

CHASING SMOKE

COOKING

OVER FIRE SARIT

AROUND PACKER

THE LEVANT AND

ITAMAR

SRULOVICH

Honey & Co.

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Copyeditor: Bryony Nowell
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Photography: Patricia Niven
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Chasing Smoke

Mustafa was waiting for us at Cairo International Airport to take us to our hotel downtown. We had thought about renting a car, but negotiating the streets of Cairo is not something any visitor should attempt, so we put our trust in Mustafa, driver and self-appointed tour guide. As we hit a three-lane road with five rows of cars squeezed door-to-door and bumper-to-bumper, a scattering of scooters and the occasional horse cart inching forward in the afternoon traffic, the air is thick with desert dust and smog, a thousand car horns and *muezzins* calling people to *salat-al-maghrib*, the evening prayer.

Deft as a dancer, brave as a bullfighter and with the faith of a poker player, Mustafa takes these roads without breaking a sweat, while we curl with terror and excitement in the back seat. We nearly scream when the car stops just shy of hitting a pedestrian, who appears out of nowhere in the packed road, but Mustafa explains that the only way to cross a road in Cairo is to go for it and hope for the best. It usually works. The car ahead of us has its boot open; two children sit with their legs dangling out and hands over their heads, keeping the lid from slamming closed. They squeal with joy and fear as if it's the best rollercoaster

ride ever, waving at us and making faces. As Mustafa overtakes, we try to count the number of people inside – four heads in the back (but there may be more), one squashed against the glass, while in the front seat a plump man and his smiling wife cradle a child across their knees.

Buses ride with their doors open, rather than pull up to the kerb, so people can pop in and out. A guy with a vegetable truck is doing brisk trade as commuters nip out of their cars or the bus to get provisions, suddenly rushing back as the traffic starts to move. Mustafa sees this slow, hair-raising journey as an opportunity to point out the sights – the Citadel and Alabaster Mosque, with the neat neighbourhood of *al Arafa* at their feet, the City of the Dead. Even when his knowledge is patchy, he still finds something to say: “See these statues? Famous people from the past.” He swerves to avoid a couple of drivers who have left their vehicles and started yelling at each other. “Nothing to worry about,” he says. “People think the Cairenes are always shouting but this is just how we talk. It doesn't mean that they're going to start a fight.” Pretty soon the drivers start roughing each other up. “Don't even worry about it,” he shrugs. “It's not serious until there are more than

two people involved.” Just as we drive by, other people leave their cars to join the *mêlée*. We are transfixed, looking through the back window till Mustafa calls, “Look, you can see the tips of the pyramids!” We're not sure we can, but something else has caught our attention: in the dusty, dusk half-light we are passing a street lit by neon shop signs, and the most delicious-smelling smoke wafts from the grills that line it. “This is *bawanshi* street,” Mustafa informs us. “All of Cairo comes here to eat *bawanshi*. Are you hungry?” We don't know what *bawanshi* is, but we are certainly hungry from our flight and hungry for a taste of this city, so Mustafa stops the car.

The street is buzzing with people. All the shops here sell the same dish, but Mustafa knows which one is best, so this is the one we go to. The grill guys are on autopilot, working at full speed. They take a big *baladi* flatbread, slice it open, fill it with minced meat, cheese and sliced chilli peppers, close it and grill it till the meat is cooked, the cheese melted and the bread (which has been brushed with clarified butter) is a crisp, delicious shell. These golden discs come fresh and hot from the grill, a cross between a pizza and a burger, but so much better than either. There's a little pot of pickles and another of



tahini, and we sit at a table on a side street, dipping our wedges of *hawanshi*, while Mustafa shows us pictures of him and his son, a giant perch they caught in the Nile, and the lemon tree in his backyard. We tell him that we want to go to Alexandria and his face lights up. “Alexandria! *Arouset el bahr*, the bride of the sea, the mermaid, so beautiful. The food is so nice, restaurants on the beach, beautiful! You will love it! The old city is quite small so you can walk everywhere,” he says, “which is good, because the traffic there is really bad.”

