plants of Palestine over the centuries. The museum is situated in the town of Bir Zeit, close to Ramallah and the Bir Zeit University. The university is not only the center for Palestine's most talented intellectuals but also an institution that has been at the center of the political opposition to Israeli domination since the first and second intifadas.[4]

The museum is Palestine's first energy-efficient green building with a LEED silver certification. It was nominated for an Agha Khan Award for Architecture in 2019 at the World Architecture Festival in Berlin for being "aesthetically pleasing and environmentally responsible."[5] As Hanan Toukan notes, the gardens of the museum also invoke plant politics in the politics of displacement:

> The planting on the grounds of the Museum of groves of apricot, pomegranate, mulberry, cypress, olive, walnut and fig trees, lemons and oranges, herbs like zaatar, mint and other plants that Israel has appropriated as part of a policy of erasing the memory and identity of Palestinian people, are a step towards reclaiming what has been taken away. But standing inside the small Museum and looking out of the floor-to-ceiling windows that adorn an entire wall that overlooks the hills and the Mediterranean Sea in the distance that Palestinians are barred from reaching, thanks to Israeli imposed restrictions on movement, the foundation on which Zionism stands is usurped, even mocked, if only momentarily (Toukan 2018, 16).

The politics of plants and their cultivation, harvesting, and foraging are as central to this museum as they were to Mirna's dinner. Her creative approach to live art found a welcome home at the museum, which is the site of many pedagogical, sociable, and artistic workshops – including on edible plants and wildflowers – along with the more conventional displays of visual art. With Mirna as the organizer, chef, artist, and professor of the dinner, the "host" was refigured as the Palestinian people, who are in some senses appreciating themselves and their own cuisine, but not as an end in itself. At this particular event, hospitality was employed as an ephemeral enactment of positive possibilities for a Palestinian future. The gracious means of sharing becomes a means of regenerating community; countering attempts to make Palestinians feel marginal in their own land; and celebrating the nurturing power of the land itself through consuming its healthy and delicious but now neglected foods. Although some foreigners were present, the guests were mostly Palestinian. While I did not ask anyone about their demographics, the guests appeared to be mostly middle class, with a few well-known authors like Raja Shehadeh and many university-educated food activists whom I had met on different projects.

Mirna's storytelling began in Arabic, although there was plenty of "code switching" to English throughout. The event felt celebratory, helped by the presence of the camera people from the news channel Al Jazeera filming a short piece about Mirna's Palestine Hosting Society.[6] This performance art dinner was intended as an embodiment of Palestinian wild plant edible heritage; designed to evoke tactile perceptions and pleasures of smell, taste, and touch; and as "another way of experiencing our landscape," in Mirna's words.

**Art and Food in Mirna's Practice**

Mirna's philosophy underpinning her art practice for this event articulates her transformation from a visual artist working primarily with video installations to an artist who explores embodied art via food. In an interview with me in Ramallah the day after the event, Mirna described how she had been at a residency in Tokyo doing artwork with video that focused on the auditory and visual when she realized that she wanted to do more embodied art engaging her senses of smell and taste; she elaborates this point in her article, "Rooted in the Future" (Bamieh 2020a). She went to culinary school for three months on her return to Palestine, and the Palestine Hosting Society followed quickly after that. Unlike other art forms, her live art depends on embodied action, eating, smelling, tasting, touching, and visual appreciation. And her visual aesthetics were apparent in the beautiful presentation of the dishes, at the table, and in her photos posted on Instagram.

Visual arts often feature Palestinian plants, particularly olive trees, which have become iconic of Palestinian loss, suffering, and resistance. Tree trunks, olive oil, and even olive soap have been used as materials for Palestinian artists' work.[7] Rana Bishara, in a recent interview, describes serving olive oil and the beloved za'atar to foreign audiences at a performance piece called "Zeit and Zaatar," which offered a visceral experience of Palestine (cited in Abu-Lughod 2021, 137). Mirna is making a similar move by presenting the collective consumption of the wild plants of Palestine part of an artistic moment. She locates her art in a performative practice that is ephemeral (in this sense, her live art installation is more like a play) and designed to be transformative, so participants can imagine a desirable and delicious food future. She argues that it inspires the eaters to "have the guts to want more."[8] Mirna expressed her belief that her hosting entails two types of gathering: of recipes from all over Palestine and often the diaspora and of the plants from the earth itself. It is a way of overcoming the fragmentation of Palestine. Some refugees took the recipes to other places but then they lose access to the plants or products on which the recipes depend.

