

Culinary Impresario

Chef Michael Ginor cross-pollinates Israeli and American chefs

By LISA SCHIFFMAN

For those who might equate Israeli food with unvarnished hole-in-the-wall establishments complete with surly counter men stuffing pita pockets with greasy falafel balls and slippery *schwarma*, it is time to recalibrate your mindset. A visit to the kosher restaurant Tel Aviv in Great Neck is definitely in order. With its ambitious debut, chef-owner Michael Ginor hopes to raise the bar for high-quality Israeli cuisine.

Last year was eventful for Ginor, a well-known food personality, restaurateur, cookbook author and the co-president and founder of Hudson Valley Foie Gras. Ginor has made a grand entrance onto the Great Neck restaurant scene with the re-opening of Tel Aviv last August after a renovation, and the September premiere of Lola — his non-kosher gourmet restaurant — both located on Middle Neck Road.

In sync with his mission to connect Israeli and American chefs, Ginor, together with chef Itay Skoropa and visiting chef Amos

Hayon [check: Amos Hayon?], hosted two special six-course food and wine tasting dinners in December at Tel Aviv and Lola honoring celebrity Israeli chef Israel Aharoni. At Tel Aviv, over 100 guests enjoyed a special menu including items such as Pan Seared Sea Bass Glazed with Balsamic Soy, Seared Duck Breast and Duck Leg Confit with Chestnut Mousseline, Quince and Bok Choy, and Yuzo Lemon Tart.

Upon entering the restaurant's brightly lit space, diners are greeted by wait staff wearing royal blue T-shirts emblazoned with white lettering that reproduces a boarding pass from JFK Airport to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport. The international theme continues on the restaurant's menu covers and the vivid posters of kibbutz life set against the backdrop of the restaurant's boldly painted brick-red walls.

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In addition to the regular menu of Israeli hummus, salads, traditional Israeli and Mediterranean dishes such as *shakshuka* (below) and a wide selection of small plates, mezzes (left) and soups, Ginor's Tel Aviv restaurant also offers Indian-influenced dishes as daily specials, such as Ginor's version of the Vietnamese sandwich "Banh Mi," which he makes with *schwarma*.

turkey schnitzel, grilled meats and sandwiches, Tel Aviv offers a wide selection of small plates, *mezzes* and soups. A chef's tasting menu for \$40 is also available. Asian- and Indian-influenced dishes

continued on page 11

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A few minutes with Michael Ginor

Michael Ginor is a busy man. This past September, he organized the Bangkok Food & Wine Festival under the auspices of the Royal Family. Last month he cooked for President Shimon Perez in Israel and attended The Mohegan Sun Food & Wine Festival. And at the end of this month, he will be cooking at the Reykjavik Food and Fun Festival in Iceland.

Running his two new restaurants while acting as ambassador for celebrity chefs here and abroad, in addition to his role as co-president of Hudson Valley Foie Gras, leaves Ginor with little time to chat, yet he took a few moments to speak with this newspaper about Tel Aviv, Lola and some of his many culinary endeavors.

"I wear a lot of hats in the food world," Ginor admits. "I've always loved cooking, although I had other careers first."

After graduating from Brandeis University and studying for an MBS at New York University, Ginor joined David Lerner Associates, becoming in the early 1980s at age 23 the youngest senior vice president in the history of the firm. The son of Israeli



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expatriates, Ginor made a life-changing decision after four years at David Lerner to join the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), where he served as a captain in the Gaza Strip, a patrol commander and as the IDF spokesman.

After returning to the U.S., Ginor partnered with Izzy Yanay to found Hudson Valley Foie Gras in 1989, which has since become one of this country's leading producers of foie gras, a gourmet specialty food made from duck livers. Besides his role as co-owner and president of Hudson Valley Foie Gras, Ginor is a well-regarded food personality and consultant, who helps to create and organize culinary events and festivals worldwide. In 1996, Hudson Valley Foie Gras received the Award for Excellence from The James Beard Foundation.

Ginor has also served as honorary event chairman

continued on page 11

'In putting a dish together, put all of one's senses into the food experience: Flavor, presentation, taste, texture and smell.'

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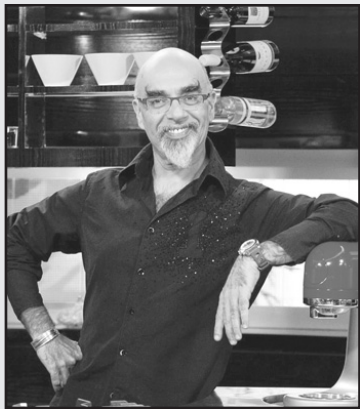
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Israel Aharoni on Israeli cuisine

The son of immigrant Bukharian Jews, Israel Aharoni grew up in Haifa. He had originally planned to become an artist, even studied art after his military service. Yet fate intervened. “One day a friend of mine cooked Chinese food — I was amazed. I felt a new door open.” After traveling throughout Asia to learn its techniques, he returned to Israel to open his first restaurant, Yin Yang, in 1979, in Tel Aviv, then Tai Chi in Gan Har. In the late 1990s he opened Tapuach Hazahav, “The Golden Apple,” a gourmet French restaurant regarded as one of Israel’s best restaurants.



