

## PERFECT HARMONY

In the walled city of Akko, Israel, chef Uri Jeremias invites locals and travelers to expand their palates—and their minds.

by Sara Lieberman

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**T**HERE'S A LIGHT breeze coming off the Mediterranean as I walk through a maze-like market where colorful spices such as sumac and za'atar are displayed in glass jars, and falafel sizzles and pops in giant frying pans. Overhead, the chirps of low-flying swallows mix with the sound of a muezzin's call for prayer.

It feels like I'm in Morocco or Turkey—but I'm not. I'm in Akko, Israel, a coastal town 70 miles north of Tel Aviv. (The town is also known as Acre.) And I'm with Uri "Buri" Jeremias, a 75-year-old Jewish chef and hotel proprietor with a Santa Claus beard who appears to know everyone we pass on our stroll.

An Arab man standing near a rainbow of fresh produce pats Jeremias on the back. "*Ramadan kareem*," he says. Happy holidays!

Jeremias responds with a two-handed shake and a hearty *chag sameach*, the Hebrew version of the same phrase.

Ramadan is almost over, and Akko is in full-on prep mode for Eid al-Fitr, the festival that marks the end of a month of fasting for Muslims. Anywhere else in Israel this fusion of religious camaraderie might seem highly unusual. But here in Akko, men in traditional Jewish *kippot* and women in hijab intermingle freely. With a population of 48,000—60 percent Jews, 32 percent Arabs—Akko is one of Israel's most integrated cities. And Jeremias is the town's unofficial ambassador of unity.

Since opening Uri Buri restaurant 30 years ago, Jeremias has been blending flavors, and the religious populations of those who create them. In his restaurant overlooking the Mediterranean, he employs a staff of around 40 people: Half of them are Arab; the other half are Jewish. In a country so often associated with borders and division, Uri Buri is a model of harmony. Jeremias says he's not trying to meet a quota or earn a medal. He simply

believes in the importance of an open mind.

"We can achieve [coexistence] with a very simple ingredient, and that's respect," Jeremias tells me as we leave the market and walk toward his restaurant. "With respect we can live together."

And work together. In the kitchen, we meet with sous chef Ali Mar'i, a Muslim man from the northern town of Kafr Yasif who has been helming the stove top for 17 years. Like Mar'i, many of Jeremias's employees have been with him for quite some time—from the dishwashers to the waitstaff. Jeremias makes a point of hiring people without restaurant experience, as he prefers to mentor and foster his own community.

"They study and learn and advance and they circle," Jeremias explains as we dodge open oven doors. "The dishwasher, if needed, can be replaced by one of the cooks."

His open-minded philosophy extends to his food—and the way he interacts with diners. His menu focuses on fish with a Middle Eastern flair (thanks to lots of olive oil and fresh herbs, such as cilantro) and occasionally nods to Peru, Japan, and Greece.

When we settle down to taste a few things, Jeremias asks me: "What *don't* you eat?"

Sensing it's a trick question, I say: "No allergies, but there are some things I don't *love*, like dill or capers or anything smoked—and maybe salmon."

What comes out? Soy-drenched salmon topped with wasabi sorbet. And it's the most incredible thing I've ever tasted.

"It is interesting to taste things that you don't usually like," he says, the corners of his white beard lifting into a smile. In fact, Jeremias encourages that ethos with a loose tasting menu that invites diners to share any allergies, as well as their budget, with their server. The kitchen will then send out

Left to right, from top: Chef Uri Jeremias's restaurant, Uri Buri, in Akko, Israel; Akko's old town; Hamudi Kurdi, the proprietor of a coffee and spice shop in the Old Acre Market; Jeremias's salmon sashimi with wasabi sorbet; the chef, shopping for fish in the Old Acre Market; the terrace at the Efendi Hotel; the Efendi lobby; scallops in a ginger cream sauce; seafood on display in the market.

a selection of dishes based on those details. Anything a diner doesn't like goes back without judgment, fuss, or a fee.

Disappointments are rare, though. Case in point, next up for me is sliced ceviche drizzled in olive oil with onions—and capers. And, what do you know, the shrub berries are far tastier and less acidic than I was expecting.

I share my surprise with him. "You don't come [to my restaurant] to suffer; you come to enjoy," he says in response. "But try things you don't usually eat. [Otherwise], what is the point of traveling? I'm trying to get people out of fears and fixed thoughts."

Juan Hazem Alzubi, a 24-year-old chef of Jordanian descent, wanted to learn from Jeremias—and share her culture. She now fries *moqjanat*, crispy cheese pastries stuffed with olives, and creates spicy, bubbling-hot *shakshuka* for breakfast at his Efendi Hotel. "What [Jeremias] cares about most is good food, no problems, and being happy," she says. "Wherever he goes there's a positive energy."

And, likely, zero leftovers.

"Finish this," he says, pushing a plate of yogurt-covered tuna, pickled chilies, and purple onion toward me. "You have to finish this."

I eye the half-eaten dish, then look up at the rosy-cheeked chef who conceptualized it, wanting so badly not to let him down. But I'm full. He sees me hesitate and offers a compromise:

"OK," he says, spooning a bite into his mouth. "We make half-half"

And so, united we eat. **A**

## HOW TO VISIT AKKO, ISRAEL

Akko is located about 70 miles north of Tel Aviv in Israel's Western Galilee region and is easy to reach by car, bus, or train. There are only a handful of lodgings in the walled city, including the Efendi Hotel, a 12-room boutique lodging created by Uri Jeremias. He spent nine years restoring two former palaces that date back to the Ottoman era. Common spaces and guest rooms have colorful ceiling frescoes restored and conserved by Italian artists, and there's a refurbished hammam, as well as a 900-year-old vaulted wine cellar. His restaurant, Uri Buri, is a five-minute walk from the hotel. Reservations are recommended for lunch and dinner. Rooms from \$320, including breakfast. [efendi-hotel.com](http://efendi-hotel.com)