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Falafel and Shwarma: Israeli Food in Mexico | Paulette K. Schuster [±]

Abstract

Falafel and shwarma are two iconic national Israeli dishes, which are also widely recognized and loved in Mexico. The main objective of this article is to compare three different groups: Jewish Mexicans in Israel, Israelis in Mexico and Jewish Mexicans who remained in Mexico and how they perceive Israeli food in Mexico and in Israel. In addition to this, how marketing of Israeli food in Mexico has evolved. Fieldwork took place in Israel and in Mexico City. Twenty qualitative interviews were conducted in Israel in total. Ten were conducted with Mexican Jews living in Israel and another ten with Israelis who lived in Mexico and who have returned to Israel. There are marked differences as to how these foodstuff are marketed in Israel and abroad.

Keywords: Israeli food in Mexico; marketing; falafel; shwarma; food choices; street food.

Introduction

When we think of street food, we often think of grabbing a slice of pizza on the go, chucking down a steaming hot cup of coffee while juggling a briefcase and a leash on a dog or munching on a hot dog while running to and from appointments. Street food is defined here as ready-to-eat food or beverages sold by hawkers or vendors, in a street or any other public place, such as at a market or fair. It is often sold from a portable food booth/stall, food cart, or food truck and meant for immediate consumption.

Street food often reflects traditional local cultures and exists in an endless variety. There is much diversity in the ingredients used, as well as the preparation of street food, beverages, snacks, and meals. Likewise, street eating is informal, convenient, fast, cheap, and satisfying. It is simply hearty eating at its finest. Often described as a memorable experience, it can also be categorized as an impulse food, similar to mindless snacking.¹

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¹ Impulse food can be described as an unplanned purchased snack or meal. Three types of snacking behavior exist: (1) pure indulgence; (2) everyday treating; and (3) non-indulgence. For more on snacking behaviors, see (Cross, Babicz and Cushman 1994).



Food patterns in Israel are as varied as its people (Schuster 2015). It has a culture that is definitely food-centric, but not food obsessed. Although you can find many yummy delights in Israel, for this study, I focus only on falafel and shwarma since they were the most widely cited Israeli street food mentioned by the participants interviewed. Falafel and shwarma could be attributed to other other regions/specific groups in the Middle East. There are many debates and arguments about ownership.² Food is a basic staple that is rooted in the past but that exists in the present. We all share, consume and enjoy it. If you go back in history and search, you will always find certain elements of a dish invented or fashioned by someone else. So, in essence nobody properly owns any one dish because it is quite likely that someone else cooked it before. Each generation adds its own touch, improving and adapting it to local flavors and ingredients. It is impossible to find the rightful owner and it would be a mistake to affirm that a dish belongs to any one nation or people. For the purpose, of this article, I refer to the Israeli versions of falafel and shwarma and how they are consumed and adapted in Mexico to form interesting food mixes or fusions and innovative culinary combinations. In terms of authenticity...“authenticity is not determined by static tradition or heritage, but rather by practice (Ariel 2012).³ In this article, I evaluate the multiple understandings of food, food choices and the meaning and centrality of a meal.

Falafel and shwarma are two iconic national Israeli dishes, which are also widely recognized and loved in Mexico. Are they considered religious or cultural symbols by Mexican Jews and/or the population at large? Do these conceptions change? Are they imbued with symbolic meanings? Why do we choose certain street foods over others? Does location influence our decisions? In this article, the different food choices and the systems of meaning encoded therein were evaluated. Do food memories lead or determine our current food choices? The ethnic and cultural assumptions were examined as well.

Objectives

The main objective of this article is to compare three different groups: Jewish Mexicans in Israel, Israelis in Mexico and Jewish Mexicans who remained in Mexico and how they perceive Israeli food in Mexico and

² The relationship between ownership and food patterns needs further explanation but it is beyond the scope of this article.

³ Cross cultural transitions and how food is transported across borders has vast literature behind it, particularly in terms of authenticity but again it is beyond the scope of this research.



in Israel. The evolution of the marketing of Israeli food in Mexico is also examined.

Methods

Twenty interviews were conducted in Israel in total in order to uncover which foodstuffs were important for the participants and to further understand the nuanced meanings that they formed as part of personal and collective culinary spaces. Ten were conducted with Jewish Mexicans living in Israel, five with Israelis in Mexico and five Jewish Mexicans who remained in Mexico. These interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions and were conducted in Spanish and varied in length. They were carried out in various cities in Israel in cafes, parks and participants' homes. They live in such cities as Kfar Saba, Bat Yam, Rishon LeZion, Herzliya, Tel Aviv, Karmiel, Shoham, Ashdod, Petah Tikva, Kiryat Gat, Modiin, Gedera, Rehovot, Ma'ale Adumim and Jerusalem. In Mexico City, they were also carried out in cafes, restaurants and participants' homes. In Mexico, they mostly live in Polanco, Tecamachalco, Bosques de las Lomas and La Herradura. In addition to the interviews, I observed 15 different falafel stands and restaurants in Mexico City that serve falafel and shwarma. I also did a survey of kosher and non-kosher restaurants, which serve other street foods, not only falafel and shwarma.⁴

The sample includes twelve women and eight men. It was not a planned sample but rather evolved organically using a snowball sampling technique. The age range was between 37 and 68. Their religious observance included five secular (mostly Israelis), twelve traditional (usually Mexicans and/or Israelis who have lived in Mexico for a long time and have adapted to the mores of the Mexican Jewish community, which is traditional) and three are orthodox. Their marital status is as follows: sixteen are married, two are divorced and two are widowed (both women).

