We make it wrong. We serve it wrong. We eat it wrong. In fact, the Israelis get hummus right in ways we hadn't even considered we could mess it up. This dawned on me just after I stepped off the plane in Tel Aviv.

"Where will you eat hummus in the morning?"

My taxi driver wanted to know.

In Israel, hummus is breakfast. Not a party dip served with "baby" carrots. Not adulterated with pesto or artichokes or—God help me—chocolate.

My education begins the next morning at Abu Hassan, the country's premier hummus shop, around since the '60s. And it begins early. In a flurry of scooters, pedestrians and cars, customers line up shortly after 7 a.m., some carrying mixing bowls, plastic food containers, foil baking pans. Hummus take-out is very DIY. The shop will close once the hummus runs out.

Abu Hassan has two locations; I'm at the original, a beige storefront. In the distance, a sliver of the Mediterranean Sea peeks between buildings. On the left side, a tiny dining room that spills onto the sidewalk is already at capacity. On the right, a window and a line of people waiting to order.

At each of the eight or so tables, customers are handed wide, shallow bowls swirled with hummus topped with whole chickpeas, a sprinkle of parsley, pops of red paprika and amber cumin. Side plates hold stacks of pillow-soft pita breads and quarters of raw onion. The sea mixes with warm bread, concocting a seductive air. Crowd be damned, it is quiet beyond murmurs. These are workers stopping for a quick breakfast on their commute. The hummus was made in the early hours, so even the kitchen feels hushed.

In Pursuit of Perfect Hummus

Warm, whipped hummus is the breakfast of choice in Tel Aviv

Story by J.M. Hirsch

In the Old City of Jerusalem, Arab and Israeli cultures and cuisines come together, and wonderfully so in bowls of warm, ethereally smooth hummus.
Watching them eat is jarring. Sure, some rip off hunks of pita, swooping it fluidly into the yogurt-soft hummus, a scooping technique every child masters. But many pull the bowls toward them and eat it with a spoon, as we would soup.  

My turn at the window and I make a hummus faux pas. I want what I see, so I ask for hummus and pita. I get a strange look and a request for 10 Israeli Shekels, or about $2.70. Instead of the beautifully dressed bowl I craved, I get a bag. Inside, a split pita with hummus oozing out the sides.

Turns out, pita is implied in any order of hummus. By calling it out, apparently I overstated the obvious to which I was oblivious, changing my request into some sort of unorthodox sandwich. Hence the odd look. Nonetheless, I eat—rather messily—standing at the sunny curb, surrounded by others expertly balancing bowls and bread. I don’t care. I am transfixed. This no tub of American grocery store hummus. It is light, ethereal—standing on the sunny curb, surrounded by others expertly balancing bowls and bread.

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Samah Siam teaches Palestinian cooking at her home inside the Damascus Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem. She follows her mother’s recipe, a study of simplicity: freshly cooked chickpeas, tahini, a splash of lemon juice and salt. She purees it until silken smooth, thinning it with chickpea cooking water.

Hummus has been an unlikely flashpoint in the Middle East. Various countries and people claim it as their own, a push and pull that would be comical if the factions weren’t already so at odds. In recent decades, Israelis became particularly enamored with it. Today, Jews and Muslims alike savor it. But it began as an Arab dish. So I seek an Arab as my first teacher.

Samah Siam’s home—a warren of small, almost subterranean stone rooms in the city’s Muslim Quarter—is a short walk along narrow cobbled roads from the Damascus Gate, a massive entrance to the city that dates to the 16th century. She will teach me the hummus her mother taught her. Her 20-year-old daughter, Aseel, translates from Arabic as Samah pulls a pot of steaming, freshly cooked chickpeas off the stove.

She works quickly and by instinct, measuring nothing in her small kitchen, which is a contrast that spans thousands of years. Jesus likely walked past her home. Today, a reality competition plays on a flat-screen TV on the other side of the room. Stray cats—which are legion in Israel—saunter past the open door. Eager to impress, her husband, Riad, takes us to the rooftop, from which a stunning panorama of history and faith unfolds.

When we return, Samah explains that the chickpeas are always pureed warm and hummus is always served warm. They are creamier that way. And they are pureed first with nothing but their own cooking water, a critical ingredient for reaching a silky consistency. When her blender has reduced the chickpeas to a soft puree, she adds tahini, lemon juice, salt. Nothing else. No garlic.

