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BREAKING BREAD



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Directed by Beth Elise Hawk

Runtime: 1 hr 25 min

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SYNOPSIS

BREAKING BREAD is a documentary that explores the A-Sham Festival, a groundbreaking food festival where Arab and Jewish chefs work in tandem to create mouthwatering dishes in order to foster social change. Founded by microbiologist Dr. Nof Atamna-Ismaeel, the first Muslim Israeli to win Israel's television cooking competition, MasterChef, the action unfolds in the city of Haifa, a model of multicultural coexistence. The chefs put personal spins on traditional recipes handed down over generations - including kishkef (a Syrian yogurt soup) and qatayef (a dessert served during Ramadan) - transforming flavors while political and religious differences melt away. A treat for the senses, this delectable showcase of culinary heritage gives hope to the idea that collaboration in the kitchen could be a bridge to mutual understanding and, perhaps, a first step toward a lasting peace.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

"In today's world, where we are bombarded with stories about division, I was driven to tell the story of *Breaking Bread*, which is about commonality. Breaking Bread demonstrates that food can nurture a connection among people from disparate groups, chipping away at discord. When the chefs cook together in the kitchen, political and religious labels fall to the wayside, and what's left in their wake are human beings with striking similarities.

Breaking Bread highlights our humanity. Its message transcends politics and religion, whether Muslim, Jewish or Christian, Democrat or Republican." – Beth Elise Hawk

A CONVERSATION WITH BREAKING BREAD DIRECTOR BETH ELISE HAWK

How did you first hear about the A-Sham Festival? And during that initial introduction, what was it about that experience that made you see the festival as a subject for a documentary?

I was sitting in Los Angeles traffic, as we in the city often do, and suddenly Dr. Nof Atamna-Ismaeel appeared on the radio. She was the first Palestinian Muslim Arab to win Israel's MasterChef television cooking competition, and she was on a quest to bring Jews and Arabs together through food. I could not believe my ears. A positive story emanating from the Middle East? Food, my favorite film subgenre? If there was an authentic story to be told, I wanted to tell it! I raced home to connect with her on Facebook.

Nof told me about her A-Sham Festival, which paired Jewish chefs, on the one hand, with Christian or Muslim Arab chefs, on the other, to collaborate on exotic dishes. An event highlighting connection, rather than divide. I became obsessed - the fundamental ingredient

necessary when embarking on a documentary project that consumes your life. Little did I know that once I'd arrive in Haifa, the chefs, the city, the food, the humanity would provide a magical narrative far exceeding my expectations.

How much time did you spend in Haifa in order to immerse yourself in the culture?

For the five weeks of scouting and principal photography of the film, I lived in Haifa. During that time, I must admit, I fell in love with it. It is off the global beaten track. A mystery to be explored. It is one-of-a-kind. It possesses sheer beauty, sandwiched between mountains and sea. Its people have a laissez faire attitude. They're not on their smart phones; they're not glued to flat screens at restaurants and bars. They're focused on the moment, living life authentically, almost oblivious to the outside world. It boasts a seamless mix of religions, I witnessed firsthand. It is truly inspiring. In a way, Breaking Bread is a love letter to Haifa.

Dr. Nof Atamna-Ismaeel, the film's primary subject, is an impressive woman, so warm-hearted and also full of fascinating insight. What, in your opinion, makes her so special and so worthy of the exposure this film can bring to her?

To win any competition is a feat. To come from a microbiology background and rise to the top of Israel's MasterChef as the first Palestinian Muslim Arab is all the more fascinating. But it's what Dr. Nof Atamna-Ismaeel chooses to do with her victory that is noteworthy: to bring Jews and Arabs together through food. It's her celebrity combined with her hopeful message that makes her a force. She explains, "I think that 90 percent of the people in Israel want to live together, but it's the 10 percent who get the headlines...and then people start thinking maybe these 10 percent are the 90 percent." She believes encouraging contact between opposing sides leads to a better understanding and improved relations. Her endeavors, like the A-Sham Festival, promote these beliefs. She exudes charm and wit, is creative and talented. But it's her quips like, "I don't believe there's any room for politics in the kitchen," and her tenacity to bridge the gap, to make small steps, hoping that they will lead to huge ones, that make her an inspirational protagonist in Breaking Bread.

