

BASIL ALZERI—

The Archivist in the Kitchen

Cuisine is a vivacious and mutable cultural practice that has history and politics folded right into it. The privileged eaters who make up North American foodie culture may often miss the specific histories of conquest and migration built into their eclectically global palettes, but they are present in each bite. Israeli appropriations of Palestinian ingredients and dishes are illustrative; for instance, the rebranding of tabouleh as “Israeli salad,” and maftoul (a small, round pasta made from wheat and bulgur) as “Israeli couscous.” The complex etymology of the word sabra, commonly known as the name of an Israeli-produced hummus, reveals a complex history of linguistic colonialism. In Arabic and in Hebrew, sabra is a generic word for cactus, plantings of which were used pre-1948 to delineate borders between Palestinian villages. More recently, in Modern Hebrew sabra has become the descriptor for Israeli-born Jews — metaphorically and literally, the beneficiaries of the clearing of the Palestinian cacti. In 1982, residents of the Sabra Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon were massacred by a Lebanese Christian Phalangist militia, in collusion with Israel, one of the most brutal events in the history of the occupation. The name of the hummus, so cunningly appropriated, can't be separated from this settler-colonial history.

Palestinian cuisine — in Gaza and the West Bank, in camps and in cities worldwide — reflects a history of occupation and displacement. But more than that, it reflects the skills, proclivities and ingredients required to survive those conditions. Basil AlZeri has captured hours of Skype video of his mother teaching him how to cook from her impressive oeuvre of Palestinian dishes. This archive of cultural knowledge is the private counterpart to a series of public food-based performances he has presented since 2011. The first performances were mezze-style dinners in which AlZeri presented his guests with an array of Palestinian recipes in tiny dishes resting on his body. Lying face-down on the table, the uncomfortably shifting body of the cook became an antidote against the commodity fetishism of foodie culture. These early performances established the labour politics of AlZeri's work by highlighting two kinds of unrecognized and often unpaid labour: gendered domestic work and artist's labour. Next, AlZeri began cooking live as a performance with his mother, Suad, instructing him from Dubai, over Skype. Most recently, AlZeri has been working on *The Mobile Kitchen Lab*, which he will use as an itinerant stage for future cooking performances. AlZeri performs simple and generous gestures, inviting his guests to identify the Palestinian stories of land, resources and labour that are built into his recipes.



Mezze

I wanted to learn more about Palestinian food so I could share with her.

FUSE – Eventually, you began to incorporate food into your artistic practice. How did you come to that?

BA – Cooking became an entry-point for me to introduce myself, as a human being who is also a Palestinian, to my peers in Canada. Cuisine became a way for me to express myself, my history, my cultural identity, with a lot of specificity but without being over-determined by certain politics.

FUSE – Mezze is a form of cuisine you’ve drawn on in your recent work. In Arab cuisine, is mezze an appetizer course within a larger meal, or more its own style of eating?

BA – People don’t necessarily eat mezze and then a main course and then dessert. Mezze can be the whole meal. The meal is made of many different little dishes, and that’s all you eat. For lighter meals, or lunch, or even a lighter dinner. It’s usually the type of meal for when you have a little time to sit around and talk. It has a social aspect to it. Where people sit around and eat for longer, and the plates keep coming.

FUSE – How many times have you done the mezze-style dinner party performances?

BA – The first time I experimented with that gesture was very informal, in a private space, in 2010. It was Mother’s Day, and I dedicated the first dinner party performance to my mom. I kept working with the idea of the body and cooking and food preparation. I did a short residency at Don Blanche in August 2012, where my role as an artist was as a cook’s assistant. I realized that I’d like to present something there towards the end of my residency, and it seemed like a really great chance to re-enact certain elements of the food gestures, but in a different context.

FUSE – Like the first mezze dinner, for the performance at Don Blanche your body was used as a surface for serving food. While you are serving, do you interact with the eaters at all, or do you just lie there?

