

QUAIL, WATER BUFFALO, AND LOCUSTS FOR DINNER

It's All About Tradition

Sparrow, dove, and pigeon broth, cow udder in saffron, guinea fowl pastry, and fried locusts. Not your standard restaurant menu, but that didn't stop 250 curious Jews from putting down \$100 each to participate in the most recent "Mesorah Dinner," whose purpose is to preserve the traditions of kashrus that have faded over the generations. For nearly three decades, Dr. Ari Greenspan and Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky have been hopping around the globe, preserving mesorahs while partaking of some unusual gastronomical fare

E. Schwartzbaum
 Photos: Ouriah Tadmor

Two hundred and fifty hungry Jews recently made their way down to the Eucalyptus Restaurant outside the Old City of Jerusalem, which, according to its logo, serves "Biblical Israel Cuisine." Tonight, the place would be living up to its claim with a vengeance, thanks to the efforts of the unique neuroscientist-dentist team — Rabbi Dr. Ari Z. Zivotofsky, a professor of brain science at Bar-Ilan University, and Dr. Ari Greenspan, a dentist in Jerusalem — who have spent the past twenty-eight years revolutionizing the idea of what it means to be a kosher Jew.

For the fourth time

in the past few years, the Ari duo has organized what they call the "Mesorah Dinner," an occasion for brave souls to sup on flesh and fowl which, although absent from regular Jewish cuisine, have traditions of kashrus going back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The *seudah* has only one rule — any food without a halachic and historic basis in Jewish culture would have no access to the tables tonight.

The story of these dinners goes back nearly three decades, when Drs. Greenspan and Zivotofsky were in yeshivah together studying the practical laws of *shechitah*. At the time, someone asked if they could slaughter a pheasant. The first question was whether the pheasant is indeed a kosher bird. The Torah lists just twenty-four birds that are not kosher, implying that all the rest are. However, because of the uncertainty over the identity of these birds, the only birds treated as kosher today are those for which a reliable tradition, a *mesorah*, exists. Each community maintained its own *mesorah* regarding the kashrus of local birds.

Greenspan and Zivotofsky realized that in an age of industrial food production and centralized slaughterhouses, the old rabbis and *shochtim* who remembered their local *mesorah* were dying out. The two have spent years traveling the world, searching for clues and information about animals that are no longer eaten but are actually kosher. This was the fourth public feast of its kind, to make sure the chains of these traditions don't disappear. The first was held in Jerusalem in 2002, followed by *mesorah* meals co-sponsored by the Orthodox Union in 2004 in New York and 2007 in Los Angeles.

Ari Greenspan approached the microphone with a pheasant, which was squawking for help and making a valiant attempt to escape. Raising it triumphantly aloft, Greenspan explained how his and



A taxidermied gazelle and partridge have helped Dr. Ari Greenspan (L) and Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky (R) receive mesorahs from elderly *shochtim*

Zivotofsky's interest in the dying *mesorah* was kindled by this very species. As the Ari duo have explained untold times, this species was indeed the impetus for their lifelong mission.

"When we were asked to slaughter a pheasant, we began to investigate. We found an article that traced the history of the *pasyon* (Hebrew for pheasant) for nearly 1,500 years and demonstrated that it was always treated as a kosher bird. The Gemara says that one of the types of *slav* eaten by the Jews in the desert was *pasyon*. In another place, the Gemara uses the *pasyon* as an example of a delicacy a person might feed a father to honor him.

"In the eighteenth century, the sefer *Divrei Dovid* records that the Ramchal permitted *pasyani*; and in the nineteenth century, *Zivchei Kohen* records that it was treated as kosher. But there is no way of knowing for certain that the bird called *pasyon* 1,500 years ago — or even 100 years ago — is the same bird called *pasyon* today, and the trail seemed to have gone cold. Rav Moshe Feinstein discussed the issue, and concluded that he was unable to find a living person with a tradition on it, and so it must be treated as nonkosher.

