Episode Book

EPISODE #5475

Why Salad Is Breakfast in Israel and Punishment in America

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SYNOPSIS

A country that eats chopped salad at seven in the morning, and a country where the same dish signals joyless dieting. How did raw vegetables become the backbone of the Israeli and Turkish breakfast table — and rabbit food in America? This episode traces the Israeli salad from Levantine shepherd's salad to kibbutz dining hall to contested national dish, then builds the global list of cultures that treat vegetables at breakfast as default rather than strange. Along the way: rationing-era political economy, a kibbutz-bred cucumber, a 1979 attempt to replace the Israeli breakfast with a Continental one, and the late-nineteenth-century advertising that gendered salad as "fanciful but not filling." The dish is regional. The breakfast habit is local. And the meaning is entirely manufactured.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

What does it mean that a country eats salad at seven in the morning and another country treats the same food as punishment?



Herman

You're starting with the hard one.



Corn

I'm starting with Hannah's question. She sent us something this week. Her parents came to visit years ago, they went out to a café, and they were shocked to see a group of big, armed soldiers sitting there eating enormous salads. To Hannah, completely normal. Salad is just part of the food culture. To her parents, a spectacle.



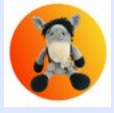
Herman

The soldiers or the salads?



Corn

The salads. The soldiers they'd seen before.



Herman

Right, yes, that tracks.



Corn

So here's what she's actually asking. She grew up here, salad is so standard that she never thought about it. But now when she travels to the States or Europe and the hotel breakfast has no vegetables, she's surprised. Disappointed, even. She saw a guy selling newspapers on a bench the other day, and his breakfast was basically a giant chopped tomato-and-cucumber salad. And that contrast with America is what fascinates her. There,



Corn (continued)

salad is diet food. A lighter meal. A side at a nice restaurant. Never something you'd expect at breakfast, never something that feels essential to every meal.



Herman

And the questions?



Corn

Three of them. What role does salad play in different food cultures around the world? Are there other places where salad or raw vegetables are central to everyday eating? And are there other cultures where vegetables at breakfast are normal rather than strange?



Herman

That's a good prompt.



Corn

It is. So today we take salad seriously. Not as a diet food. As a cultural object.



Herman

Israeli salad is salat yerakot yisraeli. Finely diced tomato, onion, cucumber, bell or chili pepper. Lemon juice, olive oil. No lettuce. That's the whole dish.



Corn

No lettuce at all.



Herman

None. And here's the naming thing that trips people up. Inside Israel, almost nobody calls it Israeli salad. It's salat katzutz, chopped salad. Or salat aravi, Arab salad. Or just salat yerakot, vegetable salad. The name "Israeli salad" is mostly used outside the country.



Corn

By tourists.



Herman

By tourists, by delis in New Jersey, by people writing menus. Janna Gur, the Tel Aviv food writer, puts it well. She says Israelis are a nation of salad-eaters and they'll call countless dishes by that name. But if you ask for just a salad, it will most probably be a tomato-cucumber chopped salad. That's the default. Not a wedge of iceberg with ranch.



Corn

That's the thing that would confuse an American. You order "a salad" and you get something that looks like salsa.



Herman

And it's been called the most well-known national dish of Israel. Standard accompaniment to most meals. Breakfast, lunch, dinner. It's just there.



Corn

So here's the paradox I want to sit with. Same raw vegetables. In America, salad signals restriction. Julie Beck wrote in The Atlantic that salad evokes diets and weight-consciousness in a way that no other entire category of food does. In Israel and Turkey, the identical dish signals abundance. Freshness. Hospitality.



Herman

Opposite emotional valence. Same food.



Corn

So how did a chopped vegetable dish become the most natural thing in the world to eat at seven in the morning in one country, and a symbol of joyless deprivation in another?



Herman

The Israeli half of that starts on a kibbutz.



Corn

Of course it does.



Herman

The chadar ochel. The communal dining hall. That's where the morning salad was born. And the mechanism is straightforward. Kibbutzniks ate a light early snack, went out and worked the fields for hours, then came back to the dining hall for a proper mid-morning meal. A buffet. And by the 1950s, Israeli hotels were copying that format and calling it the Israeli breakfast.



Corn

Which is now the thing every hotel in the country serves and every tourist photographs.



Herman

Dairy-based, because of kashrut, so no meat. Buffet-style. Fruits, vegetables, salads, breads, pastries, dairy, eggs, fish. And the most common vegetables on that table are cucumbers, tomatoes, and red bell peppers. The salad isn't a garnish on that spread. It's the spine of it.



Corn

Where did the salad itself come from, though? Because the breakfast ritual is one thing, the dish is another.