What is Falafel and Shwarma?

Falafel is the quintessential food of many Middle Eastern countries, but Israelis have their own style of serving and eating it.⁵ Typical Israeli falafel is made from a mixture of ground or mashed up chickpeas, fava beans, onions, garlic, parsley, cilantro, cayenne pepper, cumin, coriander, sesame seeds, flour and spices which are then shaped into small round balls about two centimeters by two centimeters that are

⁴ Food that may be consumed according to *halakha* (Jewish law) is termed *kosher*.

⁵ Yael Raviv's *Falafel Nation* deals with the role food plays in the Jewish nation. She ponders the power struggles, moral dilemmas, and religious and ideological affiliations of the different ethnic groups that make up the "Jewish State" and how they relate to the gastronomy of the region (Raviv 2015).

deep fried in hot oil. At home, falafel balls are made by hand but industrially/commercially they are made with a falafel press/scoop. They are smaller balls, deep fried and usually eaten in the afternoons or evenings as a fast snack or quick meal. In restaurants and eateries, falafel is fried fresh to order and not massively fried.

Some will argue that it was Yemeni Jewish immigrants; others that it was Egyptian Jewish immigrants in the first half the twentieth century who introduced this delectable street food to the rest of Jewish society (Rodin 2001). In Israel, there are many variations to falafel. Falafel can be categorized by color into four main types: (1) Original/Classic Brown (as already described); (2) Red Piquant (mixed with paprika, chili peppers, and spices); (3) Green (mixed with fresh herbs usually coriander and parsley); and (4) Yellow (mixed with toasted sesame and cumin) or *Hawajj* (Yemeni ground spice mixtures used primarily for soups and coffee).

In Israel, falafel is commonly served hot in a pita "pocket" bread and eaten with *tahini* (paste, dip or sauce made from toasted ground hulled sesame seeds), *hummus* (dip made from cooked, mashed chickpeas, blended with *tahini*, olive oil, lemon juice, salt and garlic), chopped Israeli salad (chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, white onion, parsley, olive oil, lemon juice and mint), ⁶ pickled/fermented vegetables (usually turnips, cucumbers, carrots and beets) or curried vegetables (cabbage and carrots), Iraqi-style fried eggplants, French fries, marinated onions, sauerkraut, hot yellow chili peppers or Yemeni red *szug* (a condiment made from fresh red or green hot peppers seasoned with coriander, garlic, salt, black cumin and various spices. Some also add caraway seeds), and *Amba* (Iraqi in origin, it is a thick yellow liquid condiment made from green tangy mango that has been pickled with fenugreek, turmeric, garlic and spices).⁷ Falafel is usually eaten in the afternoon or at night. Half pita portions are also common or larger portions served in a *lafah* (taboon flatbread). Falafel is fresh, simple and down to earth food.

In many Arabic homes and venues, falafel is made out of mostly chickpeas and spices and are shaped into large round patties (6 inches by 6 inches in size), rather than the Israeli standard smallish balls and are stuffed with onions and deep fried. They are often eaten on a daily basis, eaten at all times of the day, even for breakfast, and usually eaten with pitas and just hummus.

⁶ It is also known as Arab salad and can also include bell or chili peppers, carrot, scallion, leafy greens and *zatar*.

⁷ Toppings vary and may include all or some of the ones already mentioned.



Shwarma is shavings sliced from a rotating vertical rotisserie composed of layers of compacted marinated grilled lamb, turkey, or veal, or a mixture of these meats. This seasoned meat is tightly stacked and is turned slowly on the rotisserie, next to a vertical cooking element. The outer layer is thinly sliced by hand with a serrated knife or using a type of mechanical shaver that uses metal disks. Shwarma has many variations. It is similar to the Greek gyro⁸ or Turkish Döner Kebab.⁹

In Israel, shwarma is generally made with spring chicken, turkey, veal or lamb, and is typically served wrapped in a flatbread such as a pita or a *lafah* and is usually eaten with various salads and toppings similar to those eaten with falafel such as *tahini*, *hummus*, pickled turnips, and *amba*.

Shwarma can be served on a plate (generally with accompaniments such as French fries, and a salad. The most unusual way to enjoy shwarma in Israel is in a Thai sandwich made with a warm French-style baguette, cut down the middle and stuffed with shwarma meat. Shwarma can be eaten at sit-down restaurants or more commonly standing up at fast food store fronts.

Discussion and Findings

Mexicans love to eat. Eating patterns in Mexico are as diverse as its population. Everything and anything goes. From eating leisurely breakfasts at top-notch restaurants to eating *comida corrida* (fast food) in *fondas* (local eateries); but they also love to eat street food. Street food in Mexico includes tacos, tamales, gorditas, quesadillas, huaraches, tostadas, chalupas, elotes and esquites, flautas, tlacoyos, pambazos, empanadas, chilaquiles, sopas and tortas, as well as fresh fruit in cups, juices or soups, which can be eaten at any time of the day, from breakfast to sundown. So, how did Israeli street food enter the Mexican market?