Before working on the film, were you well versed in Arabic food and culinary culture? And through making the film, what surprised you most about the culinary culture?

Before working on Breaking Bread, I was a huge fan of food films and television shows, and would consider myself somewhat of a foodie. Nonetheless, I was mostly unfamiliar with Arabic food and culinary culture. I have since discovered that many of the film's featured dishes are unfamiliar to sophisticated foodies. In my experience so far, dishes like Mussakhan (a traditional Palestinian dish of roasted sumac chicken, atop caramelized onions and laffa bread), Taashimi (Levantine whole fish baked in a crust), and Manti (lamb dumplings), are not well known here in the United States. So, it has been a joy to help generate interest in these dishes.

What was the process like for selecting the specific chefs you've spotlighted in the film? Were there certain characteristics you were looking for, or was it more about meeting the subjects and realizing their on-screen potential in the moment?

When it came to selecting the main characters for the film, my objective was authenticity. I did not have the luxury of a casting budget, nor did I want polish. I didn't want filter. I wanted the audience to feel like a fly on the wall. So, the stumbling upon the charismatic, entertaining and loveable chefs was, for the most part, fortuitous. Though, I praise Nof who, prior to knowing there would be a film, hand selected the chefs and assigned the pairs for the festival, foreseeing the chemistry they would have together.

I would film a pair of chefs, and it would become obvious, in the moment, that they would be stars of the film. For example, the pairing of chefs Shlomi Meir and Ali Khattib was a gift from the cinema heavens. Their natural bond over parallel missions was emotional and organically embodied the themes of the film. You have Shlomi, a third generation owner of Haifa's Maayan Habira restaurant, propelled by his mission to continue the legacy of his deceased grandfather's cooking. Everything Shlomi touches in his kitchen, from the meat smoker, to the antiquated refrigerator he refuses to update, resurrects the memory of his grandfather. And then you have Ali, propelled by his desire to continue the legacy of his grandmother's unique Syrian dishes, by introducing them into the Israeli culinary scene. And the first step in this journey is to teach Shlomi, at the festival, how to make his grandmother's yogurt, bulgur and lamb soup named Kishek.

They are mirror images. They recognize themselves in each other. Without context it would be difficult to identify who is the Muslim and who is the Jew. And this is the beauty of Breaking Bread. When two chefs cook together, labels fall to the wayside. There is no religion. There are no politics. It's just human beings connecting over ingredients, flavors and grandparents' recipes.

The film covers an important subject and does an excellent job of educating without losing its entertainment value and delightful charm. Was striking a balance between the historical information, and cultural nuances on your mind throughout both the filming process and post-production stage?

Living in Israel while making the film, it became clear that even the unexceptional becomes political. Whether you roll out of bed on the left side or the right can become political. At what time of day you drink your coffee can become political. Nof alludes to this phenomenon in the film when she says, "Frankly, we're not Switzerland."

Aware of this, and knowing that what transpired at the A-Sham Festival was the antithesis of politics, where food was the great equalizer, a unifier rather than divider, I tried my best to be sensitive to the cultural nuances of both sides, and maintain a balance in the structure (without affecting the film's integrity), as much as possible in post-production.

What has been the most rewarding thing about making *Breaking Bread*?

When I introduce *Breaking Bread* at festivals, I say, “If you enjoy the film a small fraction of how much I’ve enjoyed making it, you’re in for a great evening!” Every single aspect of this film, from the scouting, to writing these answers today, has been incredibly meaningful, inspirational and rewarding. From the adventure of ensconcing myself in the unfamiliar culture of Haifa, to meeting the colorful chefs, to consuming the delightful food, to sculpting the footage in the editing room, to working on the score with composer Omar El-Deeb, to the gratification of sharing the uplifting experience with receptive audiences—I could go on and on. All of it has been an absolute joy. When I embarked upon making this film, I never expected the loving response that has transpired from all ages and all walks of life. It has enriched my life, and I am beyond grateful.