Herman

Two different origin stories and they get conflated constantly. The dish is Levantine. Gil Marks, the food historian, traces it to the Turkish çoban salatası, shepherd's salad. Jewish immigrants arriving in Ottoman Palestine in the late nineteenth century encountered cucumber-and-tomato salad already being eaten here. They didn't invent it. They adopted it.



Corn

And the breakfast habit?



Herman

That's the kibbutz adaptation. And this is the part that's interesting. Janna Gur makes the point that Palestinians never start their day with a salad. The salad is shared. The breakfast habit is specifically a kibbutz innovation.



Corn

So the dish is regional, the timing is ideological.



Herman

And the reason it became so central isn't culinary at all. It's political economy. Ronald Ranta at Kingston University traces the salad's institutional weight to the mess halls, army and kibbutz both, and to the price of meat. Late forties, early fifties, food rationing. Meat was expensive. Institutional cookbooks of the period stressed vegetarian dishes and salads because that's what you could afford to feed a lot of people.



Corn

So the salad is a rationing artifact.



Herman

Partly. Six hundred eighty-eight thousand Jews immigrated to Israel in the first three and a half years of statehood. That's a country being rebuilt while it's being fed. You feed them what's cheap and what grows.



Corn

And what grows is cucumbers and tomatoes.



Herman

Cucumbers especially. In 1940, Kibbutz Beit Alfa developed a cucumber variety named after the kibbutz, and that became the standard Israeli cucumber. This is a country that bred its own cucumber.



Corn

That's a level of commitment to salad I hadn't considered.



Herman

There's a detail I love about the early years. For a long time, kibbutz vegetables were served whole. Each person chopped their own salad at the table. And the ability to dice tomatoes and cucumbers into the finest, most perfect cubes was a mark of status among kibbutz cooks.



Corn

Status. For dicing.



Herman

For dicing. It was a skill you could see. You sat down, you got a tomato and a cucumber, and everyone at the table could tell how good you were.



Corn

I want to push back on that in a second, but finish the history.



Herman

The ritual got entrenched enough that in 1979, the Jerusalem Hotel Association and the Israeli Hotel Owners Association tried to kill it. They wanted to replace the full Israeli breakfast with a Continental breakfast. Cut costs, and also stop tourists from hoarding food off the buffet.



Corn

They tried to replace the salad with a croissant.



Herman

They tried. It failed. The hearty buffet came back. You don't take the tomatoes off an Israeli breakfast table and survive the backlash.



Corn

So the ritual outlasted the economic conditions that created it. Rationing ended, the salad stayed.



Herman

That's how food culture works. The reason disappears, the habit doesn't.



Corn

Now the naming question, because you can't tell this story without it. Gil Hovav, the Israeli culinary journalist, told the BBC that the Israeli salad, quote, actually it's an Arab salad, Palestinian salad. Joseph Massad at Columbia cites it as an example of appropriation. Palestinian and Syrian foods rebranded as Israeli national dishes.



Herman

And he's not wrong about the dish. There's no single inventor. It belongs to a much older family of Eastern Mediterranean salads. Persian salad shirazi. Turkish çoban salatası. Indian kachumber. Greek salad. Bulgarian shopska. Serbian salad. East African kachumbari. Mexican pico de gallo.



Corn

Pico de gallo is the same dish with a different passport.



Herman

Functionally, yes. Diced raw vegetables, acid, maybe oil. It's a template, not a recipe. What's Israeli about it isn't the ingredients. It's the breakfast.



Corn

Which is the honest version of the story. The dish is regional. The habit is local. And the name is contested because the name is doing political work.



Herman

Right. And the name is mostly used abroad anyway. At home it's just salat.



Corn

Okay. That's the Israeli story. Israel isn't alone in this, though. Turkey is the obvious next stop.



Herman

Turkey might be the strongest case. Kahvaltı. The word literally means "before coffee."



Corn

The whole meal is named after what it precedes.



Herman

And it's a spread of fifteen to twenty small plates. Sliced cucumbers, tomatoes, olives, cheeses, vegetable dips. Dietitian Selin Aydan put it plainly. Having vegetables like cucumber, tomato and olives in the morning is normalized in Turkish culture. They're staples. If we don't have these ingredients on the table in the morning, it's just not breakfast.



Corn

That's a stronger claim than Israel's. That's not "we like vegetables at breakfast." That's "without them, the meal doesn't exist."



Herman

And it's the same emotional register as the Israeli salad. Abundance. Hospitality. A table covered in small dishes is a table that's welcoming you. Nothing about it says restriction.



Corn

Which makes America the outlier, not the norm. Let's build the list, because Hannah asked specifically about other cultures.