However much the Wild Plants dinner celebrated older, lost, or sidelined food traditions, the event was by no means an attempt to re-create a timeless, *fellahin* (peasant) past. Mirna is attuned to the cosmopolitan aesthetics of contemporary food presentation and its capture in digital photography, which Gioia compares to a form of "grace," and he also notes that photography has the capacity to transmute personal taste into group identity (2019, 5). When Mirna reclaims knowledge about Palestinian plants and their traditional food preparations, she well recognizes that she is helped in this task by social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, which allow her to draw on the knowledge of widely dispersed Palestinians – some of whom cannot even enter their homeland – to help her identify plants and offer preparations from various regions of Palestine. Palestinians might show an Instagram photo of a plant or a dish to their grandmother, for instance, and reply to Mirna if they have a different name for it. In her use of Instagram videos, what is often noted are the differences in the regional dialects of Arabic for names of plants and recipes. Here too, as in Laila El-Haddad and Maggie Schmitt's work (2012), food and recipes are trying to overcome the harsh separation of Gaza from other Palestinians. Mirna recently announced

that the Hosting Society would move permanently to Instagram. I asked her if this was because, as my undergraduate students have informed me, that Facebook was for "old people"; she chuckled, but did not deny it.[9] However, the week before the event, Mirna posted short video clip "teasers" on Facebook and Instagram showing the food being prepared and noting where tickets could be purchased. This marketing was quite effective because tickets sold out within a day.

**The Event: The Wild Plants Dinner**

Mirna told me that she, like many artists, questioned herself and her work: "What is the use of this?" In this instance, she described her work's *use* as reclaiming Palestinian food history in a critique of the ongoing Israeli occupation. Her dinner table becomes the site of embodied pedagogy and celebration, capable of moving her guests. It is perhaps not surprising that as a food scholar, I found the whole event persuasive. While it is ephemeral (like any meal), it is not superficial and is based on intensive fieldwork and consultation. Everything was planned to highlight the theme of wild plants, from the selection of foraged wild flowers on each table; to the napkins designed by Mirna's sister, Yara, which were silk-screened with images of four different za'atar plants, a "star" of Palestinian every day cuisine[10] and to the serving plates, some of which Mirna made herself in a pottery studio. The napkins were designed to be souvenirs for the guests; mine was appropriately stained with olive oil and still smelling deliciously of za'atar when I unpacked it on my return to Canada.

Mirna designed the dinner to highlight the recent celebration of wild plants that can be eaten; the value is in their edibility, but there is more to it than that. In Proustian fashion, these contemporary Palestinian food activists, Mirna among them, want to highlight how food is deeply connected to emotions, nostalgia, and longing. They also highlight a concern Palestinians share with many other peoples, which is having aspects of their cuisine appropriated without concern for their general welfare as people. Here she refers to what every Palestinian has noticed – the recent trend of describing traditional Palestinian food as Israeli. These practices of appropriation are noted in several Palestinian cookbooks (see Mishan 2020), and have also come up in conversations I have had with food activists over the past four years. Inevitably after a spirited rant about how conventional politics are dead and no one sees any future in participating in them, comes the assertion of a preferable everyday politics of preserving the knowledge, the pride, and the distinctiveness of their environment and its food. In Mirna's formulation, food is key to absorbing the knowledge (and taste) of the landscape.[11] Both food and knowledge are for sharing, preferably with company.

Unlike other forms of hosting, this one is narrated and infuses pedagogy with pleasure, yet it also retains the obligation to share food generously in a spirit of conviviality. The verbal interventions about the plants and recipes Mirna offers with each course belong more to the genre of storytelling than lecturing; she then stands back to allow the smaller conversations to unfold at each table. It was probably all for the best that one of the goals of the event was to provoke the sharing of memories because the conversation at each table quickly bubbled up as people exchanged thoughts on the dishes as we sampled them. There were a few translations into English or French, which quickly ended as multilingual commentary took over with plenty of laughter and some friendly arguments. I admired Mirna's skill at getting her audience's attention back after her dishes so quickly inspired such enthusiastic reflections, although she did occasionally have to raise her voice over the din.