"We had all but given up hope of providing our friend with kosher pheasant, when a friend in the yeshiva [who was at the dinner] mentioned to us that a leading Yemenite *posek*, Rabbi Yosef Kafich, had just that week spoken of a tradition attesting to the pheasant as a kosher bird. We asked Rabbi Kafich to confirm the *kashrus* of the pheasant, but he insisted that we bring him two live pheasants, so that he could verify that the bird we were calling pheasant was indeed the pheasant he knew. No easy task, but we managed to find two birds, we brought them to Rabbi Kafich, *shechted* the birds and received a letter from Rabbi Kafich attesting to the fact that we had the tradition and could pass it on."

Unfortunately, Rav Moshe passed away before Greenspan and Zivotofsky could apprise him that they had unearthed the elusive *mesorah* of the pheasant bird.

What's For Dinner? As guests strolled in, **Mishpacha** plumbed the psyches of people willing to challenge their palettes with the novel and unexpected — from locusts to water buffalo. Responses to the question "What are you doing here tonight?" were variegated.

"The good food," one hungry-looking participant shot back. "You're not going to get any deep philosophical stuff from me. I'm here because the food's really good. Sorry!"

But most tasters at the \$100-a-plate feast were eager to pontificate.

"There is a mitzvah in the Torah to know how to differentiate between the *tamei* and the *tahor*, a *mitzvas aseh d'Oraysa*," Rabbi David Dudkevich of the Shomron rabbinate remarked. "Sadly, many animals have become forgotten. For me, the eating is merely a light accompaniment to this great Torah lesson of preserving the *mesorahs*."

For Abish Rand, who had come in from Yeshivas Mir, the restaurant table was an extension of the *shtender*.

"My reason for coming is mainly because I am very into the Yerushalmi at the end of *Kiddushin* [4:12], which says, 'A person will be judged and give a reckoning for all that his eyes saw and he did not eat,' even though I didn't necessarily see any of these things before coming here," he said. "The idea is to see what the Ribono shel Olam made available for us and to appreciate it."

Indeed, that Yerushalmi appeared in print at the end of the six-page long menu.

"Regarding the *mesorahs*," he went on, "throughout my learning I try to see how things used to be. I think it is very relevant to Torah learning to see how things were done once, as opposed to nowadays. We don't even see things from a hundred years ago anymore."

You're confident with what you are eating here?

"I clarified beforehand. Some of the things I was told to stay away from, although there are halachically valid positions permitting them. It's not worthwhile to enter into a halachic controversy. These included the muscovy duck, the kingclip fish, and the swordfish." Indeed, the organizers sent all participants a detailed letter several weeks before the dinner explaining every item and its *kashrus* pedigree.

Rand's remarks were interrupted by an immense crash. In keeping with Rav Moshe Feinstein's *psak* that the *mesorah* for a kosher animal requires a visual sighting of the animal in question, the Ari duo had brought a number of caged birds as a visual accompaniment and one of them — perhaps the pheasant, which spent the evening leaping in a desperate bid to escape — had sent its cage crashing to a courtyard below.

Down in the kitchen, world-renowned chef Moshe Basson was in the midst of unusually challenging preparations, but confident that the *seudah* would be a success. He cooks exotic animals almost every day of the year. Indeed, his robust frame, mahogany skin, and pigtail provided an interesting contrast to his propensity

to spout *psukim* to suit the occasion. At that moment, he was describing the swordfish as *cherev shlufah b'yaado*, its sword bared in its hand.

Upstairs, Trungo Ardani, who came from Ethiopia sixteen years ago, was baking Ethiopian pitas known as *injera* on an electrically modernized version of a traditional hot plate, using flour produced from teff, a grain that grows only in the Ethiopian highlands. Later in the meal, Professor Zohar Amar of Bar-Ilan University would explain that according to a tradition of the Geonim, the five grains of Eretz Yisrael grow long, with a horizontal groove; thus, teff, a round, smooth grain, does not qualify for the *hamotzi* blessing. Indeed, Rav Yosef Hadana, chief rabbi of the Ethiopians, recommends beginning meals with regular bread of the five species to preempt any halachic doubts regarding the *injera*.