Herman

Korea. Traditional breakfast is rice and soup with banchan. Side dishes. Kimchi, steamed eggs, tofu. Vegetables are just part of the meal.



Corn

Japan. Steamed white rice, miso soup, pickles. Takuan, umeboshi. Grilled fish, egg, nori.



Herman

India. South Indian breakfast is idli or dosa with sambar, which is a vegetable-lentil stew, and chutney. North Indian is paratha with vegetable curry, curd, pickles. Bengali is roti with curry. Vegetables at breakfast aren't a feature. They're the baseline.



Corn

Egypt. Ful medames, fava beans, garnished with chopped tomato, parsley, onion, garlic, lemon, chili. Plus fresh or pickled vegetables. Torshi.



Herman

Indonesia. Gado-gado, nasi pecel, vegetable salads in peanut sauce. Lalab, which is raw vegetables.



Corn

Hungary. Peppers, tomatoes, radishes, scallions, cucumber.



Herman

Poland. Tomatoes and sliced pickles.



Corn

So the pattern is overwhelming. The United States treats vegetables at breakfast as strange. Most of the rest of the world treats them as default.



Herman

And that tells you breakfast is a cultural construct, not a biological one. There's no nutritional reason a tomato is a lunch food and a muffin is a breakfast food. That's just a line somebody drew.



Corn

A line somebody drew, and then sold.



Herman

Which is the American half of the story, and it's the half I find more interesting.



Corn

Go.



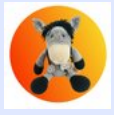
Herman

Julie Beck again, in The Atlantic. Salad is a shorthand for healthy eating, but also a shorthand for joyless healthy eating. Amy Bentley at NYU is blunter. Dieting food was always that rabbit food. The salad, it meant deprivation.



Corn

Rabbit food. That's the whole American association in two words.



Herman

And it's not natural. It was manufactured. Paul Freedman at Yale, who wrote American Cuisine, traces the gendering of American food to the late nineteenth century. Women entered the workplace in the 1870s. Chain restaurants like Schrafft's created women-only spaces. And magazines and advertising started labeling fish, white meat, cottage cheese, salads, and sweets as female foods.



Corn

Salads got gendered.



Herman

By the early twentieth century, women's food was described as dainty. Fanciful but not filling. That's the phrase. Fanciful but not filling.



Corn

Which is a hell of a thing to build a cuisine around.



Herman

And Freedman notes the pattern never went away. Kale, quinoa, other healthy food fads get gendered as female. Barbecue, bourbon, adventurous foods are the domain of men. It's the same move, a hundred and fifty years later.



Corn

So the American salad didn't drift into the diet niche. It was marketed into it.



Herman

Over decades. Restaurants, magazines, ads. And once a food is coded as feminine and abstemious, it stops being something you serve with pride. It becomes something you order when you're being good.



Corn

Which produces the anecdote that made the rounds a few years ago. A writer named Emily Christensen described an older coworker patting her on the back and saying "good girl" when she ordered a salad.



Herman

Good girl. For lunch.



Corn

And the backlash to that framing is its own genre now. Julia Turshen, the cookbook author, calls salad a simulacrum of food. A placeholder. Therapist Rachel Millner says diet culture wants us to assign value to food.



Herman

Placeholder is the right word. In the American frame, a salad isn't a meal. It's the absence of a meal. It's what you eat when you're not eating.



Corn

Whereas in Israel, a salad is what you eat when you are eating. It's the thing on the table everyone reaches for.



Herman

And here's where I think the stakes actually are. If vegetables get coded as diet food, people eat fewer of them. Selin Aydan pointed out that olive oil intake averages around twenty milliliters a day in Western countries and around sixty in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries. That's a threefold gap in a single ingredient.



Corn

And vegetable consumption more broadly. Fewer than one in ten Australian adults eat the recommended five to six daily servings of vegetables.



Herman

Fewer than one in ten. In a country with cheap produce and a year-round growing season.



Corn

So the framing isn't just aesthetic. It has consequences. If salad means penance, you eat salad when you feel guilty. If salad means breakfast, you eat salad every day.



Herman

Which flips the whole thing. The American association with deprivation isn't just a cultural quirk. It's actively working against the outcome everyone claims to want.



Corn

Let me push on something, though. The Turkish and Israeli versions aren't actually the same as what Americans mean by salad. The Israeli salad is dressed with lemon and oil, it's got real fat in it. The Turkish table has cheese and olives and bread alongside. It's not a plate of undressed leaves.



Herman

That's a fair point, and it matters. What Americans picture when they hear "salad" is often a bowl of raw greens with a low-calorie dressing. What Israelis and Turks picture is a table. The dish is the same category. The meal it belongs to is completely different.