It is dark now and the streets have a different feel, quieter, less hectic. Further down the street we see a glow and smell fresh bread; it’s the bakery where they make the *baladi* bread we just ate. They are lighting the wood oven in preparation for baking all night. Mustafa says, “Wanna see?”

That trail of smoke is one we have been following all our lives. From Haifa and Jerusalem where we grew up, throughout our travels around the Mediterranean, it has led us to rooftops in Marrakesh, to beach shacks in Kefalonia, and to London’s Lebanese restaurants on the Edgware Road and the Turkish kebab shops on Green Lanes. We have learned that good things await us at the end of that trail: where there’s smoke, there is fire, and where there’s fire, there are often people and stories and something good cooking. Where there’s fire, food, friendships and memories are made.

Our own fire burns at the northern end of Great Portland Street in London, in our grill house Honey & Smoke. Every morning our grill is stacked with coal and wood, then lit. Aubergines, squashes, courgettes and onions are charred for salads and sides, and all the good gossip is dished. Lamb is marinated in sage and lemon rind; octopus is braised to soft submission before it goes on the blazing coals; prawns are threaded on skewers; and the drama of our life in the kitchen plays out. Everywhere we’ve been, all the food we’ve tried on our travels, and all the people that we’ve met along the way – all are in our restaurant. Every morning when we light up the grill, we go on another adventure.

We hope our fire sends a wisp of smoke out to the street, and that people – chefs, waiters, guests – follow the trail just as we do. When you get to us, we hope you find something good to eat and join us, either in the restaurant or through this book, on a sunny Middle Eastern journey.



How to BBQ

I grew up in a very English household in the middle of a completely different culture. My parents emigrated to Israel in 1970, before I was born, and decided to make their life and raise their kids there. In some ways they remained very British. In others they embraced the Levant and its customs, most notably the weekend tradition of grilling food outside and eating with your fingers.

We used to call my father a pyromaniac; his idea of fun was gardening (a very British pastime) and burning all the garden waste in a fire pit in the backyard (a typically local thing to do), before lighting the BBQ to cook lunch or dinner. My mum would prepare oblong silver trays of raw chops, steak, kebabs or chicken and send them out to him, with some salt, pepper and the ubiquitous ‘chicken grill spice’ (a powder made mostly of paprika and MSG – delicious). My job was to take the trays out to my dad along with a little dish containing oil and half an onion to clean the grill, and hand him a beer or a shandy.

As each batch of meat was cooked, I would take it back to the kitchen where my mum would pop it in the oven on a very low heat to keep warm, away from the flies, the cats, and us children, who were driven mad by the delicious smell.

Once all the meat was cooked, we could finally sit down to eat. There would always be a wide selection of salads, some home-made, others shop-bought – a potato salad or a Russian salad, cabbage in some form, a huge

bowl of chopped vegetables – and of course hummus, BBQ sauce, and plenty of fresh pitta to mop everything up. We would attack with enthusiasm, and within minutes there would be little left to show for all the work apart from our sticky fingers and messy faces.

The reason I am writing this is not to claim that I picked up BBQ tongs at the age of 8 and became a world-famous grill chef, but rather to say that, as a child, I never did anything more than ferry a platter from one place to another. I never looked at how my father actually started the fire, or how he judged when it was time to start grilling, or how he knew when the meat was cooked. To be honest, I am still not sure how he knew. He can make a decent dinner in the kitchen but it is not his hobby or his passion and, even in this age of smashing the patriarchy, my mum, sister and I actually did most of the cooking.

