

## Straight to the Source

In the place where her father and forefathers were born, Debra Kamin experiences what she loves most about Israel: its food



Small plates at Helena, in the port city of Caesarea



Nana Estate Winery is an oasis of green in the Negev Desert

I returned to Israel because I was hungry. I grew up in Ohio on a diet of Rice-A-Roni, Tropicana, and chicken nuggets, but some of my strongest memories of taste are rooted in this tiny, complicated country. After dinner, my father would tell my sister and me about the fragrant orange groves behind his childhood home in the city of Kfar Saba, and the tomato-and-goat-cheese sandwiches, pressed together on warmed seeded bread, that his *savta* (grandma) Yona packed for bus trips to Tel Aviv. Each summer we would return to Israel to eat schnitzel and piping-hot chicken livers in my aunt Chana's kitchen, drink sticky-sweet kumquat gazoz, and swim in the Mediterranean.

These flavors lured me back to Tel Aviv, where I lived for nearly a decade; though I've since returned to the States, I still feel their pull. So in early 2020, I went back again to see—and savor—Israel differently. Rather than make restaurant reservations in Tel Aviv, I decided to rent a car so I could go to the source of the country's bounty. It's a surprisingly feasible proposition: Israel has about the same square mileage as New Jersey, and with an agricultural heritage rooted deep in the biblical rhythm of the seasons, farm-to-table is the normal way of life. In modern times, those farms have been the sites of many innovations: The seedless bell pepper was invented in Israel, as was the golden-yellow Galia melon, and even modern drip irrigation. Renting a car is easy, and roads are well marked with English signage.

I set off from Tel Aviv, stopping on the northern outskirts at Tzuk Farm Deli, a nondescript restaurant wedged in a shopping plaza. While owner Assaf Shinhar maneuvered lamb kebabs onto the grill, his business partner, Tomer Tzuk, sifted through nettles and zucchini flowers from his family's farm, which sits in the



An organic farm surrounds the hotel Mizpe Hayamim



Six Senses Shoharut, in the remote Arava Valley

Elah Valley—where David is said to have fought Goliath—and supplies the restaurant with nearly every stalk and seed it serves. Sated from an herb-laden salad with goat cheese, nutty tahini, and briny olives, I followed Highway 2, the Mediterranean glittering on my left and the country's wide coastal plain, dotted with farms and archaeological ruins, on my right.

In the far northwestern corner of the country, the white chalk cliffs of Rosh HaNikra beckoned: a maze of waves, sea caves, and what some claim is the steepest cable car on earth from which to view it all. After a lunch of creamy sweetbreads in sunchoke purée at Michael Local Bistro, where the garden is always in bloom, I headed east, briefly hugging the border of Lebanon before reaching Mizpe Hayamim, a boutique hotel set on a 15-acre organic farm. There, all of my senses were fired up—first, with a therapeutic herb massage, where tinctures from the garden were rubbed into my joints; then at dinner, as I feasted on entrecôte skewered with olive branches; then again, as I watched the sun rise over the endless blue of the Sea of Galilee.

A day later, I stood with chef Amos Sion on the rocky shore of Olga Beach, in the city of Hadera, a place I've known since childhood. "Look away from the horizon," he told me, "and down at your feet." There, hiding in plain sight, were sea arugula and ice lettuce. At Helena, his restaurant in Caesarea, he transformed our foraged haul into a feast with shrimp, tomatoes, tuna, mussels, and yellow carrots. We washed it down with glasses of a crisp Chardonnay-forward blend from nearby Margalit Winery, where co-owner Yair Margalit approaches his dry-farmed vineyards from a chemist's perspective. "We don't have much water here," Margalit said. "I don't irrigate. I make the vine roots dig deeper to gain more water." Everywhere, it seems, the land can be coaxed into giving, if you know how.

After an overnight at the cheeky new Dan Caesarea Resort, which had a *Beach Blanket Bingo* vibe, I headed back south, all the way to Sde Boker. Here, in the vast desert that accounts for more than 60 percent of Israel's landmass, I stood at the burial site of David Ben-Gurion, the nation's first prime minister, letting the wind whip my face as shadows moved across the crags of the Zin Valley. I found solace at Kornmehl Farm, a goat farm and cheerful dairy restaurant perched on a desolate hill, where owner Anat Kornmehl detailed her family's careful production methods, starting with milking the goats twice a day. Fellow travelers and happy dogs gathered around us on the restaurant's shady patio as we enjoyed a platter of creamy Tomme and a homemade knafeh pastry with sharp, stringy goat-cheese filling. I thought of my father and his rucksack sandwiches, and how far we were from each other—and how close.

En route to Eilat, the country's southernmost tip, I paused in the Negev Desert, whose amber folds and crags have become increasingly popular with international travelers, especially since the long-awaited opening last summer of the gracious Six Senses Shoharut. Here, I wandered Kibbutz Neot Semadar, a place of rose-hued buildings that seemed to rise from the dust, browsing pottery, jewelry, stained glass, and weaving, all created on site, then ordered an herb-infused port at the organic winery. Later, I headed to Timna Park, one of southern Israel's largest attractions, where mushroom-shaped hoodoos unfurled from the sand.

Each day of my journey, the landscape shifted a dozen times. There were olive groves and dunes of sand; high green hills of fennel and salty lowlands sprouting tangy sea weeds. I drank it all in greedily, hoping it would hold me over until my next return. Before my flight home, I made a sandwich with the goat cheese from Kornmehl Farm, and then, for good measure, I made two more. I smiled as I tucked all three into my bag. Savta Yona would have approved.