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHY

BETH ELISE HAWK – Director, Producer

The Los-Angeles-based Beth Elise Hawk holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from McGill University as well as a Juris Doctor degree from New York University School of Law. Prior to making films as a producer and director, she worked for Walt Disney Studios’ feature film department as a Business and Legal Affairs Executive. In that role, Beth played a large part in the behind-the-scenes facets of films released through Hollywood Pictures, Walt Disney Pictures and Touchstone Pictures, including *Mystery, Alaska*, starring Russell Crowe, and *High Fidelity*, starring John Cusack.

Beth tapped into her creative side by producing the sports documentary *Fan-Demanium*, which provides a spirited look at soccer fandom through the points-of-view of 10 lovers of the game from around the world. She co-produced the biographical documentary *I’m Rick James*, a tribute to one of the music industry’s most unique and polarizing icons that features insights from George Clinton, Janice Dickinson and Linda Blair. Briefly pivoting away from documentaries, Beth executive-produced the MTV series *Eye Candy*, an adaptation of beloved horror fiction author R.L Stine’s book of the same name that starred Victoria Justice and ran for 11 episodes. *Breaking Bread* is Beth’s directorial debut.

DR. NOF ATAMNA-ISMAEEL - BIO

Dr. Nof Atamna-Ismaeel was the first Palestinian Muslim Arab to be voted by the general public of Israel as their winner of the 2014 popular television program, MasterChef. Ever since, she's been on a mission to build bridges between Jews and Arabs using food. In addition to the A-Sham Festival, the subject of Breaking Bread, Nof serves on the Board of Directors of the Peres Center for Peace & Innovation, where she creates culinary-themed programs to foster connection between the cultures. She uses her kitchen skills and chef relationships to raise funds for the Hillel Yafe Hospital in Hadera, Israel, which serves both Jewish and Arab communities.

With a quarter million followers on social media, she is a face of leading Israeli food brands, such as Sugat and Tara, has collaborated with British retailer Marks & Spencer on a line of Arabic food products, and is featured in the Culinary Institute of America's video series World of Culinary Arts: Israel. When she is not making television appearances, providing catering services for fabulous events, or cooking for dignitaries, she teaches Arabic Cuisine and Patisserie at Israel's prestigious culinary school, Danon.

In her other life, Nof is a doctor of microbiology. A fluent speaker of Hebrew, Arabic and English, she received her undergraduate and master degrees from Tel Aviv University, her PHD from the Technion Institute of Technology in Haifa, and four post-doctorates from Technion, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Haifa University and Oranim College.

CHEF - BIOS

CHEF SHLOMI MEIR can be found daily at the helm of Maayan Habira Restaurant in Haifa, Israel, continuing the legacy of his grandfather's Eastern European recipes.

With laurels from prestigious restaurant Magdalena in tow, CHEF ALI KHATTIB has ventured on his own, cooking for a distinguished clientele all over the North of Israel, serving his unique, exotic food of Syrian heritage, featured in Breaking Bread.

You can find CHEF ILAN FERRON on any given day guiding gastronomes through the fresh market-inspired selections at Talpiot Restaurant in Haifa, Israel.

Influences from his apprenticeship at Michelin-starred The French Laundry are on display at CHEF TOMER ABERGEL's new restaurant, Pizzeria Talpiot, in Haifa, Israel.

SALAH CORDI is wowing foodies as the chef of restaurant Lola Martin in the beachside neighborhood of Herzliya Pituach, Israel.

CHEF OSAMA DALAL specializes in reviving the historic cuisine of Akko, a Mediterranean port city jewel featured in Breaking Bread, and has spearheaded a plethora of hip Tel Avivian eating establishments.

PRINCIPAL CREW

Director	Beth Elise Hawk
Producer	Beth Elise Hawk
Executive Producers	Jon Fitzgerald Travis Knox
Associate Producer	Michelle Harrison
Director of Photography	Ofer Ben Yehuda
Sound Design	Nicholas Ashe Bateman
Editors	Jonty Fine Itai Levin
Composer	Omar El-Deeb

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Country of Origin: United States; Israel
Language: English and Hebrew (with English subtitles)
Running Time: 85 minutes 44 seconds
Aspect Ratio: 1.85 USA
Shooting Format: HDV
Exhibition Format: DCP (PAL 25fps)
Picture Format: Color
Year: 2020