BA – No, I don’t interact with the eaters – I like to call them the guests. My gesture is a bit strenuous, but at base it’s a friendly gesture. I don’t try to achieve a complete stillness or anything. I shift or stretch a bit. And if someone insists on

talking to me and I can respond, I will, but because I’m head down, I can’t really talk to them.

I’m interested in the passive presence of the body, barely recognized for its labour. I’ve noticed that once people get involved in eating the food they can actually forget that there’s a body on the table. They start having conversations, they’re laughing, and there are moments where I am pretty sure that they completely forget where the food comes from, who produced it, who prepared it...

FUSE – Is it important that the body on the table is also the body of the cook?

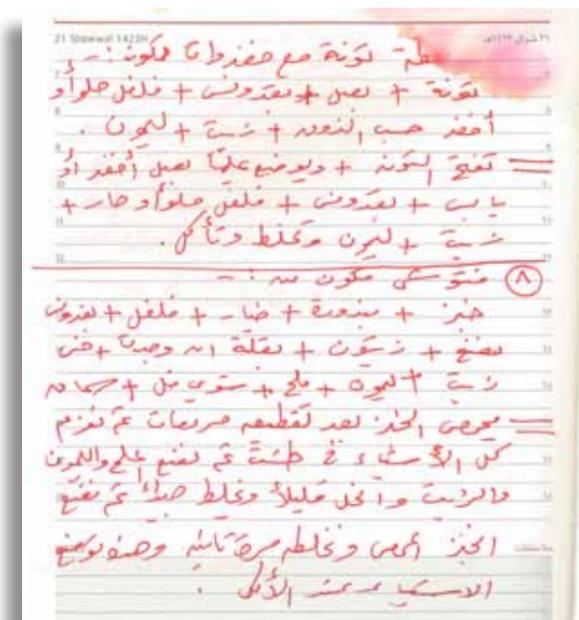
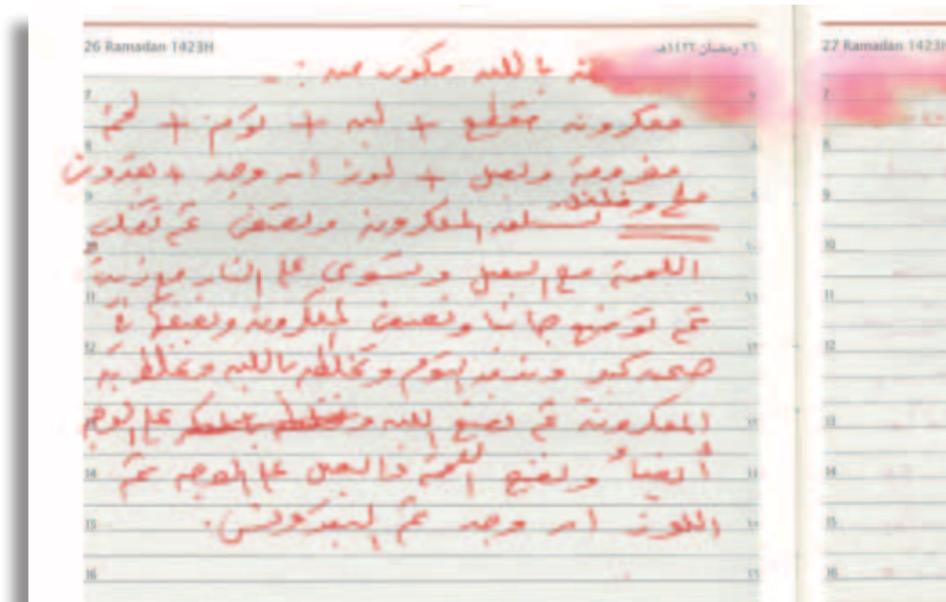
BA – Yes, for a couple of reasons. I think a lot about how artists’ labour is often forgotten, just as it is in many other fields, including food preparation. At Don Blanche, my residency consisted of working in the kitchen; myself and another artist, Deirdre Fraser, cooked for basically the whole duration. People were very grateful and acknowledged our cooking, but we worked the whole time to feed the mass of people – from 20 up to nearly 100 towards the end of the residency period. My body on the serving table became a reminder of that labour.