Corn

So part of the American problem is that salad got stripped down. It became the lettuce and nothing else.



Herman

It became the diet version of itself. Which is why Julia Turshen can call it a simulacrum. It's a copy of a food with the food taken out.



Corn

That's the sharpest way to put it. The American salad is the Israeli salad with the abundance removed.



Herman

And the abundance is the point. That's what the kibbutz table was. That's what kahvaltı is. Fifteen small plates is not a diet. It's a welcome.



Corn

Okay. So we've got the Israeli origin story, the global pattern, and the American exception. There's one more thread I want to pull, which is the appropriation tension, because we touched it and moved past it too fast.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

The dish is Levantine. The breakfast habit is kibbutz. The name is contested. And the naming only really happens abroad. At home it's just salat. So the politics of the name are mostly exported.



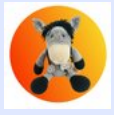
Herman

Which is true of a lot of national dishes. The branding happens at the border.



Corn

And the honest version is that no one invented this. It's a template that shows up from Mexico to India. Diced raw vegetables, acid, oil. The interesting question isn't who owns it. It's why one country put it on the breakfast table and another put it in the penalty box.



Herman

The answer to that is meat prices and advertising, in that order.



Corn

Meat prices and advertising. That's the episode.



Hilbert

You're both right, and the chopping isn't the skill.



Corn

Sorry?



Hilbert

The dicing. Everyone talks about the dicing. I spent a stretch in the late two thousands as a prep cook at a hotel that did a big breakfast buffet, and I was on the salad station. Five in the morning, cucumbers and tomatoes, uniform cubes, tray after tray. Nobody ever judged me on the dice. They judged me on whether the tray was still a salad by nine o'clock or a puddle.



Herman

So it's draining.



Hilbert

It's draining. You salt the tomatoes, you let them sit, you drain them. Cucumbers too. If you don't, the water comes out on the buffet and by the time the tour group gets down there you're serving soup with a fork.



Corn

That's why the fine dice mattered.



Hilbert

That's why the fine dice mattered. Smaller pieces drain faster and they drain even. A rough chop and you get wet spots. The kibbutz cooks weren't being precious about cubes. They were managing water. You can look it up. Or you can make a salad and watch what happens.



Herman

That actually reframes the whole status thing. It wasn't aesthetics.



Hilbert

It was never aesthetics. It was a tray that had to hold for four hours.



Corn

What happened to the job?



Hilbert

Hotel changed hands. The buffet went to a catering company. I moved on. My cousin married into a Turkish family, and she served me a kahvaltı spread once that I did not understand at all. Cucumbers, tomatoes, olives, cheese, at eight in the morning. I thought she'd lost her mind. Now I'd fight you about it.



Herman

So you came around.



Hilbert

I came around. She won't put lemon on a breakfast salad, though. Olive oil only. Lemon is a lunchtime thing, according to her. I've stopped arguing.



Corn

Noted.



Hilbert

I've got to go. My aunt's expecting me, and she's been expecting me since Tuesday.



Herman

The draining thing is real, though. That's a genuine correction to what I said about the dice.



Corn

It is. And it fits the larger point. The kibbutz salad was a logistics problem before it was a cuisine.



Herman

Everything on a kibbutz was a logistics problem.



Corn

Which is why the food culture came out the way it did.



Herman

One thing I couldn't fit anywhere, and it's a shame, because it's the detail that made me laugh. In 1958, the first industrialized hummus was manufactured by a man named Moshe Karubi in a small Tel Aviv factory. Within a decade, hummus and salatim, cauliflower salad, matbucha, Turkish salad, were in home refrigerators across the country.



Corn

The salads went industrial before the hummus did.



Herman

The salads went industrial fast. The whole salatim culture got packaged. Adeena Sussman calls the Israeli salatim table a United Nations of the table, and by the sixties it was a United Nations you could buy in a tub.



Corn

Which is its own kind of abundance.



Herman

It is. And it's the opposite of the American trajectory, where the salad got stripped down instead of built out.



Corn

Here's where I land. If breakfast is a cultural construct, what else do we treat as normal that's actually just local?



Herman

If the American framing of salad as deprivation was manufactured over fifty years of advertising, it could be unmanufactured. That's the open question. Whether the diet-culture framing survives contact with cultures that treat raw vegetables as a welcome, or whether it wins globally.



Corn

The Turkish table is winning in some places. The hotel breakfast is spreading.



Herman

It's spreading. Slowly.



Corn

We'll leave it there. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, for the draining correction, which I did not see coming.



Herman

Nobody sees draining coming.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed this, the best thing you can do is share it with someone who's ever been told "good girl" for ordering a salad. And if you want more episodes like this, the archive is at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.