The hummus pours easily from blender to bowl. Samah—whose family in winter eats fresh past her home. Today, a reality competition plays on a flat-screen TV on the other side of the room. Stray cats—which are legion in Israel—saunter past the open door. Eager to impress, her husband, Riad, takes us to the rooftop, from which a stunning panorama of history and faith unfolds.

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At Shlomo & Doron, near Tel Aviv’s massive outdoor Carmel Market, the toppings are as important as the hummus itself. Ful (pureed favas) and shakshuka (tomatoes and eggs) are the two most popular.
hummus almost daily for breakfast—adds a drizzle of olive oil, a spoonful of whole chickpeas. It is warm, savory and soft. We eat it with fresh pita.

**Shlomo & Doron**

*Yishkan Street, Tel Aviv*

Back in Tel Aviv, I meet with Elad Shore. His family opened the Shlomo & Doron hummus shop in 1937. The 27-year-old sits, sorting fava beans, at one of the tables outside the shop, near the massive outdoor Carmel Market. He confirms the simplicity of hummus, then talks toppings. It is something his shop takes particular pride in.

The classic topping is hummus masabacha—whole chickpeas, olive oil, parsley, paprika and cumin. Sometimes a sliced hard-boiled egg. Then there is ful (pronounced FOOL), which tops hummus with an almost-black fava bean puree. Shlomo & Doron also serve hummus topped with shakshuka (poached eggs in tomatoes) and a baba ghanoush-like roasted eggplant. Some shops even break the vegetarian barrier, adding spoonfuls of spiced ground lamb (called kawarma).

What about the onions, I ask as a man on a motorbike delivers fresh pita. I couldn’t get enough of the warm pita, but Elad explains that Israelis use as little as possible. “It’s too heavy, especially at breakfast” he explains. Instead, they break the quartered onions into thin scoops, using them to spoon up hummus. An acquired taste, to be sure.

**Gargir Hasav**

*Levinsky Street, Tel Aviv*

On my final day in Tel Aviv, the cooks at yet another hummus shop, Gargir Hazav (“Grain of Gold”), invite me into their kitchen. A cauldron of chickpeas boils over on a gas burner, sending rivers of foam onto the tiled floor. We focus on proportions and timing, all of which surprise me.

Oren Mizlahi, who learned hummus-making from his father, ladles 4 or 5 liters of freshly cooked chickpeas and cooking water into a food processor. He walks away for one, then two, then three minutes. Far longer than I’ve ever let anything process. He opens the cover and steam billows out. He adds tahini—a full liter. Far more proportionally than I’ve ever made. Then he purees the mixture for another full minute. I start to understand why Israeli hummus is so light and smooth.

Back at Milk Street, we had work ahead of us. First, the ingredients. We’d never noticed, but chickpeas come in a range of sizes. In Israel, they favor smaller varieties, about the size of green peas. Larger chickpeas make grainy hummus. We agreed. We tested conventional chickpeas against smaller varieties, such as the Whole Foods Market 365 Everyday Value brand, and overwhelmingly preferred the latter.

Tahini was also an issue. Tahini is more common in Israel than ketchup is here, and brands and varieties are numerous. Less so in America. A toasted, thin (i.e., pours easily) tahini is needed to get the creamy consistency and rich, savory flavor we wanted. It was also essential to stir the tahini very well; some brands separate and clump. We liked the Kevala brand, but Soom and Aleppo brands also worked. We did not like Joyva, which was dark, thick and tasted bitter, almost burned.

We were pleased that in Israel the chickpeas are cooked in a familiar way—soaked overnight, then drained, then boiled with baking soda (to help soften them). We found that adding salt to the soaking water not only helped tenderize the chickpea skins, but also helped them absorb more water (softening them further). We tried cooking them without soaking—both pressure cooking and boiling—but neither method worked nearly as well, producing hummus that was dark, with a muddy flavor.

We questioned whether the extreme processing Oren showed us was really necessary. Most recipes here only call for processing until smooth. But when we compared, processing for a full three minutes made a significant difference; the hummus was noticeably creamier and lighter. We also tested the blender versus the food processor and found the latter not only did a better job of pureeing, it was also easier to get the hummus out.

