

VIEW FROM JERUSALEM WITH HARRIET SHERWOOD



Jerusalem promotes culinary attractions alongside religion and history

Market and restaurants provide showcase for Israeli cuisine



Serving food at the Azura restaurant in Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market Photograph: Harriet Sherwood/guardian.co.uk

There was a moment's hesitation before Udi Epstein, the sous-chef at Angelica, an upmarket Jerusalem restaurant, revealed what he had prepared for us to taste. Then he said it in Hebrew. There was another hesitation before the translation was supplied. "Buffalo testicles." Gulp.

Angelica is one of the city's finest restaurants in a city which is increasingly marketing itself as a cultural and culinary centre alongside its religious and historical attractions.

We were there as part of a food tour of West Jerusalem, starting at the wonderful Mahane Yehuda shuk (market), a bustling, buzzing place where Jerusalemites go to buy fresh fruit and vegetables, fish and meat, dried fruits, nuts, cheese, olives and olive oil, bread and pastries. Every sense is put to work: the sound of the traders' calls, the smell and taste of fresh falafel and bourekas (pastries), the smooth feel of plump and glossy eggplants and nectarines, the sight of bundles of fresh parsley, coriander, dill and mint.

The shuk is nearly always crowded, but Friday mornings are mayhem as people shop before the market closes for Shabbat. It's a mistake to go when hungry, unless you're planning to head first to a cafe, as you end up buying far more than you can either carry or consume.

Eli Mizrahi's coffee shop was the first to open in the shuk, almost nine years ago. According to our guide, Tali Friedman, a chef and author of a book on Jerusalem's culinary attractions, people thought the idea was mad: who would want to stop for coffee when going to the shuk to shop? Now the market is crammed with restaurants and cafes, and is a magnet for people-watchers as well as food-lovers.

Traditional Israeli food is essentially Middle-Eastern influenced by European Jewish, North African and Mediterranean cuisines. The raw ingredients available here are mouth-watering, but food is relatively expensive. The same fruit, vegetables, nuts and pickles are much cheaper in the West Bank.

On our tour, we visited two contrasting establishments in the shuk. First, to the Iraqi market, a small square in which old men sit under the shade of an awning to play backgammon. Here we went to Azura, open since the 1950s, where food is cooked slowly in huge pots over traditional oil burners called ptelias.

The food is Turkish, influenced by Iraq and Syria, says Moshe, one of the owner's sons. This is the opposite of fast food, he says, stirring vats of oxtail, rice and beans, stewed eggplant and lungs in a rich red sauce ("very popular").



The open kitchen at Machneyuda, Jerusalem's coolest restaurant

Photograph: Harriet Sherwood/guardian.co.uk

Not far away is Machneyuda, Jerusalem's coolest restaurant, fully booked for up to six weeks in advance. Using the freshest ingredients from the shuk, the chefs in the open kitchen cook contemporary dishes fast against a background of loud music.

The restaurant is not kosher but like most restaurants in Jerusalem it closes on Shabbat. Every Friday afternoon, religious people in the neighbourhood come to check that the restaurant is closing in time, said Yossi Elad, one of the three co-owners, as he served us ceviche with watermelon.

The tour continued to Racha, a family-owned Georgian restaurant off Jaffa Street, only open for two months and serving traditional but kosher Georgian food, heavy with nuts and herbs, and to Kadosh, a coffee and patisserie shop that could be straight out of Vienna or Budapest.

Then we went to Angelica. Ah yes, those buffalo testicles. They were served in a light broth with olives and dried tomato. I didn't know whether it was, er, the complete item or a cut. The texture was meltingly soft. The flavour was delicate. There were murmurs of appreciation. I tried to eat it all, honestly, but after two mouthfuls I decided my duty was done.

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