There were many original, tasty moments, but I will focus on three that seem to be spurring plant movements all over Palestine: (1) learning how to identify edible plants; (2) learning how to prepare them; and (3) preserving recipes not as an untouched archive but as a potential for further creativity. For instance, za'atar is central to Palestinian cuisine, and Mirna's pickled za'atar is an interesting innovation. One creative twist on a traditional recipe was her preparation of nettles, which she turned it into an Italian-style pesto with *loz* (green almonds) instead of pine nuts. But this nettle pesto was not served with pasta Italian style; instead, everyone dipped their bread in it Palestinian style. The salad included some wild asparagus, a "treasure" found during foraging in the spring.

*Loof*

I opened this article with Mirna's introduction to loof, the potentially throat-closing plant. After highlighting the scientific name, *Arum palaestinum*, Mirna relayed how recent scientific studies found that loof is rich in iron and vitamins and is beneficial for diabetics. Lest we follow the ways of some naive people who tried to eat it raw, Mirna gave us directions to transform the loof from poisonous to nutritious through slow cooking in plenty of olive oil. The scientific evidence that loof was healthy was cited as Mirna as "after the fact" proof that the wisdom of grandmothers needed to be respected.

*'Akkoub*

As Mirna introduced each course, she described the practical skills needed to ensure wild plant edibility. 'Akkoub, also known as gundelia, provides a formidable challenge. It is an edible thistle that does not lend itself to easy preparation. Gloves are recommended for those with delicate hands because it must be skinned immediately before frying it. This cannot be done ahead of time because its spines will grow back. This is a wonderful example of both plant persistence and testimony to the importance of sharing cooking knowledge. As noted earlier, Israelis have forbidden the foraging of 'akkoub in many parts of the West Bank (Manna 2020). The 'akkoub dish generated a small debate at our table but because it was baked in a doughy triangle, which my tablemates found smothered the flavor of the 'akkoub. I confess I gobbled it up without complaint, happy enough to taste it for the first time after hearing so much about it.

**Wild Plant Fieldwork**

Large hospitable events require much behind-the-scene labor. I was fascinated by the tales that Mirna told me about her preparation. Mirna's creative interpretation of hospitality begins with two or three months of research prior to each event; her method sounded very much like the participant observation of cultural anthropologists. For instance, Mirna interviewed elders in Palestinian communities in their homes about wild plants and recipes. They were initially surprised at her interest, but Mirna said it was easier to elicit their food memories if she spent time with them in their own kitchens. She gave her elderly interlocutors her samples from recipes, and they could tell her how they preferred to make it and perhaps volunteered how their neighbors made it, sometimes with praise and sometimes with criticism. These forms of knowledge are often passed down in familial contexts, so she explained how she felt like she was finding new grandparents during this research, making kin through plants and recipes.

As part of her preparation, Mirna would take walks with those more knowledgeable than she, which is how she learned the essential art of foraging. She admitted that in the

beginning all the plants looked the same to her. She describes her research walks as "introducing my body to plants." She said she had grown particularly fond of snacking on the yellow wild mustard flowers. Food activists like Mirna are aware of the global resurgence of interest in foraging. These include Rene Redzepi's foraging practices in the revival of Nordic cuisine (see Kramer 2011) and Viljoen's *Forage, Harvest, Feast* (2018). Yet in these other contexts, foragers do not usually face having their access to the beloved and desired plants forbidden to them. Mirna conducted her research for a funded project and with a particular event in mind, but many Palestinians – no doubt inspired by Raja Shehadeh's (2007) beautiful *Palestinian Walks* – have shown renewed interest in walking and foraging as political acts.[12] As noted above, restrictions on foraging plants essential to the tastes and smells that make food beloved, like za'atar, *miramiya* (sage) and 'akkoub have long been seen as a way of restricting Palestinian movement, using the "preservation of nature" as a guise for colonizing the land. As Mirna told me in an interview, this prevents them from being Palestinian in this traditional way of connecting with the land. One's relationship to the land becomes abstract when the land itself is difficult to access. She said, "The geography is not one you can know in an embodied way. This changes yourself." When artist and filmmaker Jumana Manna found herself at her parents' house in Shuafat during the COVID-19 pandemic and unable to continue her film making because of the quarantine lockdown, she found time to walk and forage, reinforcing Mirna's point about foraging and belonging. As Manna wrote, "Throughout the quarantine, foraging became a hybrid performance of food sovereignty as well as culinary delight; it is for me an intimate practice that strengthened my sense of belonging and connection to the landscape" (2020, 6).