Mexico is filled with fast food nooks and crannies and street food stands, from tortas and tacos to fresh-fruits. These stands often negotiate social spaces by monopolizing busy parks and street

⁸ Traditionally made out of beef, pork, chicken, veal or lamb, or even a mixture served in a pita bread with sauce and a garnish or on a plate, usually with fried potatoes and dressed with tzatziki sauce. (Dilouambaka 2016).

⁹ Döner Kebab is served stuffed into a pita or other type of bread as a sandwich, or wrapped in a thin flatbread such as lavash or yufka, known as a *dürüm*. It contains salad or vegetables, which may include tomato, lettuce, cabbage, onion with sumac, fresh or pickled cucumber, or chili, and various types of sauces. Originally invented in the 19th century Ottoman Empire. For more on the Döner Kebab, see Sirkeci (2016).

mediums. It is also dotted with restaurants serving everything from American-style burgers to sushi. Most restaurants are open seven days a week and close late. It is common practice to start dining at 10:00 pm.

Food Choices

What motivates these food choices? Convenience? Health consciousness? Dietary restrictions? Sweet tooth? Food allergies? Savory preferences? Individual dietary choices are primarily influenced by such considerations as taste, cost, convenience and nutritional value of foods (French 2003).

We choose food based on taste, nutrition values, calories, what ingredients are locally sourced, what we have readily available in our local stores and what we have in the refrigerator or freezer. What we are in the mood for? What we are sick of eating and what we desperately desire. What is in season? Does being Israeli motivate these choice at all? How and in what contexts? For example different Jewish cultural food experiences, *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws), Jewish/Israeli consciousness around personal eating.

There are a variety of issues that help shape how and what we eat. For example, cultural identity, dietary restrictions like *kashrut* or vegetarianism, ideological philosophies, spirituality and ethical considerations like veganism and/or health issues. Added to that, we may encounter financial considerations, availability or scarcity, regionalism, and personal taste. These may overlap and juxtapose. Laudan's (2013) treats cuisine, like language, clothing, or architecture, as cultural traits that are socially constructed by humans. As such, then our choices are influenced by outside forces and not just internal beliefs.

Food choices are complex and are often inspired by an external cluster of cultural or religious values. A life course perspective may provide a useful framework for understanding how food choices develop in changing temporal, social, and historical contexts (including trajectories, transitions, turning points, lives in place and time, and timing of events in lives) Devine (2005). Abstaining from certain foods is often tied to moral virtues or prescriptive grounds but more often than none are guided by embedded social convictions that denounce or promote the consumption of certain foods on diet trends, celebrity personal codes, economic cycles and even political shifts.¹⁰

¹⁰ The latter is beyond the scope of this research and will not be explored here.



Eating Context or Setting

Food changes as its context changes. Such food mobility is at the cornerstone of the evolving culinary practices and eating habits that often overlap and interact with entrenched local traditions. What is considered fast food or junk food in one location may be considered fine dining in another. The context in which we eat in the present is crucially important. It is determined by various elements. For example, childhood memories of grandmother's cooking, a certain smell might trigger an aversion or evoke a profound longing for a special treat or meal. Are these meals shared experiences or individual determinations? There are many systems of choice and meaning that affect each experience of daring to obtain a fast snack at the local kiosk or food stand or opting for sitting down for a more formal meal.

When migrants move they bring their own culinary baggage that is heavy with emotional attachments. Change of location makes some immigrants cling to the food they know and resist others. These food preferences offer insights about the tendencies for acculturation, assimilation, adaptation, social distancing, integration and later improvements or risks to quality of life (Capella 1993).

When Israelis took their style of shwarma and falafel to Mexico adaptation was inevitable. As a result, other vocalizations emerged that were mixed with other immigrant groups from the Middle East, primarily Lebanese and Syrians. After these, amalgamations have taken place to localize then does falafel and shwarma still remain Israeli?

Consumption of Falafel and Shwarma

Who eats falafel and shwarma in Mexico? Why? How are they perceived? In Israel, falafel and shwarma are eaten usually in the same location, although there are just places that serve falafel or shwarma separately. They are usually eaten on the go but can also be enjoyed eaten as quick meal shared by friends.

In Mexico, falafel and shwarma are transformed in more ways than one, according to the target population discussed. In general, they are seen as special or different. Certainly these dishes are more expensive than in Israel. For some, these dishes are not missed or longed for, but rather remind them of a past they left behind. This does not mean they will not eat either of these dishes, but they will not actively look for them. As one respondent told me, "Sure if I come across a falafel place, I will eat there but I will not actively look for it." For Jewish Mexicans, falafel and shwarma are iconic Israeli dishes that represent and idealized home nation whether literal or figuratively. When eaten in Mexico, they tend to be savored and celebrated, in

Israel they form part of their diet whether they are enjoyed weekly or more sporadically. For non-Jewish Mexicans, these dishes are not usually known and thus do not figure as part of their diet. If encountered, they are seen as foreign or specialty foods, unless their families were of Arabic origins then they will be seen as an integral part of their diet.