Next to a bloodcurdling exhibit of antique *shechitah* knives, animal skulls, bottled fish, and stuffed beasts and birds, Ari Greenspan explained the logistical challenges of bringing the varied species of the evening together under one roof.

"All the locusts someone was raising for us died in the heat wave," he said. "So we went online and found where they produce locusts for laboratories, which was England. This happened to be twenty minutes north of my cousin's house. So I told my cousin, 'Buy a ticket to come to Israel.' At the same time, we could not get pheasants in Israel that were mature. I have a friend who is in charge of *kashrus* in Rome, and we knew that in Italy we could get the pheasants. We had the *shochtim* in Italy *shecht* the pheasants for us."

"Back in England, my cousin bought 250 locusts and brought them (already dead) to Rome, where he picked up the pheasants and arrived in Yerushalayim the day before the dinner."

By now the dining courtyard was filling beyond capacity, about fifteen waiters were weaving their way through an obstacle course of chairs and legs, and diners were flavoring their *injera* pitas with genuine hyssop (*eizov*) dip.

At the end of one side table with other *chassidishe*-looking Yidden sat Rabbi Avraham Dovid Moskowitz of the London Beis Din, who later discussed the *kashrus* of the blue marlin fish, explaining that it was regarded as perfectly kosher for years, until a non-Jewish ichthyologist (fish expert) was appointed by an important *beis din* to draw up lists of kosher and nonkosher fish, and demoted the blue marlin to the black list of eels and lobsters. Nowadays, most *poskim* worldwide regard the blue marlin as kosher, and it was indeed included in the night's repertoire.

Rav Moskowitz said he decided to attend in order to show his support for the cause.

"For years, Ari Greenspan and Ari Zivotofsky have been *moser nefesh* to preserve the *mesorah* and are doing something very important for the future of *kashrus*. With the destruction of communities over the generations, most local traditions have become forgotten, and nowadays we *shecht* only about three kinds of fowl that are convenient and cheap for industry; for the dozens of other types, the *mesorah* has all but disappeared. The actual preservation of *mesorah* is no less important than studying *halachah l'maaseh*."

It was the fear that traditions of generations would simply



Dinner participants (from left) Dr. Robert Lederman, Rabbi Uri Miller, Rabbi Menashe Reizman, Rabbi Avraham David Moskowitz, and Rabbi Menachem Perl



Rabbi Moskowitz, Rabbi Moshe Charnet, and Rabbi Perl sample some unusual kosher fare

disappear that pushed Greenspan and Zivotofsky forward. "We continued our hunt, not for animals, but for traditions. Sadly, we realized that traditions can easily be lost. Up until fifty years ago, there were Jewish communities all over the world that each had a local *shochet*. The *shochtim* and *rabbanim* in each locale had traditions regarding which birds in their area were kosher. Today food production is centralized, and most of those communities have been destroyed. If action is not taken soon, traditions will be lost.

"A stark example of this can be seen in a book written less than two hundred years ago by an Italian *shochet*, the sefer *Zivchei Cohen*. He presents diagrams of thirty birds that he recognized as kosher. Today

we have trouble finding thirteen kosher birds altogether.

"The magnitude of the undertaking did not occur to us. For example, we suspected that the guinea fowl was kosher. So we purchased two guinea fowl, put them in a cage on top of the car, and headed out to look for old *shochtim* and rabbis who may have slaughtered them in the old country. In order to make sure we were getting only solid *mesorahs*, we looked for references for any local *rav* or *shochet* we approached with our birds. Because the guinea fowl is native to North Africa, we tried North Africans and Yemenites. Unfortunately, none of the rabbis we consulted recognized it. After repeated attempts around Jerusalem, we were ready to give up.

