

LIFE ON A PLATE

SEASON 4, EPISODE 1: YOTAM OTTOLENGHI & NOOR MURAD

SPEAKERS

Alison Oakervee, Yasmin Khan, Yotam Ottolenghi, Noor Murad

Yasmin

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Hi, I'm Yasmin Khan and you're listening to Life on a Plate, the podcast from Waitrose. Throughout the season my co-host, Alison Oakervee and I, are going to be talking to a range of fantastic guests from many walks of life and asking them to share their stories through the food memories, dishes and ingredients that mean the most to them.

Hi Alison, how you doing?

Alison

Hi Yasmin, I'm really well thank you. How about you?

Yasmin

I'm really well and it feels like such a privilege to be joining you on season four of Life on a Plate. Thank you so much for inviting me on.

Alison

It's great to have you with us and I know we did a trailer but tell us a bit more about who you are and what you've done?

Yasmin

As you know I write cookbooks for a living. You know, I've written a few, mainly focused on Middle Eastern food. But I'm also really fascinated, not just in, you know, recipe writing, but the power of food to tell us, kind of, stories about ourselves and the world around us. So, I'm really looking forward to chatting to this incredible selection of guests we've got coming up and finding out about how the food that they've shared has influenced their lives.

Alison

Yeah, and we've got a great first guest, haven't we?

Yasmin

Absolutely, what a cracking first guest we've got Yotam Ottolenghi and Noor Murad, who, for me, are just two of my culinary inspirations, really. I think Yotam Ottolenghi needs very little introduction. But, you know, let's remind ourselves of who he is, he's the author of eight best-selling and multi award winning cookery books, a restaurateur and chef patron of the four London based Ottolenghi delis, as well as Nopi and Rovi restaurants. He's been a weekly columnist for The Saturday Guardian for over 13 years, and a regular contributor to The New York Times. But perhaps more than all of that, I feel like what Yotam has done over the last 15 years in his championing of vegetables has led to this thing which I think we can all identify as like the Ottolenghi effects like, you know, if someone says, 'Oh, that's a bit Ottolenghi', that it means that it's shorthand for a dish that's really vibrant, full of colour, very vegetable focused. Just incredible flavours and drama in the mouth is how he likes to describe it. And as well as Yotam, we've got one of his test kitchen colleagues, Noor Murad. Now, Noor is a Bahraini-born chef who's international work experience, she was a chef in New York, eventually brought her to the Ottolenghi family about five years ago. And she developed recipes for their brilliant book *Flavour*, as well as works for, you know, his masterclass series and their other online publications. And I really enjoyed talking to Noor, especially because her Bahraini roots had a real strong influence on her cooking and her recipes have got a lot of Arabic, Persian and Indian flavours, which I love sharing with people because I just think they're the best flavours in the world.

Alison

Have you cooked up any of them now we've got our hands on a book?

Yasmin

I did, I made the confit tandoori chickpeas where it's honestly, I feel it's gonna be like a weekday staple for me now. One of those really easy dishes where you just put everything in a casserole dish, bang it in the oven, it's ready in an hour. That's my favourite type of cooking. And it's really, like, spicy, kind of a bit like a Chana Masala, Indian flavours. And then I made a kind of Persian-inspired dish – a kofte, so kind of meatballs that were lamb and beef made with some rice in this beautiful, kind of, sweet and sour sauce. Yeah, it was absolutely delicious!

Have you have you cooked anything from it?

Alison

Yeah, I cooked the courgette and tomato loaf cake, it's kind of got a cheesy bread and he makes it with a really spicy tomato chutney, which he kind of put some of it in the loaf as well as serving it alongside. It was just delicious and perfect if you've got a glut of courgettes, like I've got in the garden.

Yasmin

Okay, I'm going to add that on to my list.

All right, then. Well, should we get going on the conversation?

Alison

Yeah, let's get going.

Yasmin

Okay, well, kicking off season four of Life on a Plate, here is our conversation with Yotam Ottolenghi and Noor Murad.

Hello, Yotam and Noor, thank you so much for joining us.

Yotam Ottolenghi

Hello. Good to be here.

Noor Murad

Lovely to be here.

Yasmin Khan

Do you know, Alison? Alison, have you guys met before?

Alison

No, we've never met, although Yotam, I need to confess, I was at the Cordon Bleu when you were. I think I worked at the Cordon Bleu in the recipe office when you were a student.

Yotam Ottolenghi

Oh wow.