For some Israelis living in Mexico, these are reminders of home, either longed or not. Food becomes obsessions that define them. Smells and tastes of Israel invade their subconscious and falafel and shwarma, which are common everyday food, become something more. They become comfort food and an emotional attachment is bestowed upon them.¹¹ In Mexico, they become memorable dishes that are shared with family or friends. "Cuisine is one of the most distinctive expressions of an ethnic group. Frequently, the last sign of an individual's attachment to his roots before total assimilation into the host community in the consumption of distinctive kinds of food" (de Silva 1996).

For others, they constitute nothing special and is seen as part of junk food, in the same category as pizza or fruit juices that are enjoyed once a week. In this case, there is an emotional detachment. Falafel is inexpensive and is served relatively fast compared with other sit-down restaurants or fast food joints. For these reasons, it is also popular among students and singles living with a budget. For them, falafel fills a practical need in a relatively healthy manner. As one respondent commented, "Eating falafel is like getting a healthy full meal of great value for little money". For tourists, both falafel and shwarma constitute a culinary curiosity, more like experimentation of the local food scene. "A must try" before leaving the country, part of the Israeli experience. For foodies, falafel and shwarma are nothing more than local flavor.¹² However, when they are upgraded and served as part of a chef restaurant or fusion food, then they change to a formal affair. In doing so, these restaurateurs are changing their status from an everyday people's fare to a culinary, almost snobbish experience.

Falafel sometimes is favored over shwarma by religious and traditional Jews for dietary and ethical reasons. Since falafel is made from

¹¹ Comfort food is defined here as food that provides a nostalgic value to an individual and that reminds him/her of home. The nostalgia may be specific to an individual, or it may apply to a specific culture (Rufus 2011). The term comfort food was first coined in 1966. Adults turn to "food associated with the security of childhood, like mother's poached egg or famous chicken soup" (Romm 2015).

¹² A foodie is defined here as a person with a particular refined interest in food who eats for pleasure/hobby and is guided by his/her quest for a new culinary experience.



chickpeas or fava beans, it is classified *pareve* (neutral) and as such can be eaten as a starter/appetizer to a meat or dairy meal or eaten in between the time allotment for dairy and meat meals, allowing religious Jews to partake in this delight. Since vegans and vegetarians do not eat meat. They also favor falafel over shwarma.¹³ Then veganism becomes eating as a moral choice.

However, shwarma is consumed more readily by Mexican gentiles accompanying Israelis or Mexican Jews on culinary outings because it resembles *tacos al pastor* (literally, "in the style of the shepherd"), which is a Mexican variation of Döner Kebab via the Lebanese shwarma (Watson 2015; Pilcher 2012). *Tacos al pastor* are normally made with pork. *Tacos al pastor* should not to be confused with *tacos árabes* (Arabic tacos), which are spicy and made from different cuts of meat (no lamb or pork); same principle but different variations.¹⁴ "It's a story of migration," (Pilcher 2012), which circles back to food mobility and adaptation to local ingredients and tastes. The original version was made with lamb, then with beef, and is mostly found in Puebla. Unlike shwarma, *tacos al pastor* are eaten with corn tortillas instead of pita, an *Achiote* (Annatto — an orange-red condiment) marinade, raw cut onions, fresh coriander and slices of pineapple - the traditional way here in Mexico.

Marketing of Israeli Food in Mexico

Food is has been an important marketing tool in Israeli history (Raviv 2015). Immigrants use food as a connection and as a powerful link that anchors them into their new setting. In this dynamic relationship, food becomes more than a conduit for nostalgia, it introduces possibilities for change, as well as resistance to new habits, behaviors, and cultural experiences. Food has also long played an important role in transmitting ideals, national ideology and building a common culture in Israel. Foodstuffs were transformed into national symbols, such as oranges and falafel, and used as props for national unity in Israel. But Israeli food and foodways is more than that. As a 30-year old Israeli woman commented, "For me, Israeli food is all about hospitality, that's what is behind it. You just need to open a table and just feed people. There is always food at any event or family gathering."

¹³ Vegetarian/vegan restaurants could be kosher but if the establishments are open on Shabbat and do not have a rabbinical stamp, then they are not.

¹⁴ Migrants from the Middle East started to come to Mexico at the end of the 19th Century. They came in larger numbers in the early 20th Century when the Ottoman Empire was crumbling.

In this space, I also focus on three unique Israeli popular snacks *Bamba*, *Bisli*, and *Shkedei Marak* (soup almonds) that are not only sold in kosher food stores, but Mexican local supermarkets and convenience stores as well.¹⁵ These three snacks have a long-standing tradition in Mexico. However, restaurants serving Israeli food are far less common. In fact, for most of the 1980s and 1990s, there were only three establishments, in the following decades several other places have opened-up, including a new gourmet Israeli cuisine restaurant opened up. How does the Jewish community in Mexico perceive Israeli food? How did it go from a simple snack/street food to a gourmet affair? How are they framed and marketed?