Israeli restaurateur and foodie Israel Aharoni (left) says: “Food is really about people and culture. My weekly column [in Yediot Ahronot] for the last 20 years has been food stories from Israel and around the world. Whatever fits into the definition of food, I write about.”

Whatever fits into the definition of food, I write about.” When asked what Israeli cuisine is, his response was: “There is no such thing — but we have a few dozen different ethnic cuisines. On the surface nothing is in common. The common factor is they’re Jewish. The beauty of the variety — the different flavors, techniques — makes for an interesting mosaic.”

Yet accepting the variety of different cuisines took time, Aharoni recalls. “When we were kids all of my friends came from different ethnic groups. We were ashamed of our cuisines — it took us a few years to realize it as a treasure.”

Over the years, Aharoni says he has seen many changes in Israeli cuisine, including a heightened awareness of it. “The wine, olive oil, restaurants, books and shows have become so popular. A few decades ago this was unheard of.”

A renowned figure in the Israeli culinary world, Aharoni writes a column for the weekend magazine of the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*. The author of 20 cookbooks, including *The Melting Pot* and *Eating Alfresco: The Best Street Food in the World*, Aharoni has been the host of Israeli TV shows, including one now in which he showcases different dishes and cuisines each episode.

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Ginor

continued from page 9

for the Spinazzola Foundation and the Cystic Fibrosis Fund. In 1996, he received the first Olive Branch Award from the Jewish National Fund for humanitarian and professional achievements. He was also honored with the 1997 Angel Award from The James Beard Foundation and, in 1998, received the American Master Taster Award from the American Tasting Institute. Ginor has also appeared on the PBS show *Food Trip with Todd English* and as a guest chef on the Food Network.

Residing with wife, Laurie, and their three children in Great Neck, Ginor is also active in a number of Jewish hospitals and philanthropies, including Hadassah’s Children’s Hospital, Schneider Children’s Hospital and the Jewish National Fund. Laurie is on the board of **The Parker[?]**

Jewish Geriatric Center in Long Island Jewish Hospital[?].

Before opening Tel Aviv and Lola, Ginor owned two other restaurants, Napa in Las Vegas, and La Verdad in Boston. After upgrading Tel Aviv’s décor and menu, Ginor claims it to be the “best of breed” in Israeli restaurants. It has received critical acclaim, including a three-star rating from *Newsday* as well as

a “notable” mention from Zagat.

Since it opened, the restaurant has proved popular with a kosher and non-kosher clientele, including a large Israeli expatriate population, Ginor says. Based on that, Ginor is now exploring opening another kosher Mediterranean restaurant in Queens.

While Tel Aviv offers traditional, though high-end Israeli cuisine, Ginor has gone out on a far more adventurous gastronomic limb with Lola. Ginor defines the menu as “an eclectic, personal cuisine developed over the years from high-end ingredients and techniques” drawing from various cuisines — Asian, South American and Thai. “Really street food brought to a higher level, it encapsulates my world in cooking and my personal love of food of the people,” he explains.



Moroccan cigars — layers of paper-thin dough filled with spicy meat (above) — are a favorite among fans of Middle Eastern food.

Through his work organizing culinary events, Ginor hopes to “connect the U.S. and Israel, culinarily speaking” by bringing together American and Israeli chefs. Over the years, he has brought American chefs Daniel Boulud, Todd English, Thomas Keller and others to cook in Israel

and hosted Israeli chefs here in the U.S. At both Tel Aviv and Lola, Ginor wants to deliver a heightened dining experience. Always experimenting, Ginor says that while creating a dish, he seeks to layer flavor first. Another component is a sense of balance: “In putting a dish together, putting all of one’s senses into the food experience: Flavor, presentation, taste, texture and smell.”

Impresario

continued from page 9

appear as daily specials, such as Ginor’s version of the Vietnamese sandwich “Banh Mi,” which he makes with *schwarma*.

On a recent weekday afternoon, we enjoyed a lunch sampling, starting with Tel Aviv’s Combination Salad, for \$11.95, served with warm pita bread. Notable choices included a tasty Moroccan Carrot Salad and tangy Green Eggplant Salad — roasted eggplant with coriander, parsley and oil. The Yeminite Soup, chock-full of beef and potatoes, was flavorfully spiced, warm and satisfyingly filling, as was the Four Cigars, spiced shredded beef wrapped in rolled pastry. Among Tel Aviv’s dinner entrées, an offering of fish, poultry and meat ranging from \$16 to

\$39.95 for their Ribeye Steak, we chose the grilled chicken breast, which was excellent paired with an Israeli salad of chopped tomatoes, cucumbers and onions, and Tel Aviv’s signature lemon mashed potatoes.

After much heated discussion, and wavering between the Molten Chocolate Cardamom Cake with Coconut Sorbet and the Malabi Rosewater Pannacotta with Berry Coulis and Pistachio Foam, we made the decision to forgo our diets, settling on Tel Aviv’s special dessert, the Halva Parfait, for \$5.50. Ginor’s light, airy confection, which he says was tweaked from a recipe of his mother’s, is made from the sesame seed candy, and served with a sauce made from Silan date honey with a sesame wafer on top that was rightly voted one of Long Island’s 15 best restaurant desserts in 2009 by *Newsday*’s food critics.

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