Alison

Weren't you that around 98/99?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Yes. 97/98. Yeah.

Alison

Yeah. Because I was there, kind of, 97/98-2001 or something like that.

Yotam Ottolenghi

So we have met, we have met.

Alison

We've met. I used to get accused of being only wanting to work at the Cordon Bleu because of the white chocolate fudge with griotte cherries. Because they used to always be left over and there was a fire alarm and I actually got caught taking the tray out to the street.

Yotam Ottolenghi

You set it all up, you started the fire.

Alison

Yeah, but nice to meet you both and nice to meet you Noor, as well.

Noor Murad

Nice to meet you, Alison.

Yasmin

Both me and Alison were talking earlier about how we feel that we've been interacting with the whole Ottolenghi family for a while now. And we particularly enjoyed reminiscing about our very first Ottolenghi experience. I remember mine so clearly, honestly, it's so interesting, it was my birthday and I always take the day off and this is back in like 2007. It was before the first book came out but the Guardian column was still happening it must have just started and I knew that there was this place and I really remember, I went and it was the Islington branch I went to and this is also very relevant of the time because I got a cupcake, I mean that was so of the moment when the whole cupcake... everyone was eating cupcakes, I'd never get that now, I don't know why I did.

Yotam Ottolenghi

We used to make like four types of cupcakes every single day.

Noor Murad

We don't make cupcakes anymore, do we?

Yotam Ottolenghi

No, once in a blue moon.

Yasmin

But it was so, like, of that year, I think and it had like a rose cream, like you know, the frosting and it had a lemon base. Obviously already I was like, oh the flavours of the Middle East and I remember having like the salads and it was just such a moment for me actually, you know, I born in this country, been eating food in this country all my life, but all of a sudden, my taste buds were getting the vibrancy of the food and because we eat so much food that's like, my mum's a nutritionist so we always ate a lot of vegetables, a lot of Persian flavours, lots of like sours. So, I was getting all that herbs and freshness but it just looked so incredible. I walked out and that was it, I was a fan.

Yotam Ottolenghi

What about you Alison?

Alison

Oh, I just remember the magic of just the piles of the salad and the huge meringues, I mean, everyone is doing those big meringues now but it was those clouds that were in the window, the meringues that was just magical.

Yasmin

And the magic continues here and now with your new book, *Shelf Love*. The first and new series from the Ottolenghi test kitchen team. Me and Alison have both been cooking from the book this week, and absolutely loving it. Like all of the books that come out of the Ottolenghi test kitchen, the recipes are so vibrant, and delicious, and so colourful, that I've just bookmarked so many recipes that I'm going to be cooking in the coming months. But before we get talking about the concept behind the book, I'd love to hear more about your food backgrounds, and the journeys that you've taken that have brought you to this place now. So Yotam, let's start with you. What did food look like for you when you were growing up?

Yotam Ottolenghi

I grew up in Jerusalem, which is, it's a huge mix up and mash up of different cultures and cuisines. And in a way, it's really very interesting. My parents are a Jewish family from, my mum is, her family are Jews from Germany and my dad, my dad is from Italy. And in a sense I had, the German influence was not so strong in our household, that didn't stay with me as much as my Italian heritage which is my father, which is really, kind of, classical northern Italian food, polenta and pasta and gnocchis and very precise set of, you know, recipes that were followed to the T and they were always very good. But then when you'd walk out there was this, kind of, huge Palestinian influence which was the other half of Jerusalem the eastern part and we used to go a lot to Eastern Jerusalem and to the part of the West Bank at Bethlehem, Jericho, and really enjoy the food there. And there's a massive, you know, food tradition even within Palestinian culture, Yasmin, as you know so well now, there is so many kinds of foods, but I've, kind of, absorbed it by osmosis, just by the sheer fact that it was all around and we used to go and eat it all over. And it was a very different time in the history of conflict so it was much easier to go and interact and, er, you know, we've got this pizza bakery in East Jerusalem and the baker, Hassan, used to make, he had cats and they were all over the bakery and the oven was discovered actually in the wall. And you know, with kids, we just loved this whole kind of business of going and immersing ourselves in that world so these are the kinds of foods that I had when I was growing up.

