

FORGOTTEN FLAVOURS

Palestine Hosting Society's Mirna Bamieh brings her live dinner performances to New York City this month

Even something as seemingly simple as a menu can be an act of resistance. Culinary artist Mirna Bamieh's Palestine Hosting Society is much more than a series of interactive dining events; it's a celebration of a displaced culture and its recipes and traditions that are on the brink of extinction. "Somehow with time, colonisation and occupation, this knowledge about the Palestinian kitchen has been flattened," Bamieh says. She strives to prevent further erasure by bringing her epicurean exhibitions from Berlin to the Cayman Islands to Chicago and beyond, sharing traditional Palestinian feasts with as many as she can.

Bamieh was studying for a culinary diploma in Ramallah when she started to suspect there was much more to Palestinian cuisine than she was being taught in school – and a quest to uncover more led her down her own path of discovery. "It started as a curiosity for me to learn more about me and where I come from," she remembers. "I knew there is so much history and richness around the Palestinian kitchen that somehow has been forgotten – with the constant movement of people, the forced expulsion of the diaspora, with occupation, restriction of movement imposed on Palestinians – that made many recipes disappear, and I wanted to dig for them and bring them back to life."

Bamieh immersed herself in documenting oral histories and discovering disappearing dishes across Palestine and the diaspora – meeting with older generations and sourcing ingredients and techniques that rarely find their way to the Palestinian table today. "As Palestinians, we have this very direct connection with the land and knowledge of the land, and unfortunately we were turned from farmers to workers," she says. "That created a rupture in the way we view ourselves and the way we connect to the land. And I think we are reclaiming that again – we're trying to create this self-sovereignty over our food by producing our food again."

Even when the physical connections to



Culinary artist Mirna Bamieh at her 2019 event "Menu of Dis/appearance" in New York City. **Below:** Details from a Palestinian Museum Gala performance dinner at the Four Seasons in Amman

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one's land are broken, the culinary connections must endure. During a residency at Warsaw's Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art this summer, Bamieh's work focused on fermentation techniques; in a weeklong collaboration in Lebanon, she joined a woman in a refugee camp to learn a recipe she'd never encountered and prepared a lunch with her. In Bamieh's latest residency, at New York City's Invisible Dog Art Center from 11 October through 17 November, she's debuting some of her findings from recent research into the history of pottery throughout the region.

Bamieh's efforts are a study in a cuisine's survival and perseverance, but, as the name Palestine Hosting Society suggests, the hospitality is as much the focus as the food. Through 13-course dinners in convivial settings, Bamieh re-creates the joy of converging around a Palestinian table with storytelling and celebration, as diners share foot bread; rummanieh, a lentil stew with aubergine and pomegranate; and lahmeh-a-waraqa, a kofta wrapped in vine leaves.

And while sustainability has become a global buzzword in recent years, Bamieh's research shows the importance of looking to the past to preserve the future. "We need to go back to this mindset of sustainability and go back to indigenous knowledge and culture, as they've functioned from a place of scarcity, from a place that was more attuned to nature," she says. "It's a connection that somehow we have to rebuild to be able to survive as species." – SARAH KHAN