The other aspect that’s important is that I’m serving all these Palestinian mezze that I cooked carefully and with a lot of love. In order to get the dips or the spreads onto a cracker or a piece of pita bread, the guests actually had to apply some pressure on my body. It’s unintentional pain that they cause; they didn’t even know they were causing it. And little bits of olive oil or sauce would spill, and it would drip down my skin, and they didn’t mean to do that. I heard from some of the guests that they were a little worried about me. They were trying to eat quickly so that I could get up.

FUSE – This little aggressive gesture of sacrifice underlines your labour. It makes the use of your body more explicit.

BA – But there’s another dimension: the gesture isn’t only about me specifically. I think of my mom in her domestic role, making sure that we eat well, and cooking every single day. I think of her labour, and that of other mothers, people who cook as professionals, unrecognized labour in general – but especially people whose cooking is daily, unpaid labour.

FUSE – You also morph into something of an archetype because you’re face-down – you’re not Basil, so who are you? Are you an anonymous



Macaroni/Pasta with Yogurt

- Elbow macaroni (either Stortini or Cavatappi – if you cannot find elbow macaroni, cut the pasta into smaller pieces)
- Plain yogurt
- Garlic
- Ground beef
- Onions
- Almond (if available), blanched and toasted
- Parsley
- Salt and pepper

Fry the ground beef in olive oil and onions, then put aside to cool. Cook the pasta in a big pot of salted boiling water and strain. Crush garlic and mix with the yogurt, then pour over macaroni and mix. On top of the macaroni mix, layer more yogurt; the cooked, cooled ground beef and onions; the almonds, and the parsley.

Fatoosh

- | Salad | Dressing |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Pita bread | Olive oil |
| Tomatoes | Lemon |
| Cucumber | Salt |
| Green pepper | Balsamic or cider vinegar |
| Parsley | Sumac |
| Mint | Pomegranate molasses |
| Green olives | |
| Watercress (if available) | |
| Romaine Lettuce | |

Cut the pita bread into little squares and toast it in olive oil. Chop all vegetables and add to a large mixing bowl. Add the dressing and toss well, then add the toasted bread and toss again. Make sure to add the toasted bread and dressing just before eating.

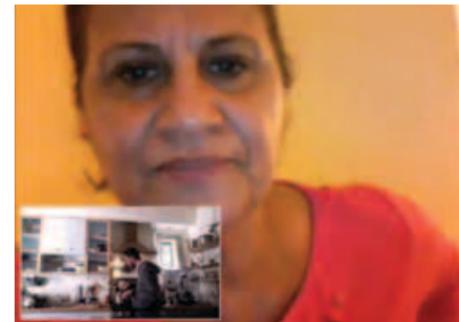
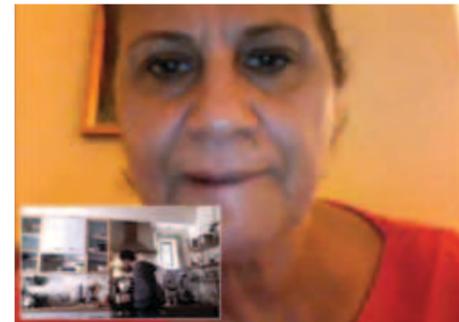
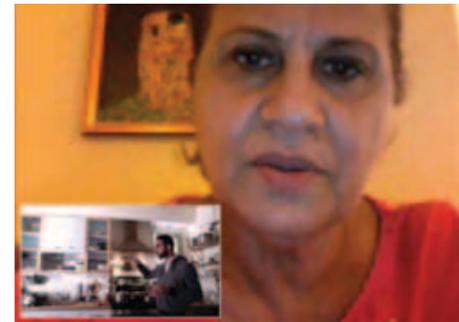
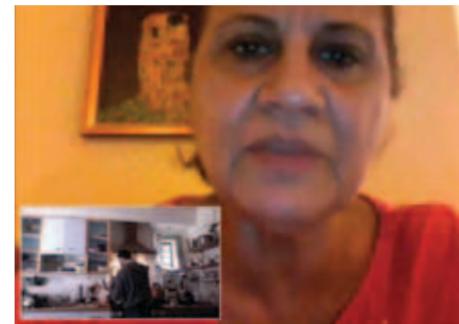
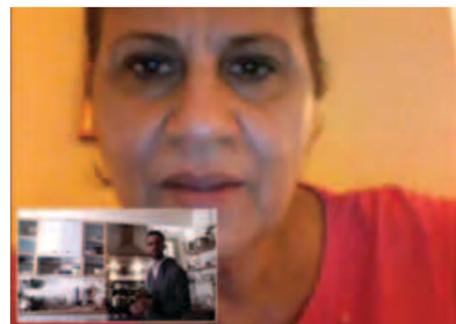
Brown body? Are you a Palestinian body? And how are these details related to the bodily sacrifice you're describing?