Alison

How do you think growing up in Jerusalem has really affected your palate?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Yeah, It's something that I've only when Sami Tamimi, and I wrote the book, *Jerusalem*, it was the first time that I really spent time thinking about what is it that we've been eating and what was it like? And it wasn't, I'd never thought myself so much as a Jerusalem cook because there is something about leaving Jerusalem like everyone that leaves there, many people who leave their home town behind, they're very happy to see the back of it. And, er, Jerusalem is also quite heavy in so many ways. It weighs heavy on historically, now you really carry the weight of history in every step you take. And so growing up there was kind of complicated emotionally, because of the conflict, but also because of, you know, 3000 years of history. But then when we started working on the book, and understanding what it was like, I realised that I was really, kind of, I was very, I was privileged in many senses, because it is so rich. They've got the Palestinian tradition, which even that is so multi layered, as I've said, you know, there is Ottoman influences, Egyptian influences, Persian influences within Palestinian culture, but then you've got all the immigrants, the Jewish immigrants diasporas, people who come from different diasporas, a lot from North Africa, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, from Syria, from Iraq, and a lot of Iraqi Jews, Yemen, Iran, and then Ashkenazi Jews, with their tradition. So it's really, it's kind of, it's really hard to explain how diverse and complex this war all is. And I feel like I'm the beneficiary of this situation, because I've had so many different foods, but I also didn't, bring up, grew up in one particular tradition. It's that diversity, which is just so exciting.

Yasmin

I think your book *Jerusalem* does such a fantastic job of capturing all those different elements. Actually, I know from close hand, it's not an easy place to even write an introduction about so I can only imagine how difficult that must have been. But I remember I read it, and I thought, oh they've nailed it.

Yotam Ottolenghi

Thank you.

Yasmin

Noor, I'd love to hear about your culinary influences. You grew up in Bahrain, and your mother was English, and your father was Bahraini. And I'd love to hear. I know a little bit about the cuisine of Bahrain, because I've been down to the south of Iran, Bandar Abbas is very similar, kind of, it's a port town where there's just so many, kind of, Indian, Persian, African, Portuguese influences just because of the nature of the trading route. But I'd love to hear, yeah, what was the food like for you when you were growing up?

Noor Murad 13:38

Obviously, my dad is Bahraini and I was born and raised in Bahrain, I always say it's a combination of three different cultures. It's got a huge Persian influence in our food, and also a big Indian influence and Middle Eastern, so it's those three things combined into one, which makes it really, really unique. So I mean a lot of the dishes have so many herbs, liberal herbs which is definitely something from Iran. A lot of sourness from the black limes I think in Iran or they probably use the lighter green ones a bit more. And then we have very liberally spiced food which I think is a bit different to Iran, so we use a lot of Indian spices. And then there's like a huge street food culture. We love, like er and it's very, very simple things like you go to these little holes in the wall places and you get, we call it Khobez khabaz which is baker's bread and it's cooked in those clay ovens and the best way to have it is, you say I want Khobez double jiben which means double cheese. They basically like fold this big clay bread into like a triangle and like, they put this like cheese spread, unidentifiable cheese spread, I'm not I don't know if it's cheese and double means you want like a very thick layer of it and they like fold it they put it back in the ovens or like hot and melty and like delicious.

Yotam Ottolenghi

It's funny, we have, for Palestinian Arabs so the north of Israel, they do something quite similar. They take their fried flat bread and they spread it with labneh and then they put parsley, and then they fold it four times and stick it all up in a tabun or anything that's hot and then it's been... it's folded in the same way like four times and then it's eaten warm and it's just so good.

Noor Murad

Yeah. And then we'll have the other one is with this, this sauce that is very unique Bahrain it's called Mahyawa. It's basically like a fermented anchovy sauce. Not everybody loves it, but it's really, it's so delicious.

Yasmin

I don't think I've had that.

Noor Murad 15:45

I think it's originated from south Iran and it was brought to Bahrain and kind of made Bahraini style. So it's like, you take all these dried anchovies and then you blitz them with loads of spices, black pepper, and coriander and cloves and all these things and you kind of like, mix it with vinegar and water and then you ferment it and like old, reused Vimto bottles, it's like the thing to do, I don't know why. And it smells like, so pungent and then you just put it on bread, sometimes with cheese, sometimes without and you wrap that up and you eat it. My dad always used to take us to the street markets that have these kind of things, which is really good but on the other side of it, I go home and my mum, being English, would make like shepherd's pie and like spag bol and I remember my dad used to say, like,

“why don't you make the Arabic food, machboos” and she's like “you want machboos then go to your mum's, but here you're eating my food and it's pie”.

