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Trendy, Yet Traditional: Jerusalem Market Becoming One of Israel's Hot Spots

By Hillel Kuttler

Machne Yehuda, the famed, century-old Jerusalem shuk, is steeped in incongruity. On the one hand, there is tradition: shop owners who forgo electronic cash registers and instead sift through bundles of paper money when making change; food vendors with carts lining the narrow alleys; patrons frantically weaving through the crowds on Friday afternoons desperately trying to track down ingredients for the Sabbath.

Then, on the other hand, there are modern flourishes—trendy establishments transforming the no-frills market into a hip destination.

Machneyuda (named for how Israelis pronounce the name of the shuk) is one of the upscale

restaurants attracting market-goers and offering an alternative way to experience Machne Yehuda. The restaurant menu features seasonal ingredients, a main floor and a balcony, and a long waiting list for tables. Tel Avivians regularly make the one-hour drive to experience both the gritty Machne Yehuda and the upscale Machneyuda.

At the corner of Rechov HaEgoz and Rechov HaTut (English translation: Nut and Berry streets), pubs and eateries are cropping up with names like Pasta Basta (a play on the synonym for a shop stall), Shama Lama, Fishen Chips (sic) and Tapas Bar. A sliver-thin storefront called Mr. Etrog dispenses freshly squeezed fruit and vegetable juices with names like Etroget, Rambam Drink (almonds,

raisins and dates) and Viagra from Nature (“Awakens love and happiness,” the text on the dispensing tank proclaims).

David Basher’s shop sells 1,200 types of kosher cheese from around the world, the orders sliced and wrapped by employees in starched-white uniforms with the company’s red logo, and floor-to-ceiling shelves are stocked with high-end wines. Around the corner, chef Tali Friedman runs a second-floor atelier or workshop, where she instructs tourists and executives on the market’s finest ingredients, then brings them to some of Machne Yehuda’s shops for primers on the offerings before everyone returns to her industrial kitchen to prepare an elegant meal that they enjoy together.

Opposite: Produce vendors at the Machne Yehuda market in Jerusalem.

Above: This area of Machne Yehuda is considered the hip section of the market, which attracts younger patrons, with restaurant names like Fishen Chips (center).

All photos by Debbie Zimelman



An assortment of offerings at Machne Yehuda, including cakes, breads, eggs and more.

And just a week after winning an Academy Award in February 2013, Austria-born actor Christoph Waltz, who is not Jewish, married off his ultra-Orthodox daughter, who lives in Jerusalem. Rather than stay at a fancy downtown hotel, Waltz told a television interviewer, he'd taken a room at a bed-and-breakfast in Machne Yehuda because the community is a gem.

Long-time shop owners and patrons say several factors are reshaping Machne Yehuda: Israeli society's increasing appetite for the finer things in life (food being an essential ingredient in the stew of Jewish culture), the cessation of terrorist bombings that targeted the popular market, an authenticity that shiny chain supermarkets can't approximate and the perpetual search—especially among young people—for new “hot” spots in old places.

None of which is to say that the market's sensory appeals are being gentrified away. Vendors' shouted come-ons—“Tomatoes! Three shekel a kilo!”; “Strawberries! Two kilos for 10 shekel!”—ring in shoppers' ears loud as ever. Bright red cranberries, bumpy black raisins, oversized golden dates, sugar-coated kiwis and the orange of dried apricots are arrayed in bins in front of one shop. Leaves discarded from lettuce heads litter pathways along with bruised tomatoes, and Jerusalem's ubiquitous cats, alert to the infinite scrounging opportunities, still abound.

What's happening at Machne Yehuda is more integration than substitution.

That's why host Yaron Enosh on “Kol Shishi” (Friday's Voice), a weekly radio program, still offers slice-of-life observations from periodic strolls in Machne Yehuda. The market, after all, is famed for the opinions its regulars dish out, and for drawing Knesset candidates eager for photo-ops with the common man.

For Enosh, something sociologically fascinating, even primal, continues apace in the down-to-earth landmark.

Israelis grasping grocery lists are drawn to the crowded market in the search for ingredients for their next meals, yes—but they're also there for community and a temporary escape from their chaotic lives, Enosh believes.

“Look around you: There are religious Jews, secular [Jews], Arabs,” Enosh says on a Wednesday morning between sips of espresso at the May 5 Café, a three-year-old establishment on one of the market's main walkways. “On Fridays, you can't move. There's great potential for tension, but for me, it's, in a way, an island inside the crazy place we call the Middle East.”

Machne Yehuda is one of the few places in the city where people “leave their cloak of anger in the car” and “can relax,” he says.