BA – I touch on that through the Palestinian food I'm serving. The gesture is subtle. The Palestinian people, as a nation and a culture, are actually a very important part of this. The best way to describe this is through the relation of occupation to Palestinian land and resources – literally, eating off people's backs.

FUSE – That's a level of meaning that your guests can only get at if they know certain things. If they realize that the mezze is specifically Palestinian and not Turkish or Lebanese, for example. The identity markers they'd have from your body – the colour of your skin, your hair – aren't necessarily going to be read as Palestinian. Depending on how much access

people have to that information, their reading will get more nuanced and more complex. Even without these details, your performance ideally would evoke the interrelation of labour, exploitation and histories of migration, and specifically the racialization of menial labour. But I'm still not entirely convinced that the complexity of the work would come out for the guests. How do you insert the uncomfortable and uncanny moments with enough force to shake them up?

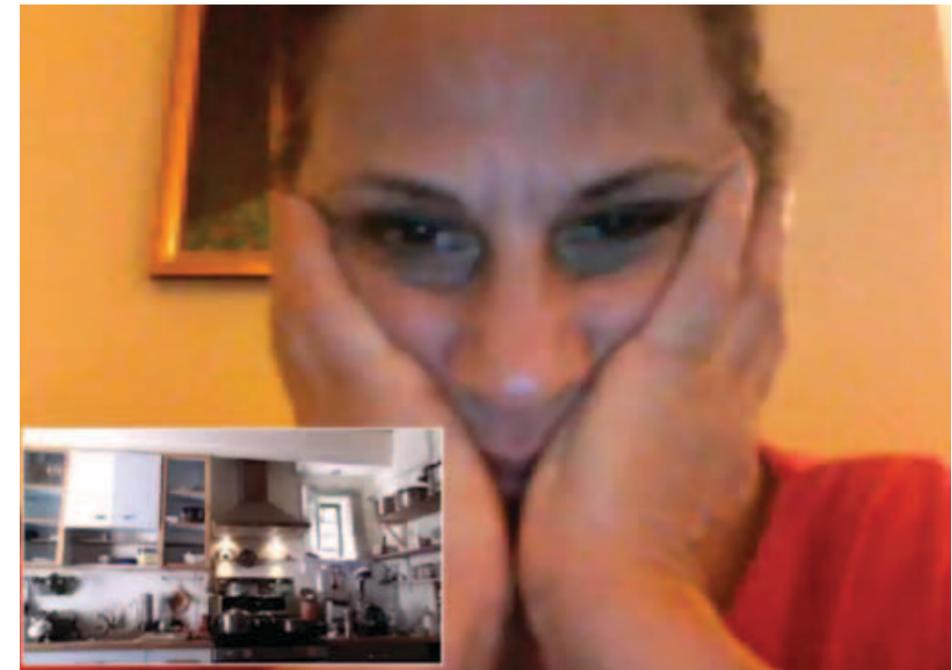
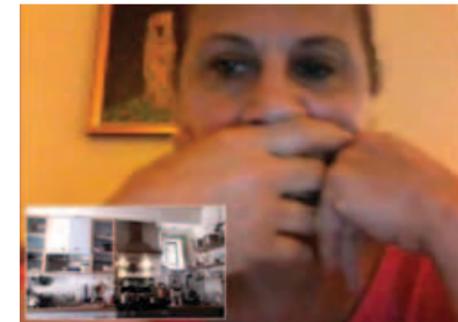