Yasmin

Oh, wow. It's very interesting because my I also come from mixed heritage. So my mum's from Iran, my dad's from Pakistan. In the house, they both are really good cooks. They both cook different things. And, I don't know if this happened in your households, but as the time, as my parents kind of, you know, the longer they spent together, I found that my mum's Iranian food got a bit more spicy like she would be adding a bit more kind of chilli and black pepper. My dad's Pakistani food started incorporating a few more vegetables a lot more kind of yeah... and so it's interesting when we get people from the Diaspora coming to our house, they'd be like, oh, that Asha noodles, that noodle soup, it's too peppery or they would have their own little blendings that were going on and I definitely feel that with my cooking now that's influenced me.

Alison

Your mum's shepherd's pie didn't get livened up or...?

Noor Murad

It definitely gets livened up if my dad has something to do with it.

Alison

Noor, you've got everyone's dream job. You work in the Ottolenghi Test Kitchen. Tell us your journey to getting there.

Noor Murad

Well, I've been working in food for four years. Like I have come from a family of foodies we love to eat – family of eaters. And er, and yeah, I just I started working in kitchens when I was quite young. I was 16 when I got my first, you know, job – summer job in a, like, hotel kitchen. It was chaos. It was absolute chaos. And I think that's what kind of drew me in.

Alison

And that didn't put you off?

Noor Murad 18:11

Yeah, no, I think I was just one of those people that was like such a, I was just an A student. I always, you know, just so studious and it was the first time that this was something just completely, just manic. And something about it. I was like, I want to be here. My dad was like, er, what are you doing? And then I just ended up in food and the studying and I worked in Bahrain for a bit I then I went to New York and I studied culinary and then I worked there as well before going back to Bahrain. But you know, I reached this point where Bahrain is such a tiny country and there was only so far I could go and I was really quite eager to, I'm quite like one of those people that just wants to discover and travel and expand and grow. And so for me, I was like, well, I've never lived in England, technically I'm half English, even though I didn't feel it. I don't feel half English, I still don't feel half English. And I was like, I'm gonna get on a plane and I'm gonna move to the UK. Well, let's do it. And then, and then I was like, but I'm only doing it if I get to work at Ottolenghi because I had all the books, *Jerusalem*, to this day is still my favourite. So yeah, and then I started working at Ottolenghi, Spittlefields, actually the first week I moved.

Yasmin

We'll shortly go on to the book in a minute, but you know, I've been enjoying your recipes in several of the previous books and you were talking about black limes earlier and I was just reminded of your black lime and tofu, I think I don't know which one that's in, is it in *Flavour*? It's really good and yeah, I'm very glad that you made that journey .

Yotam Ottolenghi

Me too, I'm very happy she made the journey.

Yasmin

If you enjoy wines, spirits and cocktails, as well as delicious food, here's a date for your diary. The Waitrose drinks festival takes place on the 12th-14th of November at London's County Hall. With more than 100 stands hosted by leading experts, it's a fantastic chance to taste award-winning wines, spirits, beers, ciders and alcohol free drinks. You can also attend masterclasses to learn about food and drink pairings and even sample the Waitrose Christmas food range. Go to waitrosedrinksfestival.com to book your tickets, sponsored by Schweppes and Unearthed.

So *Shelf Love* is a collection of recipes that celebrates store covered ingredients, you know the things that you've got at the back of the kitchen cupboard, in the freezer, in the fridge. How you can make substitutions with what you already have. What was the inspiration behind the book?

Yotam Ottolenghi

We always wanted to make Ottolenghi Test Kitchen books like dedicated books that are different from the traditional Ottolenghi cookbooks. It was really in the air for quite a while but we didn't really know how, we didn't nail it, we just thought like, we want to teach things that come out of the test kitchen specifically like certain skills and solutions and things that people would want, because we're constantly testing recipes and we have those insights and also it's kind of a very vibrant environment that we wanted to share with the rest of the world. And then the pandemic hit us and it was 2020 and we had to shut the test kitchen because obviously everybody had to go into lockdown. And Noor went to Bahrain and I went to Ireland where, Karl my husband is from and the other members of the team were in London, either on their own or with their families and the cooking that we normally do in our test kitchen, which used to be under a railway arch in Camden, but now it's on Holloway road. But anyway, it's a very cooperative, collective space where people work together, everybody was on their own all of a sudden, you know, cooking for their families and for themselves. So the way we worked really changed quite dramatically rather than just coming into the test kitchen every day, you know, thinking or chatting about what we're going to cook, ordering really exotic ingredients and kind of having like very aimless meandering through recipe testing, all of a sudden became very purposeful, okay, we're stuck at home, we have to feed ourselves, our families while we're testing recipes, and we can't get all the ingredients that we want, because you know, you couldn't go out and even when you did go to the supermarket, the shelves were half empty. So it was this kind of really particular situation and this really informed the recipes that came out of the test kitchen, that particular point in time, which was what you have at the back of your cupboard, using up ingredients, substituting for what you can't get, it's a very kind of pragmatic, practical way of treating cooking. And that's the beginning of *Shelf Love* and the shelf is the kitchen shelf and it has all these things hiding in it, on it, at the very back of your pantry or in your freezer or in your veg box and you want to give it the love it deserves and create incredible Ottolenghi-style feasts.