Bamba

Bamba is a peanut butter-flavored puffed snack made from baked corn. It is oblong about three centimeters long and resembles little nubs/doodles, similar in appearance and texture to the American version of cheese puffs. Bamba was first produced in 1964 with a cheese flavor but it was not very popular. The following year, four more flavors were introduced: peanut, corn, caraway, and grill flavored. Only the peanut flavor survived for more than a year and in 1966 was officially instituted, replacing the original cheese flavor. Since then Bamba has been an integral part of Israeli pop-culture.¹⁶ It has appeared on the CD cover of Israel's leading hip-hop group Hadag Nahash's third album, it has been used as the name of a local '90s indie band called the Bamba Paradox (alluding to the myth that Bamba in a large bag tastes different than Bamba in a small bag) and it is widely promoted on TV commercials, DVDS, and computer games by a bouncing gender-neutral baby.¹⁷ There is even merchandising of the Bamba Baby targeting babies and toddlers in the form of stuffed dolls, plastic toys and games.

The peanut-flavored Bamba, which today is regarded as the classic "regular" Bamba, contains 50% peanuts, natural fats, corn, salt, and is enriched with several vitamins (A, E, B1 or Thiamine, B3 or Niacin, B6, B12, C), iron, folic acid, and is free of preservatives and food

¹⁵ There are many other Israeli snacks sold worldwide but these are the three most popular ones sold and cited in Mexico.

¹⁶ Originally produced by the company Osem, which was established in 1942. Since then similar products from other rival domestic manufacturers have been created. Such as *Parpar* (by Telma, since 2000 a subsidiary of Unilever) and *Shush* (by Strauss).

¹⁷ Bamba's mascot was created in 1993. A cartoon gender-neutral baby with an orange lock of hair on his/her forehead, a big blue diaper, and a high-pitched voice. Since then, the Bamba Baby has become a recognizable cultural icon.



coloring.¹⁸ The original Bamba is soft yet crispy, savory yet sweet. Bamba is the best-selling snack in Israel, accounting for close to a quarter of this market with no decline in sales since it was first produced (Granof 2007). 90% of Israeli households buy Bamba regularly and every day 1 million bags of Bamba are produced. Israelis consume close to 10 million bags of Bamba per month (<https://www.osem.co.il/en/product/classic-bamba/>). Bambais certified Kosher by Badatz Jerusalem.¹⁹

Initially, Bamba only referred to the original and much loved peanut butter puffs, but in attempts capture different segments of the population, the Bamba line was expanded. Today, there are many varieties of flavors and shapes. For example, Bamba filled with halva or nougat cream; strawberry-flavored sweet Bamba (also called unofficially 'Red Bamba' that is round in shape instead of oblong, and red, flavored and colored with beetroot; Bamba stuffed with punch and banana-flavored cream; Bamba-filled Bamba (stuffed with a peanut-butter Bamba-cream/paste); organic version of Bamba, called Cheeky Monkey; Gluten-Free Bamba; Bamba filled with nougat cream and Pop Rocks; Bamba filled with mocha and vanilla) and even a special-edition frozen Bamba (sold only in cinemas). At first, Bamba was available in only in one size and shape, but was subsequently marketed in different sizes and shapes. For example, Bamba-Bomba (jumbo size), Bambini (small) and shaped in circles, squares, wheels and hearts.

In Israel, babies, toddlers and school-age children are routinely given Bamba as a healthy, easy-to-eat snack at schools and by their parents. There are even smaller size Bamba bags geared for this target population. Bamba is promoted as the perfect size for babies and their little fingers and is presented as a safe and age-appropriate way to introduce your baby to peanuts (Granof 2007; <https://www.osem.co.il/en/product/classic-bamba/>). Bamba is given to babies as young as three to four months old since it is easy to eat chew, dissolving quickly in their mouths without much effort.

Bamba commercials focus on advertising the snack as a quick, simple and healthy option for children and adults. Commercials highlight its "simple" and "quality" ingredients, such as 50% peanuts and added

¹⁸ The competitors are described as peanut-flavored snacks, but contain few peanuts.

¹⁹ Badatz is the Hebrew acronym for "Beit Din Tzedek," or "Court of Justice," which is a modern term used for a major Jewish rabbinical court. It is often used in the context of *hechsherim* (Kashrut certification).

vitamins, but never mention the other not-so healthy ingredients that make up the rest of its contents primarily fat, sugar and salt.

Abroad, Bamba has gained international recognition and market shares due to promising research findings that indicate that early peanut exposure in children via Bamba may well be the reason that the overall peanut allergy rate in Israel is so low compared with other Western nations (Du Toit 2015). Although Bamba has been marketed locally and internationally as a healthy alternative to other popular snacks like potato chips, there are some criticisms by nutritional experts that believe that Bamba should not be promoted as a healthy children's snack at all. They say that the health claims made by the manufacturer are largely deceptive, and that the added vitamins in Bamba could result in over-consumption of nutrients, leading to unwanted secondary effects. They assert that Bamba is junk food with no nutritional value, noting that it is high in fat, very caloric (a small bag of 25 grams has 134 calories), contains elevated amounts of salt, and also contributes to cavities by sticking to kids' teeth (Khromchenko 2007). However, it could be argued that the natural ingredients found in Bamba make it a better option than other more processed snack foods. It does not contain hydrogenated oils or artificial food colorings, all of which are ingredients of concern for health-conscious consumers. This may make Bamba more attractive to shoppers who are trying to avoid products made with lots of artificial or highly processed ingredients.