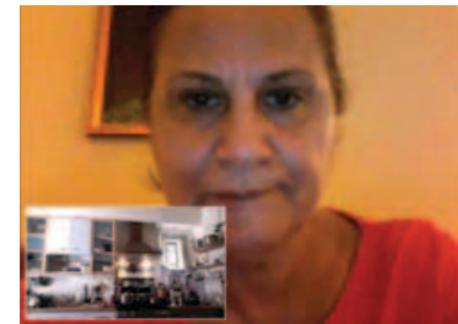
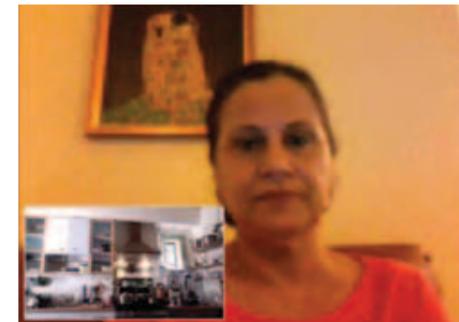
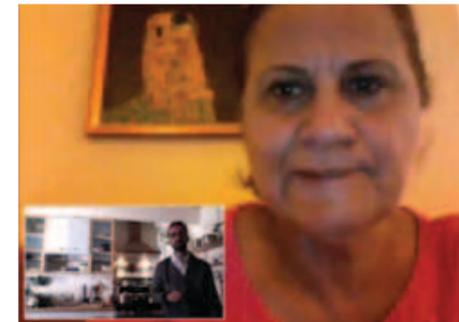
BA – When I performed this gesture at Don Blanche, I said, "You are about to eat dinner off the artist's body, of Palestinian origin. You eat at your own risk." I still feel conflicted about this wording, but I felt that I had to tell them this. I didn't know most of the people there, so I felt that they had to know this little piece of information. I think it had a huge impact.



The Main Course

FUSE – In contrast to the mezze-style dinner performances, your Skype cooking performances with your mother involve lots of dialogue and information for your audience to consume. Describe the set-up you used for your performance in Mexico City.

BA – It was part of the Transmuted International Performance Art Festival, the theme of which was "Non-Canadian Canadians." The performance was at a small contemporary art museum in the centre



of the city called Ex Teresa Arte Actual, an ex-convent and chapel. It's a historical building, built in 1616, with huge thick walls, beautiful façades, and glass domes on top. The space the performances took place in was emptied out entirely – there were no artifacts or art.