Alison

It also explains why every recipe in *Shelf Love* has got a little box that says make it your own. The great thing about it is you're giving people permission to put their own spin on it because they might not have the right ingredient. And it's great, it's really helpful.

Noor Murad

Pretty much when we came up with the premise of the book, we were at home and we were cooking those meals using what we had and using store-bought ingredients that were accessible to everyone...

Alison

Internationally accessible

Noor Murad

Internationally. Exactly. So you can get a chickpea anywhere now. But I mean, very quickly once the book started coming together. And we are a test kitchen, it's very hands on job and we kind of need that team spirit, so we opened up the test kitchen I think back again in June of 2020. So we were still working and albeit a very small team. But generally I think the great thing that I always say about Test Kitchen is that you kind of, your time gives us the kind of space that we need to kind of see through a recipe. And that really gives you a sense of like this is mine, I created it because you've come up with an idea and then you can see it through however many tests it takes you or whatever journey that is, whatever disaster that might happen along the way. And I mean, we also work very collaboratively as a team and like tasting and giving each other feedback and being like, well I think this recipe needs this. But also at the same time it's your recipe, it's your idea and you get to see it through, which is how we work in the test kitchen.

Yasmin

So I've got a question which, as someone who also kind of writes cookbooks I'm curious in and I remember hearing this interview Root Manuva this musician, years ago and he was talking about an album and if someone was asking him, you know, what is your biggest challenge with your songs and he said, I just never really know when a song is done. Because you know, and I have to be pulled away from the studio. And you know, with cookbook, well, you know, from my experience, you know, I kind of, set some rules for myself, but then it's always frustrating because when you go back and look at a recipe wrote a few years ago, you're like, I would do that differently now or like, Oh, now I would have done this. And how do you know, when an Ottolenghi Test Kitchen recipe is done?

Yotam Ottolenghi

I think what really helps is the group. So, you know, it really helps to have that kind of seal of approval that everybody tasting and saying, well, that's great, or that needs another little touch or another little change. Or, well, we often say all that needs to be Ottolenghi-fied, by which we probably mean that it needs more of an angle, you know, something a little bit unusual going on. But these are really useful conversations because then you don't only need to trust your own instincts. And you know, I come in and Noor and Tara and Verena will taste things, and they, we would test it together. And it's their recipe because they developed it from start to finish. But I think just that moment where you taste and say, Okay, well, that's good, you know, that's really good. And that I think that realisation from the team that you've done and achieved that kind of that's a nice full stop moment, I think. But we also have a kind of the ultimate arbitrator, which is, which is Claudine and she's our secret weapon in Wales and whenever

we're not sure, well, as she gets every recipe to test on with her family, you know, cooking for her kids and her husband and her neighbours. And she's the one that sends us the final verdict.

Alison

How many times would you, on average, test a recipe before it goes to print?

Noor Murad

I mean, I would say on average, three to five times. We're very, like rigorous in the test kitchen so we will, even if you get it right the first time, like say it's in recipe that you had a vision and it like, totally worked...

Alison

Yes, you never quite believe, you've done that right?

Noor Murad

You totally don't so then you end up testing it again. Because you're like, wait, I need to test the timings - was this a fluke? And so I would say on average, like three to five but sometimes I mean, if it's especially, you know, all of us have our strengths, but we also have our weaknesses and that is what's the beauty of the test kitchen is you know, you play to both and so for me baking and pastry is not something that I'm like super super confident with, although I do really enjoy it because I come at it from a very like savoury chef angle, so much more like, well, what if I did these two things, and not really thinking about the science behind it. So for me, like those recipes will definitely take a lot longer to get right.