Marketing efforts in Mexico focus on two demographic groups: Israelis and Mexican Jews. Specifically using the nostalgia factor, playing on the melancholia of native-born Israelis that feel that Bamba has the taste of Israel, which allows marketers to exploit their longing for home and also yearning to recapture their long lost childhood. For Mexican Jews, Bamba represents a deep-rooted connection to an idealized home, an iconic paradise where Jews are Jews with no prejudice and repercussions. Additionally, for those Mexican Jews who desire to immigrate to Israel, Bamba is a stepping-stone to a food culture that is familiar but one that they have not adopted entirely. In Jewish-owned kosher stores, imported bags directly from Israel can be found, where the slogans are all in Hebrew. In other locations, such as Mexican supermarkets or *tienditas* (local corner stores), the Bamba bags predominantly feature the Bamba Baby with slogans in Spanish or English. If they are in English, they are the same bags that are imported to the United States, if they are in Spanish, they are specifically designed for the Latin American market. The use of the Bamba Baby is strategic and deliberate. The Bamba Baby is featured lifting weights, playing soccer or doing other physical activities. The



Bamba Baby represents youth, vitality, exuberance, and evokes high energy and thus represents a snack that is good/healthy for adults and their children. In Mexico, children are not the main target population but rather their parents. For older children and adults, it is promoted as a savory snack that gives strength naturally. The cartoon image looks like a baby but talks in a manner that appeals to all ages. It represents the brand identity, which is aimed at children but is also cute and eye-catching that is entertaining for adults.

Bisli

The second best-selling product in Israel is the product line collectively known as Bisli. Capturing just 15% of the snack market, 80% of the households with children, over 4,000 tons of Bisli are produced annually in an array of shapes and flavors (Granof 2007). Bisli is a crunchy snack that has been likened to fried pasta because pasta was the specialty of the manufacturer before branching out into snack foods. The name is a combination of two words "Bis" and "Li". Bis comes from the Yiddish word *baysn* or the Hebrew word *Bis*, meaning "bite" since the snack is bite-sized and the Hebrew word *li*, meaning "for me".

Bisli was first produced in 1970. Corn and wheat are the staple ingredients in Bisli. The Bisli series now boasts eight standard/regular flavors: falafel, barbecue, grill, onion, smoky/spicy, pizza, Mexican flavor²⁰/taco, and hamburger. In addition to two annual special versions, which may showcase popular flavors that are in tune with the Israeli palate like shwarma and some that were not so appealing like pepperoni (note: all Bisli flavors are Kosher).

Each flavor is shaped differently: the falafel is shaped like skinny doodles, barbecue is shaped like little nuggets, the grill is shaped like corkscrew/fusilli pasta, the onion flavor like small wide hoops, the smoky/spicy flavor like small hollow tubes, the pizza flavored snacks are shaped like squares, the Mexican flavor/taco is shaped like small skinny long tubes and the hamburger variety is shaped like little circles with striations in the middle. They are marketed primarily to teenagers as a cool, crunchy snacks. They are promoted by two music/hip hop inspired characters: Grill and Barbeque. Grill is short and stubby, wears glasses, has black Bisli Grill-shaped like hair, is laid-back, witty and sharp-tongued, while quite the opposite Barbeque is tall and skinny, has curly red hair, Bisli Barbeque-shaped like hair is depressive and apprehensive. Barbeque is always anxious and Grill is cool and easygoing. Barbeque is always worried that he'll run out of Bisli and

²⁰ "Mexican" flavor in Israeli prepared foods denotes something spicy and exotic.

Grill appeases him. The good/bad cop combo of the brand. The Grill and Barbeque characters are closely identified with the brand and the slogans that represent it have become ubiquitous symbols.

Despite the apparent popularity of Bisli, it falls short of Bamba, in the hierarchy of snack foods. This is perhaps due to the timeline of when Bisli and Bamba are introduced to children. Children are introduced to Bamba at a much younger age (three months) as opposed to Bisli. Children are only exposed to Bisli on average, when they three or four years old. This is due to the consistency and choking hazard that one poses over the other. Bamba is much softer and easily dissolves in the mouth of babies, whereas Bisli is crunchy and spicy, which may not appeal to younger children and may be difficult for them to eat.

There are marked differences as to how they are marketed in Israel and abroad. In Israel, the branding is different due to issues of translations and societal knowledge and sensitivities. For example, the bags of Bisli in Hebrew will say Mexican-flavored whereas in English it will read as taco. In another example, in Hebrew it will say spicy-flavor and in English, it will read as smoky. The differences, extend beyond that. In Israel, as mentioned, they are advertised as cool crunchy party snacks; abroad they are labeled as wheat party snacks. perhaps to emphasize the somewhat healthy ingredient. Unlike Bamba, in Israel, the manufacturer (the same for both products) does not market Bisli as healthy. The ingredients include flour (which contains gluten), palm oil, salt, sugar, corn starch, potato starch, hydrolyzed soy protein, spices, monosodium glutamate, dehydrated onion, dehydrated garlic, and soy protein concentrate. The list varies according to the flavor bag. Bisli is commercially highlighted as a uniquely Israeli product that is fun, cool, and an affordable indulgence at the same time. Both the Israeli and Mexican markets use the same images and the two iconic characters.