"Finally, our perseverance paid off. We found an old Algerian *shochet*, who unequivocally recognized the bird and attested to the fact that he had slaughtered it in Algeria close to fifty years ago. Since then, we have also found a Yemenite *shochet*, a French *shochet*, and a South African individual, who have also provided testimony to guinea fowl being treated as kosher."

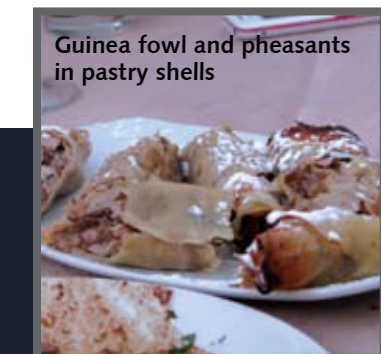
In perpetuation of these discoveries, a dish comprised of pheasant and guinea fowl was served up, and diners testified that the pheasant's rich, delicate flesh was truly deserving of the approbation heaped on it by Chazal (*Kiddushin* 31a, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7).

Food of the Midbar As the crowd ate pathetically tiny roast quails (*slav*), Rabbi Dr. Yisrael Levinger, former chief rabbi of Basel, Switzerland, and an expert on kosher species, discussed how the *mesorah* of quails was a major issue forty years ago when Israeli farmers were considering raising them in quantity.

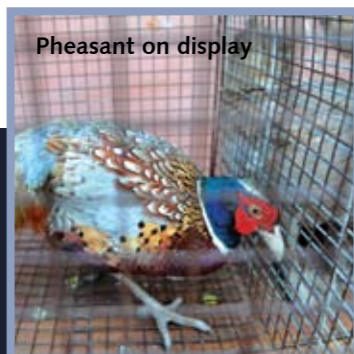
Rabbi Levinger mentioned a biological peculiarity of quail



Remembering the desert with roasted quail (*slav*)



Guinea fowl and pheasants in pastry shells



Pheasant on display



Ari Zivotofsky demonstrates the *kashrus* of a quail



Yummy locusts for dessert

The Yemenites have a *mesorah* of four types of kosher *chagovim*



“There are some contemporary authorities who permit *chagovim* to the general public, and others who prohibit them to all but Yemenites and Moroccans”

that strikes an interesting parallel to the verse, “The flesh was yet between their teeth, before it was chewed ... Hashem struck the people with a very great plague” (*Bamidbar* 11:33). Quails migrating from the north down to Sinai eat seeds en route that produce poisonous acids in their flesh, which in turn can be poisonous to humans who consume the bird, unless one waits for the poison to dissipate. Although quails are no longer popular due to their tiny size, he said, they are still raised in Yavneh and Be'er Tuvia for their eggs, which are in great demand.

Dusk was falling, strings of lights blinked on in the Yemin Moshe neighborhood on the next hill, and the orange hulk of the King David Hotel loomed opposite us. Now it was time to show a video of the senior New York *shochet*, Rav Zweigenhaft, testifying to the *mesorah* of the quail people were consuming below.



Quail in caramel sauce was a gastronomical hit



Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar studies a water buffalo head for its upper jaw structure. The rabbinat gave its certification in 2006

“I learned *shechitah* from my grandfather who was born in 1852 and he had the *mesorah* of the quails,” he declared.

Rav Zweigenhaft passed away two years ago, but his testimony, captured on video five years ago, is a typical example of the Ari duo’s tireless globetrotting effort — grabbing and classifying an old *mesorah* before it is too late.

After the quail bones were removed, steaming bowls of pigeon-dove-sparrow soup were ladled out. And to make the crowd more comfortable with the idea of eating street fowl, a member of the Auerbach family testified on screen that for the four generations that his family served as chief rabbis of Halberstadt, Germany, a sparrow was *shechted* before the *beis din* every Elul to preserve the *mesorah* that it is kosher.