Yasmin Khan

Obviously, as you described, you know, this book really came out of the pandemic, even though there were murmurings of it beforehand. And I'm really looking forward to it as a series actually, I think it's such a great concept. I mean, all of your concepts are so great. I have to say like, it's just every time I'm like, they nailed it with something else that's so innovative, but um, just to go back to the pandemic for a second. I mean, I'd love to know, for both of you actually, you know, how has the last 18 months been for you? And what have you learnt from this whole pandemic process? I think it's been such an existential moment for so many of us. So yeah, Yotam, I mean, pandemic life, how's it been?

Yotam Ottolenghi

It's been um, I call it the snakes and ladders scenario, so you can only go up, and then you fall back down, and then you go up again, and fall back down. And it's just, it's really complicated. It's so intense. It's been so intense and so unpredictable. And I feel like very traumatised by what happened in the first part of the pandemic, because it seems so existential. And so really, very, you know, and I think everybody experienced that in their world, but in my world, which is the only world I know, it's been that kind of moment where I didn't really have the confidence to say the first time in my life that, you know, that my business, you know, the restaurants because I wear two hats, I guess, I wear the hat of the cookery writer, you know, I publish cookbooks, but then I wear the hat of the co-owner of a group of London restaurants. And I really didn't feel that I could say with confidence that we're going to bounce back. It just felt so scary, really terrifying. And I remember this moment when I was on the phone with a friend in America and she said to me, this was like quite a few weeks into the pandemic. She said, so what will happen if you can't reopen the restaurants and the funny thing is like, when she said it, it's not like I haven't thought about it but when you think about yourself and the rest of the world doesn't project

that back to you, you think that you're making it up, you're a bit paranoid. But when someone in the outside world actually reflects that, and says, do you feel like... my heart just sank. I was in queueing in the supermarket I remember in Ireland, I thought, like, this is really a possibility and, you know what, we have so many employees and the thought of that, not being able to offer them jobs was really terrifying. And just this whole family that's been created through so much work, and it's my life, you know, I don't have family in London, I have family in England and that's the company, that's the kind of, the little world to create, we created. That was really terrifying. And I think I'm not, kind of, I'm not over that trauma yet, because it was just so intense

Yasmin

I mean, where do you feel the industry is at now?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Yeah, it's really difficult. I mean, there's so many challenges, I think everybody kind of I, the people that the businesses that survived it are now in a much better position, the businesses that have not survived it, that's a lot of little tragedies that you know, are there and that's the, you know, that's COVID. You know, that's the world we live in, it's full of tragedies. There's a lot of vibrancy, vitality in the business and we kind of all found a way to pivot, which is terrible word, but it's the word everybody uses

Yasmin

It's true though, isn't it? We all became like California-esque startup communicators didn't we. So how are we going to pivot? Yeah, now that that sounds really hard. And Noor, what about you, how has the last 18 months been for you?

Noor Murad

For me like on a on a personal level, I mean, I'm Middle Eastern, so I have a very fiery temperament. I was always that way, I think. And I think the pandemic, definitely the last 18 months, has kind of changed that slightly in that I've kind of been a lot more accepting of things that are out of my control. And I'm similar to Yotam, my family's in Bahrain but I also have kind of created a little family here, especially with people at the Test Kitchen, where we're such a small team, I think we really came together through this pandemic. And we've managed to pull off a lot of things that maybe we wouldn't have done at such speed. And I think that kind of gave us like a sense of like, meaning and a sense of fulfillment, you know, sometimes you can be so stuck in like, Oh, I need to get this recipe done that you kind of forget, like how maybe the food that we put out there is quite important to people, it might touch people or might land on someone's table and like really make their day. And I think I've kind of got a sense of that through the whole pandemic.

Yotam Ottolenghi

This is kind of the upside of the pandemic for us, I think was like, there was a lot to be very confused and worried about, but there was also a lot to be thankful for. And I think those moments where we, where things were exploding on social media, and everybody was cooking, and you could have these conversations and everybody joined our passion, you know, people that didn't even like cooking, started cooking all of a sudden, and that feels good. That's very empowering. And I think that was the other side of the pandemic for people in general but for us, in particular, to see how much joy, like Noor said how much joy a plate of delicious plate of food can give people in a very anxious moment.

Yasmin

The Ottolenghi Test Kitchen seems to, kind of, really celebrate in the recipes kind of migration and mixed culinary influences. How do you think food relates to a migrants experience? And how is that kind of played out in the test kitchen because it feels so diverse?