Shkedei Marak

Shkedei Marak (literally soup almonds) is an Israeli food product consisting of crisp miniature yellow squared croutons used as a soup accompaniment. The name is derived from the Hebrew word *Shkedei*, the plural form of *Shked*, which means almond, and *Marak* is the Hebrew word for soup. Soup almonds originated from traditional recipes cooked by Eastern European Jewish women who made thick and wide noodles that were cut into cubes or oval shapes that resembled almonds, baked in the oven and then added to chicken soup. These traditional recipes are still made. The word *mandlach* is the plural diminutive of *mandel*, which means almond in both German and Yiddish.



Osem first developed *Shkedei Marak* in 1952. It is a unique product that is only manufactured in Israel.²¹ *Shkedei Marak* are made from wheat flour, vegetable oil, salt, spices and all natural ingredients, with no preservatives or food coloring. It is kosher and a *pareve* product, which means that they can be used in either meat or cream soups. This is an important factor for those observing *Kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws). Despite the name, they contain no almonds. They are similar in concept to oyster crackers but are not so salty, are much smaller and have a different shape.

Shkedei Marak were immortalized by the 1978 Israeli cult film now classic *Eskimo Limon* (Lemon Popsicle) which also included *Bamba* and other popular snacks. These food products are some of the ones that Israelis seek out when they live abroad and Mexico is no exception. These foods trigger nostalgia (Raviv 2015: 182) and memories of home. They are also a form of casual eating (Raviv 2015: 183) which characterizes the informality Israeli society.

For many years, Osem was the exclusive manufacturer of *Shkedei Marak* in Israel, but today other Israeli food companies, such as Vita, and even foreign-owned companies such as Knorr also market the product. Over the years, these food companies have tried to market this product in different shapes such as stars, rings, and little fish, but were not successful and today only the original squares survive. *Shkedei Marak* is intended as a soup accompaniment, but can be eaten plain as a snack food. Many of the people I interviewed ate these tiny little square morsels by the handful, in salads, straight out of the bag or even crushed up and mixed with eggs as an alternative coating for *schnitzel*. *Bisli* is used in a similar manner.

In Israel, when marketed they are promoted as healthy additions, using only natural ingredients and as the tastiest and crispiest snacks. As opposed to *Bamba* and *Bisli*, *Shkedei Marak* are not aggressively marketed in commercials. It is sometimes promoted in print and social media, as the ultimate Israeli product for adding crunch and volume to soups or as delicious, toasted, and flavorful croutons that turn even the most boring soups into tasty and filling meals. This was especially important during *Tzena* (a period of austerity in Israel from 1949 to 1959) when food was scarce and basic staples had to be stretched to fulfill the needs of the Israeli household. In Mexico, they are marketed as taste of home "Made in Israel", producing nostalgia. As one person told me, "People know of *Shkedei Marak* just from being Israeli. There is no need for ads or commercials. We simply know it and

²¹ For more products developed by this company, see, <https://www.osem.co.il>.

love it.” Shkedei Marak are very popular and have their own culture, almost cult-like following. As one middle-aged Israeli commented, “Shkedei Marak has its own religion and its own philosophy. We can’t get enough of them.” Many Israelis can’t eat soup or other meals without including *Shkedei Marak*. The manufacturer also makes a kosher for Passover version of *Shkedei Marak*.

The use of Yiddish in Israeli pop culture is not new and especially poignant in marketing food dishes and snacks (Zandberg 2006). It is not surprising that many popular snacks as has been shown use Yiddish as a way to connote memories of a lost home and to invoke Jewish cultural connections for many from the former Soviet countries, though not necessarily religious. They are not native Yiddish speakers, and while some might use Yiddish words, most don’t keep kosher and rarely attend synagogue or join a Jewish organization.

Marketing of Falafel and Shwarma in Mexico

Falafel and shwarma are marketed to both the Jewish and non-Jewish local and foreign markets visiting or residing in Mexico (including tourists, Israelis, Mexican Jews, and local residents of Middle Eastern descent).²² For tourists, falafel in particular is presented as a healthy and vegan/vegetarian alternative to the typical meat tacos and cheese-filled quesadillas. Health-conscious tourists seek this dish for that reason. It is also promoted as an ethnic experience that is served in upscale gourmet and chef restaurants. Shwarma on the other hand is not really showcased to tourists but rather sold to the local Israeli, Mexican Jewish, and Lebanese populations.

Falafel and shwarma might have come to Mexico as humble Middle Eastern/Israeli street food, but they have evolved over the years. In Mexico, many restaurants and eateries stay close to the original roots of falafel and shwarma, while others sometimes, add nuanced local flavors elevating them to new heights. In trendy restaurants, for example, falafel may be served with whole chili peppers like chipotle, dressed with salsas and slices of avocados, similar to how *tacos* would be served. In Israeli-owned and run stalls or small restaurants, falafel may still be served in the original Israeli-style. However, in establishments not operated by Israelis, falafel and shwarma may undergo modifications as they tend to cater to tourists, residents of Middle Eastern origin, and health conscious consumers. In Mexico, when you want to be trendy, patrons include signs, menus and

²² These tourists include non-Jewish tourists looking for ethnic food and the exoticism of the Middle East and Jewish tourists who are looking for comfort food and a sense of belonging and home.



slogans that are peppered with English, especially if they want to attract foreigners and the upscale local market.