Then a Yemenite Jew, Rabbi Chaim Giat, took the microphone and personally described how his family used to trap flocks of sparrows back in the *alter heim*.

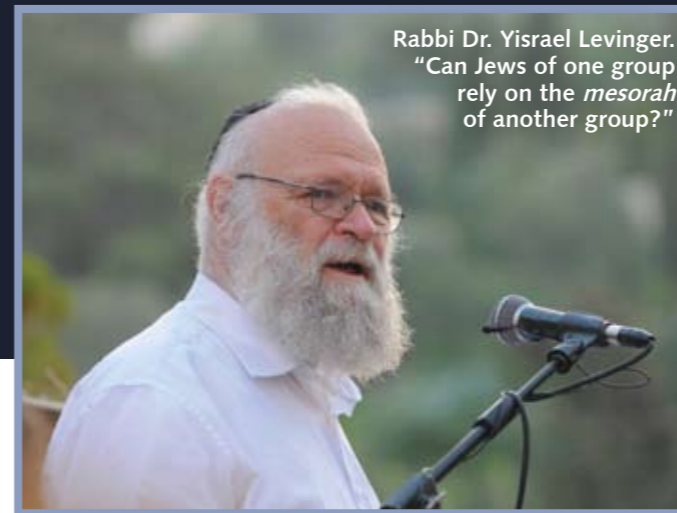
“Toward evening, we sometimes took boxes and lowered them by rope inside the large, round wells Arabs used to water their fields. The birds came in to roost, and in the morning we would pull up the boxes and find over a thousand sparrows inside. After they were *shechted*, my whole family removed their feathers, my uncles, my aunts, and others, and then we would feast on them. They were delicious!”

But how do twenty-first-century Jews feel about eating pigeons and sparrows steamed in broth?

“It didn’t bother me at all,” Mrs. Nurit Aharoni of Efrat insisted. “I think it’s fantastic. But I must tell you that I teach science and halachah, and this is an amazing example of the two genres coming together. My sisters and sister-in-law thought the idea was disgusting and didn’t come.”



A jar of preserved Iranian *shibuta*, a kosher fish from the Euphrates River, which is famed for tasting like bacon



Rabbi Dr. Yisrael Levinger. “Can Jews of one group rely on the *mesorah* of another group?”

Treif or Kosher? According to the Ari duo, the next course, wild turkey, was actually the most questionable food of the evening. It is difficult to claim that the North American turkey has any kind of *mesorah*, and indeed, *poskim* are hard put to find a good rationale for its widespread acceptance. Despite that, turkey consumption in Israel is the highest in the world, and perhaps to symbolize this *venahafoch hu* (upside-down) situation, Chef Moshe Basson announced the entrance of the turkey stew with a cacophonous banging on a tray followed by his tipping the stew pot upside down on a serving dish.

Other dishes served included a quartet of fowls — including the famous muscovy duck that looks like a duck, walks like a duck, but does not quack like a duck. Rav Yissochor Dov Illowy, who arrived in the United States from Europe in 1853, declared it *treif* with the backing of Rav Samson Rafael Hirsch and Rav Nathan

Adler of Great Britain. Nonetheless, after a century and a half of controversy, the Israeli rabbinat regards it as kosher. Also on the menu was the mullard duck, a hybrid of the muscovy and regular duck, whose mere existence is used as proof that the muscovy is indeed kosher — since it interbreeds with a kosher species.

The most controversial contender of the evening was a large frozen swordfish, which was now carried in by the beaming Greenspan, while behind him a cook’s assistant staggered in under the load of a cloth-wrapped brother specimen that had been steamed to perfection. The swordfish was recorded as kosher by the Knesses HaGedolah four hundred years ago, and regarded as kosher by many *gedolim* over the years. Indeed, Jewish communities in such places as Turkey, Italy, Gibraltar, and North Africa have eaten this fish for centuries, and still do.