Yotam Ottolenghi

For me, I think I mean, so I guess Noor and I are both migrants in a way although she's half English, she just went back to her Motherland that was just waiting for her all of those years but in all seriousness, I see it a lot in our restaurants you know, they really are almost everyone or 60/70% of people who haven't been, aren't from London or aren't from the UK and those are, even if they're not cooking their own food, then this is the first thing that we can talk about, you know, is about their their food heritage. And it strikes me but it's such an international language because everybody eats it and everybody understand it intuitively. That it's the first thing you hold on to as a migrant.

Noor Murad

It's just so interesting how food kind of evolves, I always find it as like a, you know, a cross culture kid or, or anyone it's just like you end up cooking things from your parents, but then you add a twist to it and then you change it and you add something else and then that evolves and then, so I always say like, you know, we keep cooking all these traditional foods, but traditional food never stays the same, it's always changing. And I think that in the test kitchen we are such a diverse team. And we all come from different backgrounds. I mean, you know me I'm from Bahrain, my colleague, one of them is from Mauritius, and then one's from Germany but what we do is we take what we know, and we change it and it's so interesting and that's how food is constantly evolving and changing through all this migration. And I think it's a beautiful thing. I think, as long as you honour those cultural flavours, I think it's very beautiful how food can transform.

Yasmin

I mean, just on that very point we have, in the last few years, I think the cultural appropriation debate, especially in the US a bit more than the UK has raised has, kind of, come to the forefront. Something that I've always found challenging because again when you come from like a mixed heritage, it's like, well, we're constantly mixing things and there's nothing wrong with that, and we're adapting them. I mean, has that ever come into a discussion when you're creating recipes as a mixed team?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Yeah, I think we are, we have been drawn to this conversation, this debate, even when we didn't want to, because what we do often is create crop hybrids of dishes from different cultures. Or we just start with something that maybe has its roots in some kind of connotation or association related to one culture, but we build on it and create something else. It's a very hard thing to get right when you play with food, which is what we do and we have long debates, how is that going to be perceived? Is it going to be perceived as cultural appropriation or cultural bastardisation? You know, what is it going to be like, and sometimes I understand the concerns, but other times I feel that it's, kind of, completely inappropriate, because what we're doing is just really trying, we're always very sensitive to what we're doing, we're never doing like something willy-nilly, oh, let's just grab this from this culture and change it completely and not give credit, right? Like, that's not what we're doing. We're doing something really creative with a lot of thought. And sometimes you are misunderstood, because people are not aware of the process.

Yasmin

One of the things I find interesting nowadays is just because of, I guess, how social media works, or maybe just how prominent personalities put in the, you know, public realm, you can't just be like an author, or a cookbook writer, it's almost as if something happens in the outside world and it's like, well, what, what you saying about it? What's your opinion on it? You know, what are you going to say? And sometimes, well, quite often, I'm just like, well, it's not, it's not my thing, you know, I don't really want to say anything on there. So I wanted to, I guess, ask you Yotam, like, how do you navigate that personally, you know, being such a prominent personality, you know, of Israeli descent, but just of Middle Eastern descent, probably, you know, how do you navigate this role of being a chef and a food writer, but then the external world?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Yeah, I find it very difficult to separate the, you know, to say, Oh, you know, it's just all about food and leave me out of this conversation because I've also immersed myself in these conversations as well. And we talked about *Jerusalem* the book earlier, you know, that has been, it's all about this. So I find it really difficult to navigate, I have to say like for instance, with the war in Gaza, I tried really hard not to get involved because I was, and the reason why I didn't get involved is not because I don't think there was victims, and I don't think people are suffering or struggling and I don't think it's awful but because I think I've got a family in Israel and I've got people that I know in Gaza or the west bank or that I know of and I feel as sympathetic to them as I almost, almost as I do to my own family but I don't really have the platform to tell the whole complicated story of this crisis. You know, it's like emotionally, of course, I know there's victims and there's the victimisers, etc but nobody listens, you know, to that very complex situation. I mean, if I could write an essay about the origins of all this about the occupation of the West Bank about a lot of the history of this story, then I would be happy to do that. But it will take a long time but people want quick fixes and quick answers and align yourself with one side or another. And it's, it's really complicated when you're torn in between the two cultures. And, you know, so I find myself in a very tough position these days, often thinking like, what do I do? What's the right thing? What to say? And the annoying thing is, it's often not about, it's just about what you say, and that has very little meaning because words are so cheap on social media, you can just say whatever you like, and it's like one click of a button and that's it. It has absolutely no meaning to your lifestyle and what you believe in really, and what you've done and what you, it's just words. So yeah, I find it really challenging sometimes to really make a coherent substantial position and stand behind it.

