

FLAVOR OF THE MONTH



Eating by the book

TOVA DICKSTEIN
adds fig sap to milk
to make cheese.

• Text and photo: AMY SPIRO

Tova Dickstein wants you to think twice when you sprinkle za'atar on your pita or humous.

After all, it's more than just a tasty topping. Hyssop, the main ingredient of the ground spice mixture, is an ancient herb – the same one the Bible says was used to spread blood on the doorposts of Jewish homes during the plague of the death of the firstborn.

"It is one of the most important spices in our culture," says Dickstein, noting that hyssop was also prized for its medicinal purposes and used, along with cedar wood and the ashes of a red heifer, during the biblical ritual purifying process.

Dickstein could tell you many other tales of foods we eat that have biblical origins. As the youth leadership director at the Neot Kedumim Biblical Landscape Reserve and an expert – with a PhD – in biblical foods, she spends her days immersed in researching, learning and living the culinary lifestyle of the ancient Israelites.

Dickstein didn't always work in this narrow field; she used to be a teacher. But she still remembers the moment she decided to devote herself to full-time research in the ancient culinary arts.

Over two decades ago, while she was living in New York during her husband's tenure as head of the Jewish Agency there, she was walking along the street in the cold, wet weather when she smelled something very familiar.

"I smelled a burning smell; it was Israeli eggplants," she recounts. "My mother used to burn it from side to side on a pan... it was the smell of my childhood."

Dickstein followed her nose and encountered a Lebanese restaurant cooking the fleshy purple vegetables.

"I thought this was my childhood, but it's Lebanon. So what is my Israeli food, what is my national food? Of course, we don't have a national food because Jews came from all over the Diaspora," she remembers thinking. "That was the beginning of my research."

After her return to Israel, Dickstein earned an MA in archeology and zoology (she is also in charge of Neot Kedumim's livestock) and subsequently a PhD from Bar-Ilan University "on the dining table in Israel during the Second Temple, Mishna and Talmud."

In her research she read ancient Jewish texts and searched for parallels in other historical literature, visiting cooks in Greece, Italy, Jordan, Crete and Turkey.

"We are part of the Mediterranean," she says. "Israel is at the roads from Europe to Africa and there are always influences from other people." She adds that there are many cultural foods that Jews once had that "we lost it, but they kept it."

Her research took 10 years to complete, studying not only food but its effect on society.

"It's not only about food itself, it's about all the symbols," she says, "about the culture that surrounds food, manners, agriculture... from the field to the plate."

Today, in addition to developing the educational programming at Neot Kedumim, she leads culinary tours of the 250-hectare (620-acre) park, a re-creation of the flora and fauna that were present on the land 3,000 years ago. Participants in her workshops roam the park's grounds and pick

plants and herbs that grow there, cabbage, celery, leeks, coriander and parsley, learning about the connections between the foods and the ancient texts.

"We speak about lentils with Jacob [who bargained with his brother Esau to trade his birthright for lentil soup], and then we make lentil soup." After gathering their ingredients, tour groups then cook an ancient meal and sit down together to enjoy it.

"I give people recipes but nobody follows, because when you give people materials they create their own recipes," Dickstein says. "But it is nice because everyone is cooking from his own home, his own family, and then we eat it together... this is the creation of the new Israeli meal; Everyone speaks about his home and how his mother used to cook, and this is the new Israeli food."

Other activity options at Neot Kedumim include making cheese out of milk and fig sap or grinding flour from wheat to use in making pitot or matzot.

Dickstein tries as much as possible to use only things found on the grounds of the park, but due to seasonal concerns and kashrut issues, ingredients sometimes have to be purchased.

"We are trying to buy things as similar as we can to ancient [times]," she says, not that newer foods like tomatoes, sweetcorn, potatoes and peppers are never used, "but it's never quite the same."

And while she admits she doesn't eat a fully biblical diet at home, Dickstein says her work has opened her eyes to her eating habits and she eats more whole wheat, less meat and more lentils. "But I haven't given up coffee."