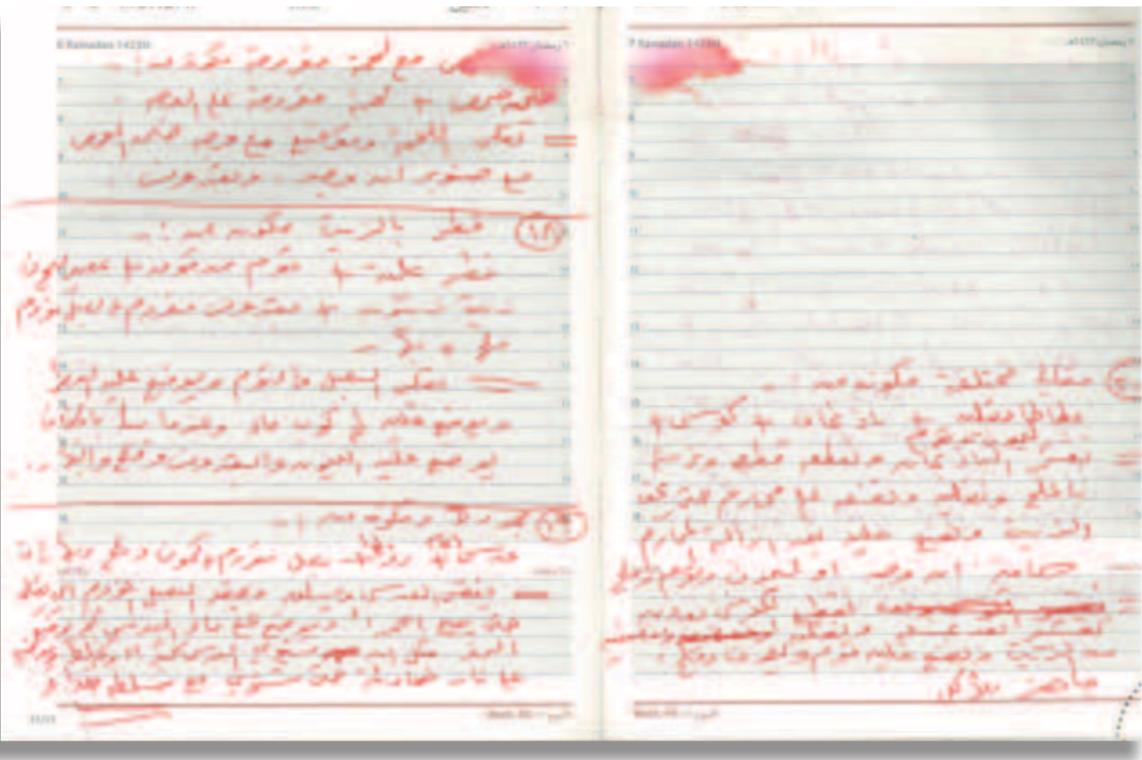
The performance started with me transporting the whole kitchen out into the performance space, running from one end of the museum to the other. I always start a performance with what happens behind the scenes. I wanted everything to be perfect for my mom. The cooking itself was kind of a disaster actually. The festival couldn't get a standing stove so they ended up getting a portable gas stove. The pot basically took over both elements, not quite being heated by both. I was worried that part of it would be cooked and the other not. But it worked out.

FUSE – Where was your mother at the time of the performance?

BA – She was in Dubai, where she lives now. She was on Skype, and her image was projected onto a wall. It was almost 10 p.m. in Mexico City, and 6 a.m. her time.

FUSE – Did you come up with the menu together?

BA – I told her what I was doing and she asked a lot of great questions: "What's the context? What's the space? What is the festival about?" Because the space was a chapel, this became a key factor.



↑
Mujdarah

FUSE – What was the meal?

BA – My mother suggested that we make mujdarah, a very simple dish. It's a very popular dish, and an affordable one, which people have been making for hundreds of years. It's made of lentils, rice, onions and spices. It is served with a yoghurt and cucumber salad and a green salad. We picked this dish because of its origins in the city of Nazareth, which is famous for being the city of Jesus's exile from Bethlehem – it's called the Nazareth mujdarah, the mujdarah Nasraouyeh. We thought that because of the religious context of the museum, this specific dish would fit perfectly, and make a link to Catholic culture in Mexico City.