Nonetheless, the swordfish became suspect some decades ago. Some *rabbanim* ruled that although baby swordfish do have some sort of scales, they disappear by the time the fish becomes adult. Furthermore, the biblical term translated as “scales” refers to scales that can be removed without tearing the skin. Whatever scales the swordfish have don’t seem to fall into this category. However, swordfish are a bit of a mystery in the scientific community, since they cannot be raised in captivity, and can only be observed swimming or dead. The Knesses HaGedolah ruled that the swordfish has scales in the water, which are lost when the fish thrashes violently during capture.

Still, no *mehadrin* kashrus agencies certify swordfish, since it is doubtful whether the fish mentioned by the Knesses haGedolah is today’s swordfish.

Now, the organizers invited the diners to examine the frozen specimen and see for themselves. About eight men took up his invitation and set to scratching its hide with a credit card, resulting in nothing but a gooey mucosa, which contained, as one of them



Is this the swordfish mentioned by the Knesses HaGedolah four hundred years ago?

The swordfish was recorded as kosher by the Knesses HaGedolah four hundred years ago and regarded as kosher by many *gedolim* over the years. Nonetheless, the swordfish became suspect some decades ago when some *rabbanim* ruled that although baby swordfish do have some sort of scales, they disappear by the time the fish becomes adult

put it, “Not even one miserable scale.” This is because it takes patience and careful observation to find them.

Highlights of the meat courses were a cow’s udder (which the Sages say is the only way to taste meat and milk cooked together); sheep and goat in endives; spotted deer and red deer; and water buffalo, which was declared kosher by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate in 2006. This came after several years of research by Greenspan, Zivotofsky, and Dr. Zohar Amar. Not only does the water buffalo chew it cud and have split hooves, as required by halachah, there is also a *mesorah*: the team gathered testimonies from elderly butchers in Jewish communities where *schechting* water buffaloes was customary. In order for the rabbinate to examine the teeth and body structure of the animal, Greenspan and Zivotofsky had a water buffalo head delivered to the desk of Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar.

The highlight of the meal was, of course, the desert locust, which was served sautéed on a bed of vegetables.

Regarding this insect, Zivotofsky explained that he has examined the



Chef Basson (L) and Ari Greenspan flip over the wild turkey stew. Does turkey even have a *mesorah*?

subject closely in conjunction with locust expert Professor Zohar Amar, who is himself of Yemenite origin.

“The *mesorah* on *chagovim* is today only found among Yemenite and Moroccan Jews,” he notes. “This raised the question whether other Jews may eat them. Of course the same question can be asked regarding birds: can Jews of one group rely on the *mesorah* of another group? This question was addressed by many of the Rishonim and Acharonim, and most of the later authorities, including the Shach, who ruled that indeed all Jews may rely on each other.

“Regarding *chagovim* the question would appear to be the same. However, there the *mesorah* is more controversial. Even the great Moroccan/Israeli authority, the Ohr HaChaim, questioned it, so it is less clear cut. There are some contemporary authorities who permit *chagovim* to the general public, and others who prohibit them to all but Yemenites and Moroccans.”

Throughout the meal, the organizers insisted that each person follow his own *posek* about whether to sample them or not. Food reporter Yonatan Sternberg was disappointed with the sautéed specimens served on a bed of lettuce and beet salad.

“They were rather small, with no meat on them,” he complained. “I would say it was more the experience than something tasty. Not something I would order or eat on a daily basis. It reminded me of a dry chicken wing in soy sauce; it didn’t really have much of a flavor to it. It was just the experience of sitting in a restaurant and eating locusts, which is not something that is common in Israel.”

After a marathon six hours, the fourth Mesorah dinner finally drew to a close, but not before hundreds of people had become part of the chain of transmission. Everyone there who paid attention to the lectures and testimonies, and carefully examined the live birds, can now attest to the *mesorah* for kashrus of such feathered friends as the quail, pheasant, and guinea fowl. This writer included. ■



A Yemenite feast — traditional pita and fried locusts