We wondered if processing the chickpeas while...
warm really was important. Once again, the Israeliis knew their stuff. Hot chickpeas made a much smoother hummus. For a do-ahead option, we found we could soak the chickpeas overnight, then drain and refrigerate them for a few days before cooking. We also found that cooked chickpeas could be kept in their cooking water for an hour after boiling, then reheated briefly just before making the hummus. The heat rule also held true after boiling, then reheated briefly just before cooking. We also found that cooked chickpeas drain and refrigerate them for a few days before pureeing—and while the results were certainly better than the tubs sold at the grocery store, they could not compare in flavor or texture to hummus made from freshly cooked chickpeas.

So now I will soak and boil and puree for a very long time. Because pared down to its basic elements, hummus is breathtakingly good. But I’m still not sure I’ll eat it scooped up with raw onions.

**Israel Hummus (Hummus Masabacha)**

*Start to finish: 1 hour (15 minutes active), plus soaking | Makes 4 cups*

**Small chickpeas work best** for hummus; aim for no larger than a green pea. The Whole Foods Market 365 Everyday Value brand worked well. If you only find larger chickpeas, cook them until starting to break down, or 10 to 15 minutes longer. Soak the chickpeas for at least 12 hours. They can be soaked ahead of time, then drained and refrigerated for up to two days. Tahini is a sesame paste sold near peanut butter or in the international aisle. We liked the Kevala brand, but Soom and Aleppo were good, too. Look for a brand that is toasted and pours easily. Processing the chickpeas while warm ensures the smoothest, lightest hummus. Hummus is traditionally served warm and garnished with paprika, cumin, chopped fresh parsley and a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil. Sometimes a sliced hard-boiled egg is added. Serve with warm pita bread. Leftover hummus can be refrigerated for up to two days. Tahini is also delicious topped with a sliced hard-boiled egg and spiced ground beef.

![Warm hummus is also delicious topped with a sliced hard-boiled egg and spiced ground beef.](image)

**Cold water**

- 8 ounces (227 grams) dried chickpeas
- 2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon kosher salt, divided
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ⅔ cup toasted tahini, room temperature
- 3½ tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 to 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon paprika

**In a large bowl**, combine 8 cups of cold water, the chickpeas and 2 tablespoons of the salt. Let soak at room temperature at least 12 hours or overnight.

**In a large stockpot** over high, bring 10 cups of water and the baking soda to a boil. Drain the soaked chickpeas, discarding soaking water, and add to the pot. Return to a simmer, then reduce heat to medium and cook until the skins are falling off and the chickpeas are very tender, 45 to 50 minutes.

**Set a mesh strainer** over a large bowl and drain the chickpeas into it; reserve ¼ cup of the chickpea cooking water. Let the chickpeas sit for 1 minute to let all liquid drain. Set aside about 2 tablespoons of chickpeas, then transfer the rest to the food processor. Add the remaining 1 teaspoon of salt, then process for 3 minutes.

**Stop the processor** and add the tahini. Continue to process until the mixture has lightened and is very smooth, about 1 minute. Use a rubber spatula to scrape the sides and bottom of the processor bowl. With the machine running, add the ¼ cup of cooking liquid and the lemon juice. Process until combined. Taste and season with salt.

- **Transfer the hummus** to a shallow bowl and use a large spoon to make a swirled well in the center. Drizzle the well with olive oil, then top with the reserved 2 tablespoons chickpeas, parsley, cumin and paprika.

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**Spiced Beef Topping**

*(Kawarma)*

*Start to finish: 20 minutes | Makes about 2 cups*

**Rich, savory meat toppings** lend bold notes to hummus and make it a more robust meal. Our inspiration was kawarma, which uses ground lamb. We found beef was just as delicious. Use a wand-style grater to finely grate the garlic. The raw meat mixture can be combined up to an hour ahead and refrigerated until ready to cook. It also can be cooked ahead and refrigerated (leaving out the lemon and parsley), then reheated in a skillet or microwave just before serving. Finish with the lemon juice and parsley.

—J.M. Hirsch and Diane Unger

**In a medium bowl**, use your hands to mix together the meat, paprika, salt, cinnamon, cumin, oregano, cayenne, garlic and 2 tablespoons of water.

**In a 10-inch skillet** over medium-high, combine the ground beef mixture, onion and olive oil. Cook, stirring occasionally and breaking up the meat, until the onion is softened and the beef is no longer pink, 6 to 8 minutes. Stir in the tomato paste and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

**Add another ½ cup** plus 2 tablespoons of water and cook, scraping the pan, until the water has evaporated and the mixture begins to sizzle, about 5 minutes. Off heat, stir in the lemon juice and parsley. Taste and season with salt. Spoon over hummus, then drizzle with tahini.