

# The call of the culinary wild

Erez Komorovsky gave up a successful bakery chain to run cooking workshops in nature



Erez Komorovsky. 'I love to take a recipe apart and get into its essence, reconstructing it and making it my own.' (Oded Marom)

• By MIRIAM KRESH

**S**ettled in the green hills of the Upper Galilee, chef Erez Komorovsky draws foodies from all over Israel to his bucolic cooking workshops. Participants wander through his flourishing organic garden, picking greens for the salad bowl and herbs to perfume a roasted, stuffed neck of lamb served with smoked green wheat. Or the chef might take them out to nearby fields, teaching how to recognize seasonal vegetables like *akub*, an edible thistle that resembles a tiny artichoke. On some occasions, Komorovsky leads the group on a culinary tour through the Acre open-air market. When all ingredients are assembled and discussed, the chef cooks up an unforgettable meal composed of heirloom vegetables, locally sourced fish and meat, and flatbread baked on the spot in his taboun oven.

The chef's fame evolved over years of urban success that started with in 1996 with Lehem Erez, one bakery in Herzliya. There, a variety of artisanal breads and baked goods were offered to an intrigued public used to plain white loaves. A chain of over 30 bakeries and five cafe/restaurants bearing his name soon sprouted all over the country. Eleven years later and at the peak of his success, Komorovsky gave the management of his business over to an associate and moved to Matat, a moshav close to the Lebanese border.

The move was a search for peace, and due to nostalgia for childhood experiences. Born 50 years ago and brought up in Tel Aviv to parents of Polish descent, Komorovsky knew only the taste of Eastern European food until an Egyptian neighbor introduced him to the flavors of North Africa.

"The adults in my family worked outside the home,

so I grew up in my neighbor's kitchen. She taught me to appreciate coriander, cumin, chilies, olive oil, fennel, bourekitas [savory pastries]. Many things that were part of my childhood didn't come from my parents' home, although my mother was a good cook," Komorovsky reminisces.

"Now when I cook, it's more Sephardi, with lots of lemons. In Poland, they only knew vinegar. My kind of cooking has lots of fresh herbs, tomatoes, garlic."

Another landmark childhood experience was summers spent in his father's almond orchards near Ashkelon.

"At harvest time, in July and August, I would hang around with the workers in the orchards. They were Druse and Christians that would come with their families and build tents to sleep in. They'd hunt partridges and hares. I used to visit them and started to connect to the things that aren't urban and Ashkenazi. I ate *baladi* [heritage] vegetables, drank coffee made over an open fire in a *finjan*. I stayed over with the workers and became part of them. This was one of the most important experiences that formed me as a chef – the real flavors that come from nature. Wild foods."

Asked when he started cooking, Komorovsky answers, "When I was a teenager. I've always just loved to cook."

Komorovsky finished his army service and immediately set out on travels, as many Israeli kids do post-army. But the fledgling chef had a unique goal: to learn as much as possible about classical cuisines. He studied in Paris and Japan.

"My cooking was completely disconnected from the land at the time. One followed a recipe without changing it. Then I lived and studied in California for five years. Fresh from the Cordon Bleu, I began to understand the California culinary revolution of the 1980s, where they beautifully developed a coherent Californian cuisine based on local ingredients."

Classical French and Japanese cooking looked rigid and uncompromising by comparison.

"In the early '80s, all cooking referred to the French standard. This went on too long in Israel. When I returned to Israel, I saw that I had to develop a local cuisine like what I saw in California, using traditional methods and local ingredients. Israel's climate is similar, producing foods like goat's cheese, good olive oil and wines. And I had fallen in love with California sourdough breads, so I introduced handmade sourdough breads in my bakeries."

The mix of familiar and innovative foods served in Komorovsky's cafes had a profound impact on the way Israelis now think about eating and food.

"Now there's a culinary emancipation, where chefs feel free to play in the kitchen without caring about one particular tradition. We used to be ashamed of our grandparents' foods. Now chefs are creatively playing with Moroccan and Yemenite family recipes. I myself took a close look at gefilte fish and reconstructed it as raw fish with beets and horseradish. I love to take a recipe apart and get into its essence, reconstructing it and making it my own."

I wondered what motivated Komorovsky to give up a wildly successful business and move to Matat, an obscure moshav surrounded by Druse, Jewish and Christian villages.

"I'd had enough," he says simply. "I sold everything and moved. It was a difficult life, very stressful. Too many employees. I even stopped cooking, because I had a manager. I felt I was wasting my life. Now I cook with my own hands again. I have a very small

boutique operation, on purpose. My suppliers are basically my neighbors. I get my meat from Christian and Arab butchers, fish from the Acre market, chicken and goats from the local Druse. And you can get excellent olive oil here."

Not only urban Jewish Israelis come to Komorovsky's workshops; a certain number of Druse and Arabs participate also. But it takes a rare open-mindedness for members of these communities to consider innovative cooking.

"These groups are strongly bound to tradition," Komorovsky remarks. "A Druse woman can't improvise in the kitchen or her family will object."

We asked the chef what advice he would give to an inexperienced cook that's eager to learn.

"Just start cooking and observing. Each time, study another way to create. Stop being afraid. Cooking and baking aren't science. You don't have to be precise. Just keep tasting and adjusting the quality of the ingredients. Tomatoes can be sweet, or they can be tart. You have to change the recipe to adapt to the ingredients, not the ingredients to fit the recipe. Aim for something good, and above all, taste it, taste it, taste it. That's what cooking's about."

"The Japanese say you have to perfect a recipe – cook it a thousand times to get it perfect. But I'm not a Zen master. I play in the kitchen."

When we asked Komorovsky what his favorite ingredients and meal are, he gave the answer of a chef whose heart and soul are in the local soil.

"Fresh, green garlic... heirloom tomatoes, and good lamb chops," he says slowly. "A favorite meal? That depends on the season and where I happen to be. For example, if I'm by the sea, then shrimp or crab with a saffron aioli sauce – with fennel on the side. For breakfast, I like sourdough bread with peanut butter and jam."

## SUMMER WATERMELON SALAD WITH PURSLANE AND BULGARIAN CHEESE

Recipe from Erez Komorovsky Cooks and Bakes, (Hebrew) 2011

Purslane is a lemony wild green that's recently become available in Israel's farmers' markets and by special order. It grows abundantly in the summertime.

- 1 medium onion, halved and thinly sliced
- 1/2 Tbsp. edible ground sumac (available in spice stores and markets)
- 3 young, unpeeled cucumbers, diced small
- Juice of 1 lemon, or to taste
- 1 hot green pepper, seeded and diced
- 1 bunch of purslane leaves stripped off their stems, rinsed and dried
- 2 cups small watermelon cubes
- 4 Tbsp. delicate olive oil
- About 1 cup Bulgarian sheep's milk cheese

Mix the onions with the sumac in a bowl. Set aside for 10 minutes.

Add the cubed cucumbers, lemon juice and hot green pepper; mix.

Add the purslane and watermelon cubes. Drizzle olive oil over all.

Crumble the cheese over the salad and serve.