Mirna said that as "the land is taken from us" by Israelis, Palestinians are losing the knowledge of how to identify the plants, what they are named, and the uses as food and as medicine. There is a general recognition that knowledge of the plants is not bred in the Palestinian bone but born out of Palestinian cultural heritage, as is its architectural heritage and arts and crafts heritage. These all need to be preserved. "New eyes" are essential for learning to identify the edible wild plants, like the wild asparagus she described at her dinner as a "beautiful treasure." The the wild plant world is a "treasure box" that people now rue neglecting. (In contrast to deliberately cultivated asparagus, wild asparagus sprouts up unpredictably here and there on the land.) I told her how my interview with an olive farmer a few days earlier had been completely derailed by his spying a wild asparagus under an olive tree, and we spent the rest of the afternoon darting after wild asparagus as we talked. I finally, and viscerally, understood the mushroom foragers who derive personal pleasure and community esteem for their skills at foraging (Tsing 2015). Like mushrooms, the wild asparagus can be sold for a high price in the market, but it isn't a predictable crop and foragers have varying skills. I learned, as did Mirna, about the importance of having a guide who teaches you how to "see"; this is the information and the practices that need to be transmitted because they underpin the possibilities of a food future with the skills of the past.

**Conclusion**

This article explores an example of contemporary food activism combined with cultural heritage preservation. The food that was served on a plate and celebrated in the Palestinian Museum had a stake in many forms of cultural preservation, from the visual arts to plants. In the Wild Plants dinner, presented as live art, participants observed the strategic way in which the moral practices of hospitality engaged with the political practices of drawing attention to one's longstanding dispossession. Along with the celebration of local plants and foods as a form of "fertile resistance," Mirna and other food activists in Palestine are

influenced by global discourses and practices about resisting the homogenization of food global chains. These activities include the "farm to table" movement; community-shared agriculture; and concerns about chemical fertilizers, seed saving, and supporting local agricultural products. Another of Mirna's motivating factors in initiating the Palestine Hosting Society was her observation that restaurants in Palestine had begun serving the same generic "Middle Eastern" food, forsaking any distinctive contributions (Chef Fadi Kattan makes a similar point in Kattan [2020]). She and other Palestinian food activists also note the remarkable number of fried chicken and pizza franchises in Ramallah and Bethlehem, signifying the global sweep of industrial fast food that wreaks havoc on traditional restaurants and street foods here as in other parts of the world. While one cannot claim Israel/Palestine exceptionalism in having food as a political issue, given how highly charged food politics are in many parts of the world, one must note its distinct contours in this particularly contested place. In contemporary Palestine, food is exceptionally politically loaded: Palestinians are concerned about the Israeli settlers taking their land, the Israeli government annexing the West Bank, Israeli food products dominating their markets, and food allowed into Gaza being calculated by calorie count rather than by desirability or health (Seikaly 2012). Food is exceptionally politically loaded when the distinctive elements of Palestinian cuisine are successfully marketed as "Israeli cuisine" because it "refreshes" the Palestinians' trauma of their diaspora and their occupation (Bamieh 2020c).

These practices of shared meals have been put forward as collective reintroductions to distinctive cultural heritage of Palestinian plants and cuisine, reclaiming older traditions when food was known to heal as well as nourish and to provide pleasure, comfort, and strength. Mirna's Palestine Hosting Society wants to preserve and record, not advocate a straightforward mechanical reproduction of practices of the past or indeed assert the existence of a unitary Palestinian peasant past. Initiatives like Mirna's Society are committed to respectfully acknowledging the grandmothers as guardians of valuable knowledge. Some recipes are lost because Palestinian access to the wild plants is made difficult, but sometimes, as Mirna notes, recipes become lost because the memories they evoke are just too painful. In some food discourses there is a strong romanticism of the power of food to sweep one across time and space, like Proust's madeleines. But Mirna notes she must respect the limits of what her interlocutors can stand. Sometimes people leave their recipes behind because making them again is too traumatic, reminding them of the places they cannot return to and people they cannot see again. Sometimes the past, with its memories of loss and destruction, is too difficult (cf. Sa'adi and Abu-Lughod 2007). Sometimes it is much easier for recipes to travel than Palestinians themselves, as they do not need permits or passports. A longer-term goal for Mirna is to compile a "treasure trove" of recipes, not just stored as an untouched and untouchable treasure but as an archive that is to be used creatively and mined for both taste and health.