“It's the human touch, less abstract, more concrete. The shop owners sit with their tills of bills and change; they don't have electronic cash registers.”

In Machne Yehuda, oddly enough, “it's quieter, and people are a little less tense,” Enosh continues. “For someone in Tel Aviv, it's like going on a trip outside Israel.”

All the more so for foreigners visiting the country. The



Chefs in the Machaneyuda restaurant preparing food during the lunch rush.

market’s exotic feel “is such an experience in terms of all the people, the shops, the fresh food,” Dale Schlafer says at Basher’s as his wife, Liz, pays for her cheese order.

The Schlafers live in Bradenton, Fla., and visit Israel several times a year.

“It’s so different than anything in the United States,” he says of the market. “I love to watch the people. You see different cultures from all over the world.”

The remnant of the residential neighborhood that was founded in the late 1800s and gave Machne Yehuda its name exists on the periphery. It’s now better known as Nahlaot, a warren of stone footpaths that feed onto doorsteps, much as in Jerusalem’s Old City. In the past decade or two, Nahlaot has gotten spruced up, with young, observant families settling there, including many immigrants from English-speaking countries.

Young, secular folks also are reshaping the neighborhood. Shaked Regev, 21, a single, native Israeli, decided to settle in Nahlaot. She works in Machne Yehuda, at the Dekel (palm tree) Bakery, sometimes arriving at 2:30 a.m. to begin mixing and kneading dough for the day’s loaves. It’s common, she says, to see people her age just heading home then after a night’s partying.

“It’s a special place, with a pleasant atmosphere for going to pubs at night,” she says of Machne Yehuda. “Young people look for places that are less commercial, less big.”

Such activity would have been unfathomable just a few years ago, when the market’s nightlife meant watching shopkeepers slide their produce carts inside, lock their doors and depart for home.

Now, a new energy grips the place, and the city and the Machne Yehuda Merchants Asso-

ciation are embracing it. Monday summer nights feature live bands performing throughout the shuk (Hebrew for market) in a street festival known as Balabasta. On Purim, so many restaurants stay open extra-late that when sandwich shop owner Itai Bezalel checked the security camera on his smartphone from home at 2:00 a.m., he was stunned at what it revealed.

“You could not see the ground,” said Bezalel, owner of Shama Lama. “It was full of people.”

“It’s a blessed change—not a revolution, but a change, because it injects young blood here,” said Bezalel, who lives in the Jordan Valley community of Maale Efraim, an hour’s drive away. “People [now] have the option to sit, eat and enjoy the night life.”

More changes are needed. Grand ideas—like relieving congestion by turning Agrippas Street, on the market’s southern end, into



A crowd gathers for lunch at Rachmos restaurant.

a pedestrian-only zone and run vehicular traffic beneath—are very preliminary. A 350-space underground parking garage hasn't gotten off the drawing board, either. For now, improvements are cosmetic: refurbished walkways and the piecemeal replacement of a translucent canopy over some of Machne Yehuda's streets.

Yom-Tov Yedid has seen the place evolve. He now sells peanut brittle, packaged dates and granola from the small stall where he once hawked bananas, apricots and grapes. His mother, he relates, left this very spot one day, at the

corner of Rechov Etz Chaim (Tree of Life Street) and Rechov Hata-puach (Apple Street), to give birth to him in Nahlaot. The shop has been in Yedid's family for 80 years.

"Things have changed. There never used to be tourists," Yedid says.

But there used to be terrorists. On July 30, 1997, Yedid was taking a coffee break elsewhere while his employee, David Nasko, ran the kiosk. Yedid shows where a terrorist had stood while detonating an explosive, killing 16 Israelis, including Nasko.

He points to a plaque on the opposite wall that memorializes

the victims. To the right of the plaque, workers are refurbishing a vacant store. A previous merchant there sold home-made natural remedies. When the man died, it became a butcher shop. Now, Yedid says, it'll be a French restaurant.

Such an establishment wouldn't seem to fit amid the frenzy of rushing shoppers and shouting vendors. Then again, neither did an atelier, but Friedman, the chef, has seen her business take off since launching it four years ago. She grew up in the area, and her mother still lives on Hayabok Street, just past Agrippas.

Being based here makes perfect sense, Friedman says. But even as Machne Yehuda evolves, it must preserve its roots, she cautions.

"In the last 10 years, it's become a bit more chic. People who want to see and be seen have come to this market," she says.

"But still, we have to remember that this is a market. If there were no parsley or onions, there'd be no purpose for me to be here. We need to preserve the balance." ☑

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