How do food cultures allow us to approach cultural intersections and conflict? And what is the value of coteaching on a fraught region marked by asymmetrical power relations such as Israel/Palestine? We explored some of these questions after our College at Carnegie Mellon University approached us in the spring of 2019 about taking a group of students on a cuisine-focused trip to Israel and the West Bank the following year. The purpose of the trip, to be guided by Palestinian and Israeli food connoisseurs, was for students to learn about the entangled and conflictive food cultures of Israel and Palestine, through exchanges with culinary experts, visits to markets and home kitchens, and projects that would document their encounters with local cuisine. When the pandemic hit, we resolved to transform our thwarted travel plans into a perceptual learning journey in the form of a freshman seminar on Israeli and Palestinian food cultures. Coteaching, a long-sought pedagogical aspiration of ours, lends the course a measure of cultural depth, integrity, and innovation we were unlikely to offer students had we taught the class separately. Yet the dearth of coteaching on this topic in the US university setting did not provide models to which we could turn. As faculty members with expertise in Jewish history and Arabic cultural studies, of Israeli and Egyptian backgrounds respectively, there was another journey embedded in the experience we sought for our students, despite the absence of a Palestinian voice: one into each other’s inner cultures, given our diverse backgrounds, a possible paradigm for inquiry and exchange across cultural boundaries. In this essay, we share our experience of coteaching this course, first virtually in the spring of 2021, and then in-person in the fall of 2021, and the insights we have gained into the ways we might transform students’—sometimes stereotypical—knowledge of Israel and Palestine, even when unable to accomplish this through physical travel. Students were able to research, sample, and cook dishes, and find comfort in an experimental culinary journey during the uncertainties of the pandemic.

We therefore took our students on a voyage that challenges preconceptions, allowing them to explore cultural intersections and divergences between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, without eliding the asymmetry of regional power relations. Our integrated approach highlighted the longer history of Jews and Arabs, Jewish immigrants and Israeli nation-building, culinary appropriation and the expropriation of lands and resources. Students navigated the entwined histories and politics of local foodways, taking into account the diversity of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish identities, histories of migration, exile, displacement, colonialism, and nationalism. Their virtual tour comprised the landscapes and kitchens of Jerusalem, Nablus, Sebastia, Gaza, Jaffa, and Tel Aviv; memoirs; and documentary films. They engaged in intercultural exchanges with prominent chefs and food writers in the Palestinian and Israeli culinary world—a chef from Bethlehem, a food journalist for Haaretz, and a professor and founder of Conflict Kitchen (a restaurant in Pittsburgh that served cuisine from countries with which the United States is in conflict and sought to expand the engagement the public has with the culture, politics, and issues at stake within the focus region). These speakers enriched students’ learning about the issues of foraging, culinary provenance, and the effects of military occupation and the separation barrier wall on agriculture and travel restrictions. In our selection of a novel, we settled on Palestinian American novelist Hala Alyan’s Salt Houses (2017), which traces the story of the displacement of a Palestinian family across several generations. Though Palestinian food is not a central theme in the novel, it figures in the characters’ search for belonging and their memories of home (e.g., maqlouba, koussa, and kanafeh). As the novel did not include Israeli Jewish voices, we assigned several short pieces addressing food by contemporary Israeli authors Moshe Sakal (e.g., kibbeh), Ayelet Tsabar (e.g., hawayij and Yemeni soup), and Yahil Zaban (e.g., gefilte fish), and excerpts of Ariel Sabar’s My Father’s Paradise (e.g., kubeh and matzoh).
To provide ourselves with a framework of the success of the course in complicating students’ understanding of Israel and Palestine, we polled them through two anonymous surveys on the first (69 respondents) and last (49 respondents) days of classes. We sought to assess students’ conceptual associations with Israel, Palestine, ethnic and national identity, and food consumed by Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. The concluding survey included additional questions on words they associate with Palestinian and Israeli cuisines, the distinction between “Jewish” and “Israeli,” their knowledge of the diverse ethnic identities in the region, and the proportional weight given to Palestinian and Israeli cultures. We will only share a selection of the terms from responses to two of these questions.

While in the first survey 58 percent of participants viewed Israel through a colonial, nationalist lens (“conflict, war/s, colonial state, wall, oppression, Zionism”), in the last survey, 86 percent focused on the contribution of Jewish ethnic diversity and of Palestinians to cultural developments in Israeli history, in addition to the occupation (“rootedness, diaspora, Zionism, new Jew, sabich, appropriation, de-Arabization/re-Arabization, colonization”). Similarly, 93 percent viewed Palestine in the first survey as a space of political tensions (“conflict, tension, war-torn, not a country on the map, wall, oppression”), violence, and religion (“terrorism, anger, Muslim”). In the last survey, 63 percent employed more tangible, culturally and politically specific terms (“nafas,” the “elusive gift that makes food taste better” (Kassis); “Jaffa oranges; maklouba; preserving culinary knowledge, appropriated, colonized, displaced, rootedness, diverse”). This denotes a broadening of the students’ knowledge of the topic, from a set of preconceived ideas to a deeper understanding of complex cultural processes through history.


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