Mujdarah is traditional to the Christian Palestinian community, as a meal for lent. When I talked to my grandma about it, she said it was very important in Palestinian

cuisine because it's a very accessible dish. The lentils and the onions come from Palestinian land, and rice is always readily available. These things have become even more important with the occupation, because many other ingredients can be scarce. Mujdarah is also important because you can feed a lot of people. I mean, people used to have huge families. My mom's family has eleven people, my dad's family has thirteen, and those are average-sized families. So mujdarah is very resourceful and practical. How much you eat mujdarah is also an indication of the class system. There's a saying, "they eat mujdarah every day." It's a common and loved dish, but if your family eats it every day, that's because you can't afford anything else.

FUSE – Can you describe how you make mujdarah?

BA – It's flavoured very simply. You cut a lot of onions, preferably red, for the colour, and you sauté them in olive oil, and then you add a big spoonful of cumin, two spoonfuls of sumac, salt and pepper, and some people add a little bit of coriander. The cumin and sumac are key. Once you season and sauté the onions, you add them to the half-cooked rice, which is in another pot, so that the spices and onion infuse the rice, and then you add the cooked lentils. There is a saying: kol habeh be-habetha, which means every grain is an individual grain. When it's mushy, that's when the dish fails. So you cook the lentils al dente, about three-quarters through. You mix it before everything gets too soft, and you let it finish cooking together, so once it's done it's a unified dish, one mujdarah. And you serve it with crispy caramelized onions. It's really tasty. And it's a bit of a picnic dish as well. People make a big pot of it, and bring the onions separately, and salad.

Coffee

FUSE – How has Palestinian cuisine been affected by the occupation?

BA – Fish dishes are an obvious example. My family doesn't come from a city near the shore, which might explain why I only know of one Palestinian fish dish. But I have asked my family why there isn't much fish in Palestinian dishes in general, and as far as my mother remembers, it was because they didn't have access to fish because it was either restricted or prohibited. When Palestinian fishermen take a chance and go fishing in occupied areas, they risk being shot at. So there's a lot of risk involved in eating fish. There's only one dish I can think of that has fish, and it's called sayadeyeh. It calls for whatever fish is available at the market.

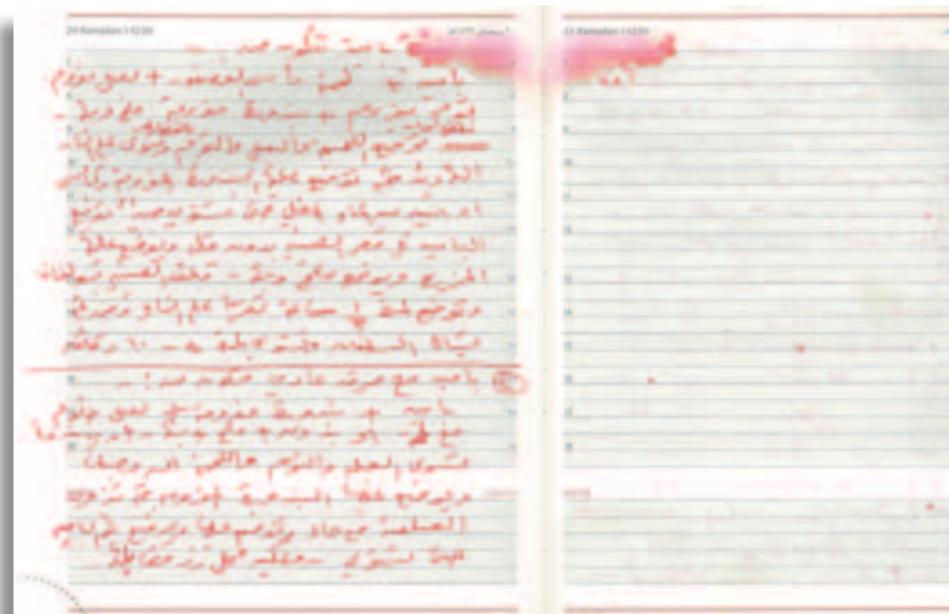
Communities in Palestine, or outside, in the camps in Jordan or Syria, hold onto their culinary tradition because it's one of the few things left in the culture that is still lively. They're also quite rigid about it. In my interpretation, the character of Palestinian cuisine is connected historically to the preservation of food. Preserved foods are extremely prominent in many recipes, even more since the occupation started. The techniques are ancient; there were all kinds of ways to make food last before refrigeration was invented. You know: labneh (pressed yoghurt in olive oil); big jars with tons of green and black olives; maktous (eggplant in olive oil and stuffed with walnuts or chilies, depending on what resources are available); different kinds of pickles;

preserved lemons; pickled tomatoes; all kinds of preserves.