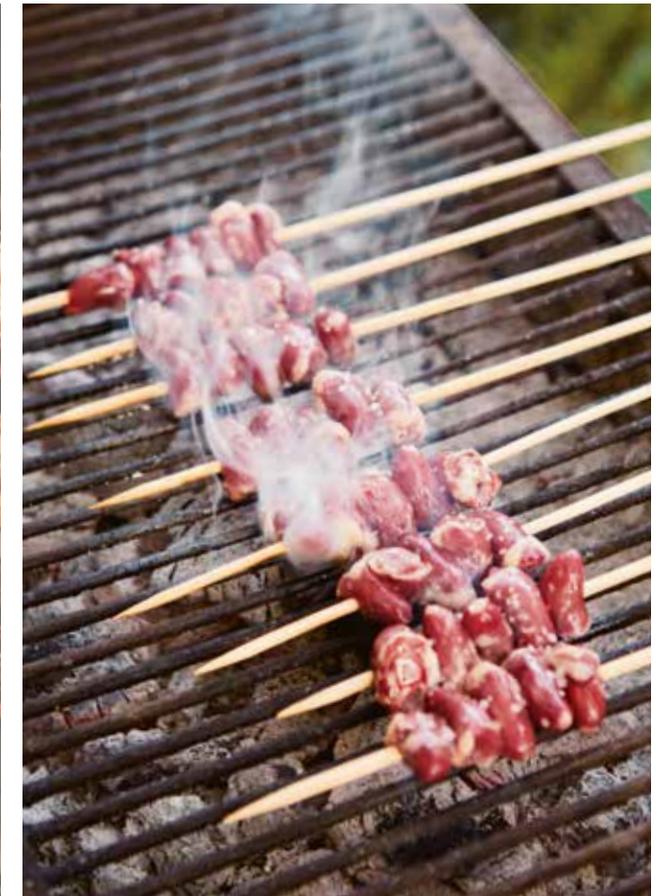
So how did he know what to do? Maybe there is something instinctive in all of us, a primal sense that kicks in when we place raw food on a grill, telling us how it should smell, when to turn it, when it is cooked. Maybe it was years of experience, of trial and error, that made fire-cooking natural to him. Maybe when he first started grilling, my parents only ate burnt food. Who knows? Luckily for me, by the time I came along he was pretty much an expert and the food was always delicious.

When we decided to open a grill restaurant in London, I was unsure of myself. My husband had been driving

me crazy about the idea for years, saying that this was the way forward (which was surprising to me, as it felt more like looking backwards to the earliest, primal form of cooking, a world away from fancy machines with built-in thermometers and gauges). I had been a chef for nearly 20 years, working in many different kitchens, and running our own little restaurant for five years, and yet I wasn’t even sure I knew how to start a fire. I assumed that Honey & Smoke would be Itamar’s domain, and that I would stay at Honey & Co, safe in my comfort zone.

Of course, reality always differs from the plan. As soon as we had installed our very expensive extraction system and our lovely grill, I simply couldn’t stay away. Once you’ve learned how to light and mellow the grill, cooking on fire is exactly like cooking on the stove, but the flavours are so much greater. Perhaps surprisingly, it is vegetables that benefit most from a bit of grilling; the smoke penetrates and intensifies them, and the results are simply delicious.

Whether you are a bit of a pyromaniac who has been happily grilling over flame for years, or a competent cook who has never even started a BBQ, the recipes in this book can easily make cooking with fire a part of your day-to-day life. For tips on how to light and manage your BBQ, see page 235.



Basic instructions – the way we work

Weights In recipes where it matters, I have stated the net weight of the prepared vegetables and fruits for guidance.

Ingredients Each chapter starts with a little introduction to the main ingredients. I suggest you read these before you shop.

Nuts and seeds We use a lot of nuts and seeds, and the recipe will always state whether they should be roasted or not. If you are roasting them yourself, you can either use the oven or a frying pan on the stove top or BBQ. To oven-roast, lay the nuts or seeds on a baking tray and place in the centre of the oven at 190°C/170°C fan/gas mark 5. Check them every 4–5 minutes, stirring each time, and cook until they are golden (seeds will take about 10 minutes; nuts about 12–15 minutes). If they have their skins on, split one in half to check the colour inside. To pan-roast, put the nuts or seeds in a dry frying pan, metal colander or sieve, and set on the low-heat zone of your BBQ. Shake the pan every few seconds and remove from the heat once they are golden. This method requires more attention than oven-roasting, but if you already have the fire lit, you might as well make the most of it.