It seems that Israeli cuisine is moving away from the small dingy, religious, and kosher establishments to more modern, clean and chic wide open sit-down style restaurants that incorporate Mexican motifs, elements and colors, like sombreros, Mexican flags, and knick-knacks. Instead of small shwarma stands, in Mexico, more often than not, you will find sit-down restaurants nestled between local fare.

In one place I visited, the falafel was served in the shape of a sombrero (Literally, hat in Spanish but alluding to the oversized, high pointed crown, extra-wide brim variety), making it trendy and popular. Falafel (in a pita, on a plate) is often served in small portions, with limited toppings and fillings and with local vegetables as accompaniments such as cucumbers, squash, corn and avocados.

In one nouvelle-cuisine style restaurant, Israeli standard food was turned into modern, sophisticated gourmet cuisine geared toward an international clientele, with elaborate complex dishes (kosher and non-kosher versions) emphasizing the aesthetics of food rather than its ethnicity. By highlighting food in a popular setting in this manner, the political/religious discourse that sometimes surrounds such dishes is muted.²³ These non-specifically Israeli restaurants are changing the face of the national cuisine abroad; this new Israeli cuisine in the Diaspora is tied up in notions of belonging, nostalgia, identity, and nationalism. Lebanese patrons run non-kosher restaurants. These non-kosher venues highlight the secular meaning of food and its place in the Diaspora.

Israeli or Jewish-owned eateries and restaurants tend to stay true to the flavors and textures of a solid fried chickpea ball. At times, local cooks will enhance the dishes with a bit of lemon juice, fresh mint and chives, and a handful of shallots, bringing together the Old and New World, but will still serve them with hummus, Israeli and tabbouleh salads, and pitas. However, no matter how authentic the flavors seem nothing has come close to the real Israeli experience.

“The falafel and shwarma is very different from the one here [Israel]. Then they didn't sell pitas like the ones you find here [Israel] and the recipe of the falafel (a stand at the Corner of

²³ Issues with ownership have been briefly addressed earlier in this work, but political/religious discourses and divides will not be addressed at length here or the current debates on how Israeli Arabs are affecting the Israeli food culture and Jewish nationhood.

Teca)²⁴ wasn't very good. The shwarma was from a Lebanese place (in Bosques)²⁵ and even though it was very different, it was very good."

In these Israeli/Jewish-owned restaurants, the meat is kosher, the menu is in Hebrew and Spanish, and you can order bottled Israeli juices. Most Israeli-owned restaurants are kosher and are open from Sunday to Friday before sundown in accordance to Shabbat observance. Some re-open on Saturday evening after its conclusion. In some restaurants or eateries, codes understood by Jewish-Mexicans will be used. For example, the letters KMD.²⁶ These letters signal to the Jewish patrons that the establishments is indeed kosher whilst to the non-Jewish patron, they go largely unnoticed. Shwarma is not marketed as an Israeli dish even when the restaurant is owned, operated or managed by Jews or Israelis, but rather as *tacos árabes*.

So far, it seems that for the Israelis eating their national food in Mexico represented an attempt at trying to connect to a symbolic sense of home. For Jewish Mexicans, eating Israeli food is either a way to connect to their future home (those that later immigrated to Israel) or a means to show their solidarity with Israel.

Israeli companies investing in Mexico have a vested interest in selling and marketing their authentic wares in Mexico as they seek to gain a foothold in this emerging market. They also want to capitalize on the growing demand for health and wellness options. Mexico was the first market where the brand Obela was launched in Latin America, which was based on wholesome and natural ingredients.²⁷

Conclusions

Israeli street food initially entered the Mexican market as part of the extension of the immigrant experience and the typical case of food mobility, but then there was a natural progression of eating for pleasure and as such it was elevated into a an ethereal experience.

These dishes remind the participants of home, whether an old home, a new home or an invented/imaginary home. A home that defines

²⁴ The "Comer" refers to a local supermarket called "la Comercial Mexicana" and "Teca" refers to a neighborhood called "Tecamachalco."

²⁵ "Bosques" refers to an upper scale neighborhood called "Bosques de la Lomas."

²⁶ KMD stands for "Kosher Maguen David" which is the Kashrut certification by one of the Halebi (Syrian-Aleppan-Jewish descent) community that forms part of the Mexican Jewish community, and is known for its rigorous rabbinical inspections and Kashrut certification.

²⁷ In June 2012 Obela launched three varieties of Hummus in the Mexican market (chipotle, red peppers and plain). See, <https://www.strauss-group.com/brand/obela/>



and completes them. Flavors and smells are like a distinct language that forms memories of past times and articulate pleasure, comfort, joy and sadness. Everything we eat, taste and cook is infused with memories and lived experiences.

Obela has been well received and perceived and has already captured the same market shares as competitor brands. In any case it seems that Israelis in Mexico utilize their native food as an important element in the maintenance of personal ties with their home countries and a cohesive factor in the construction of a new identity in Mexico as Israeli representatives or ambassadors of such food practices.

The comparative nature of the research revealed marked differences between native Israelis and Jewish Mexicans (who will become Israeli), while the rest remain in the mainstream - all connected through food and the cultural production of food in the public domain.

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