Yasmin Khan

Yeah, it's a really tricky one to navigate but what I think is really great is you're really open to having these conversations because, you know, in my experience the more we can normalize talking about this the better it is for everyone. That's certainly what I learned, you know, when I was a human rights campaigner working on this issue for NGOs and also what inspired me to write *Zaitoun*, which was my Palestinian cookbook about my travels through Israel and the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza and I think, yeah, those trips etched in my memories for so many reasons you know, not only did I learn so much about the situation there but it also felt really powerful actually to be able to come back and share with people the beauty and the joy that can be found in the region.

Alison

It's time for the kitchen grill. But before that, I always ask everyone what's the one store cupboard ingredient that your kitchen can't function without?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Yes, I always have a tub of tahini because it's...

Yasmin

Where do you get your tahini from? This is a good, important conversation point.

Yotam Ottolenghi

Well, I get it from the Ottolenghi website.

Yasmin

But, which countries?

Yotam Ottolenghi

It's a really interesting story, it's a really interesting one, so it's a Palestinian tahini made in Nazareth by Palestinian Christians. I think it's one of the best I think there's a lot of Palestinian brands and Lebanese brands that are good I think this is definitely one of them. It's called Al Arz but there's a whole lot of great tahini coming from the Middle East.

Alison

What about you Noor?

Noor Murad

Rice, basmati rice. Yeah, it's very important it's the base of all dishes I mean, you know you'll have a meal in the table within 15 minutes plus steaming time.

Yasmin

I'm on team rice as well actually. There's this phrase in Northern Iran, because they grow rice in Northern Iran and my family are rice farmers, that you're, you know how we like say our blood sugar levels have gone down? They kind of say, our blood rice levels have gone down. So if you've not eaten enough rice in a particular day, it's like, oh my God, rice levels have gone down.

Noor Murad

It's a good thing.

Alison

Brilliant! Time for the kitchen grill. It's a quick fire. There's no right or wrong. Tea or coffee?

Noor Murad and Yotam Ottolenghi

Tea

Alison

Porridge or cereal?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Porridge for me.

Noor Murad

Porridge.

Alison

How do you have it?

Yotam Ottolenghi

I love my porridge very plain with milk and brown rice and brown sugar. I don't like tons of things over it.

Alison

Classic.

Noor Murad

I like a savoury porridge, so...

Alison

Oh, nice. Fried or poached?

Noor Murad

Fried.

Yotam Ottolenghi

Fried.

Alison 42:51

Parsley or coriander?

Noor Murad and Yotam Ottolenghi

Coriander.

Yotam Ottolenghi

We haven't coordinated those answers. It's not just by chance that we are working together.

Alison

Yeah, the same taste buds. Butter or olive oil?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Olive oil.

Noor Murad

Olive oil.

Alison

Chocolate or crisps?

Noor Murad

Crisps.

Yotam Ottolenghi

Chocolate. Oh no, there's one.

Alison

Cheese or pudding?

Noor Murad

Oh, pudding. Cheese doesn't agree with me.

Yotam Ottolenghi

I can't have both right?

Alison

No, you have to have one or the other.

Noor Murad

What if it's a cheesecake?

Yotam Ottolenghi

I'll go for that.

Alison

High Tech or wooden spoon?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Wooden spoon.

Noor Murad

Wooden spoon.

Alison

Grazing or feasting?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Grazing. I graze even though I know it's not good for me.

Noor Murad

Feasting. I like a selection – buffet.

Alison

Nice. And finally, sight or smell?

Yotam Ottolenghi

Sight.

Noor Murad

Yeah, I sight as well.

Alison

Wow. And that's the kitchen grill.

Yasmin Khan

Yotam and Noor, it was so nice to speak to you both. It's been a real pleasure.

Noor Murad

Thank you.

Yotam Ottolenghi

Thank you so much. Bye.

Yasmin Khan

You've been listening to Life on a Plate from Waitrose with me, Yasmin Khan. Thank you to my co host, Alison Oakervee and our guests Yotam Ottolenghi and Noor Murad. If you've enjoyed this conversation, you can find more like it by subscribing to Life on a Plate wherever you get your podcasts. To find out more about the series, go to [waitrose.com /podcast](https://waitrose.com/podcast).