Mirna's hospitable live art presentations are attempts to use food to re-create a sense of shared culinary heritage and belonging under conditions of extreme disruption and fragmentation. They are designed to reclaim the position of host from passive recipient of aid and to assert control over a future that can be imagined as including nourishing food treasures. Because the relationship with the land is disrupted, it becomes abstract, and this changes Palestinian selves. These dinner events attempt not to bridge the fragments of a shared community to worship itself but to try to bring together webs of people distanced from each other against their will. Embodied practices challenge the stealing of time and place that are embodied in checkpoint and permit regimes (Hammami 2019, Peteet 2017; Tawil-Souri 2017). Mirna argues that because Palestinians are uncertain about the land, the house, the home, and the table, they are starting to use hosting as a means of asserting

control. By repossessing power that is embedded in the host at the table, they are essentially rejecting the position of the receiving victim or the dependent. While live art practices such as these highlight the unfairness of their contemporary condition, they also assert a hope of imagining a better, grounded, tasteful future.

## Notes

My first thanks are to Mirna Bamieh not only for her wonderful artistic work and culinary skill but also for her rich insights into hospitality. Fieldwork is nothing but rewarding when one has interlocutors so richly gifted with wit, insight, and generosity. I am continually impressed with the creativity and determination of all the agro-activists I have met over the years, including my olive-kin, Aisha Mansour, who accompanied me to Mirna's dinner. I treasure Omar Qassis for his nonstop olive talk and asparagus-foraging instructions. Thanks to Fadi Kattan for his thoughts on Palestinian cuisine, delivered with searing wit. I thank Bruce Grant, Rema Hammami, and Paul Manning for their comments and friendship, and Vaidila and Theo Banelis and my siblings for making me laugh and appreciate the value of shared meals. I appreciate the comments of the reviewers of this article as well as those of the editors.

1. Palestinian architecture (particularly Riwaq, the Centre for Architectural Conservation founded by Suad Amiry in 1991) and the distinctive Palestinian embroidery are domains of cultural heritage and part of long-standing efforts to preserve Palestinian material culture.
2. This was held via Zoom at the Palestine Writes Literature Festival in December 2020 (Bamieh 2020b). The discussion had originally been scheduled as a plenary session for the March 2020 festival to be held in New York City, which was changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Palestine Hosting Society, https://palestinehostingsociety.com/.
4. For example, the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America wrote a letter of protest on July 21, 2021, about the recent detention of forty-five Bir Zeit students.
5. The Palestinian Museum, http://www.palmuseum.org/the-palestinian-museum-on-2019-shortlist-for-aga-khan-award-for-architecture.
6. This film, "Saving Palestine's Forgotten Foods," has a memorable vista of the beautifully set tables (YouTube video, 5:16 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYD070D7iyE). To convey the visuals of the event, Mirna used short clips of this film in her online presentations at the Toronto Palestinian Film Festival (2020) and the Thinking Food Futures workshop (Bamieh 2020c).
7. For recent provocative examples, see Dashan (2020).
8. For example, left radical activists in Denmark, disillusioned with state politics, believe revolution begins in how activists eat. Their foraging begins in dumpsters, which is designed to subvert the wastes and exploitations of capitalist food production (Kroijer 2015).
9. However, the vibrant and often funny exchanges on the Mama's Palestinian Kitchen Facebook group (twenty-thousand members) indicate that Facebook is still a place for sharing photos and memories of Palestinian foods from different regions and their preparations in the diaspora.
10. For more on the politics of foraging za'atar, see Brighi et. al (2018); Manna (2020).

11. For a helpful review of the "taste of place" literature, see Beriss (2019).
12. For my own reflections on the strangeness of quantified walking versus foraging walking, see Meneley (2019).

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