And when you say "Palestinian preserves," you're not talking about little mason jars, you're talking about 10-litre jars. This reflects generosity and abundance and the way people like to eat and offer food to their guests, but now also because of the nature of their life conditions under Israeli occupation. Sometimes they're under siege or lockdown, and can't leave their houses for days and days, they can't even go to the corner store. And that has profoundly affected the way that people eat. In any other culture, you wouldn't care to keep that much in your pantry. But people stockpile and keep even more. Every house has a good-sized pantry, a little room that is full of jars of preserves: kilos of goat cheese in water and salt, olives and pickles, and big quantities of sugar and flour to make bread and dessert for days to come. It's carried on, though a little bit less so, in the diaspora. My parents don't live in Palestine, but they have a good-sized pantry full of labneh and maktous and zeitoun.

One of the most valuable things in people's houses is their pantry. It's so important for survival. When Israeli soldiers raid people's houses, they go straight for the pantry. I have not witnessed this myself, but Israeli soldiers will go and mix things up in the pantry, to starve the family. They will mix things together: the sugar with the labneh, and the zeitoun with the flour.

FUSE – As opposed to just breaking the jar, they'd actually mix them?



BA – Yes, if they break the jar maybe a bit can be salvaged, but if they mix oil into the flour, everything is ruined. This is the occupier's mind, anything to torture people.

My basic motive for these projects is to archive, and that's a form of preservation too. So much effort goes into demolishing Palestinian culture. For me, working with food is very reflexive, and a way of recognizing labour of mothers, specifically in Palestinian culture. It's also a form of cultural diplomacy. Getting to people through everyday activities. Preservation is a specific technique for cuisine and also for resistance. Both things come together: pleasure in the colours and flavors and the social history of food, and resistance to occupation. Together they make the character of Palestinian cuisine.

Thanks to Dennis Hale and Mike Sharpe, visual artists and woodworkers, for co-designing and fabricating The Mobile Kitchen Lab.

Introduction and interview by Gina Badger for FUSE.

Basil AlZeri is a Toronto-based Palestinian artist working in performance, video, installation, food and public art interventions. His artwork is grounded in his practice as an art educator and community worker, and engages with the intersection of everyday actions and life necessities. AlZeri's performance work has been exhibited in Toronto (FADO, Nuit Blanche, Whipper Snapper Gallery), Quebec (Fait Maison 14), Winnipeg (Central Canadian Centre for Performance) and Mexico City (Transmuted International Performance Art Festival, Performancecar O Morir). Upcoming projects include a public performance project with the Ottawa Art Gallery/Creative Cities Conference and performances in Chile and Argentina in 2013. On 15 March, FUSE and Israeli Apartheid Week Toronto will co-present AlZeri's performance at Xspace Cultural Centre as part of the FADO Emerging Artists Series, .sightspecific.

Okra Casserole (Seneyet Bamyeh)

Okra
Beef, in chunks the size of a little bird's head
Onions, finely chopped
Crushed garlic
Tomatoes, finely chopped
Salt and pepper
Hot pepper

In a skillet over low heat, cook the beef, garlic, onions, and hot pepper in olive oil. Add the tomatoes and one to two cups of boiling water. Let simmer until tender and cooked. Place the uncooked okra in a casserole, add the beef mix and season with salt and pepper. Cover the casserole with tin foil and cook for about twenty minutes on the stovetop. Remove the tin foil and broil it in the oven for about ten minutes.