Garlic We always use fresh garlic and not pre-minced, as the flavour changes when it has been sitting around for too long.

Lemon juice We use freshly-squeezed lemon juice for the same reason.

General preparation Please read the entire recipe before you start cooking, or indeed shopping. Always good practice.

Fire safety All the recipes in this book are designed to be cooked over a live fire. I am not your mother or babysitter, but please be careful, as it can be really dangerous. Keep bottles of oil or other flammable materials away from the

fire, and most importantly, keep kids and pets away too. Make sure you have everything you need before you head outside, so that you can be calm and collected when cooking. Remember that it is better to burn the food than a limb, so don't ever stick your fingers in the fire. Finally, if you are grilling in an open space, always make sure the fire is out before you leave.

A note on brines and salt rubs

Smoking and cooking meat, poultry and fish over fire can really dry them out. One of the best ways to keep them moist (and add seasoning before cooking) is to use a salt rub or a brine. Several dishes in this book set out precise combinations of salt and aromatics to be used, but the general method is worth learning and experimenting with, so that you can apply it to whatever you end up cooking on the BBQ.

Wet brines

The rule of thumb is:

1 heaped tbsp salt for every 250 ml / 8¾ fl oz boiling water

aromatics – hardy herbs (e.g. thyme, rosemary, bay, sage) and/or whole spices (e.g. coriander seeds, fennel seeds, black peppercorns)

a few slices of citrus or garlic cloves (if you like)

Dissolve the salt in the hot water, then add whatever aromatics you fancy along with any garlic and/or lemon. Cool the solution in the fridge before using.

The brining time will vary depending on the size, cut and type of food you are preparing, but whatever it is, it must be fully submerged. A chicken or duck breast, or a whole fish, will only need 20–30 minutes, whereas a whole bird or a big hunk of meat can do with up to 24 hours. Remove from the brining solution and pat dry before grilling.

Salt rubs (dry brines)

There are two main types of salt rub; one contains sugar for a sweet, sticky result; the other is purely an aromatic salt. Both types infuse the food with your chosen flavours before you even start cooking. Whichever type you are using, sprinkle delicately all over, and make sure that you rub it into the whole fish, poultry or meat. Cover and place in the fridge to rest and absorb the flavours for up to 12 hours, depending on the piece. Dab dry before grilling.

Sweet salt rubs

These tend to contain twice as much sugar as salt, as well as lots of warming ground spices. Try the following rub on a rack of beef short ribs, allowing at least 6 hours (and up to 24 hours) for the flavours to develop before grilling.

200 g / 7 oz dark brown sugar

100 g / 3½ oz flaky sea salt

1 tsp freshly ground black pepper

1 tsp ground cumin

1 tsp ground cinnamon

1 tsp ground (allspice) pimento

Aromatic salt rub

These involve lots of pounded herbs, citrus zest and/or chilli. Try this one on a whole side of salmon, pounding the ingredients together with a mortar and pestle, rubbing it on the fish, and then resting it covered in the fridge for a couple of hours.

2 tbsp flaky sea salt

zest of 1 lemon

5 cm / 2 inch piece of fresh ginger, grated

1 small bunch of thyme, leaves picked



Fruit & Vegetables

We love food markets, and never feel that we have really got to know a place until we have found the market and rummaged around the stalls, sniffing fruit and fresh herbs, squeezing vegetables, checking out the local pickling customs and exploring a new food culture. Of course, not everyone will think that a holiday should be spent in the market, with the noise, smells and rough-and-ready nature of such places, but we adore the vibrant life we generally find there.

There is nothing quite like recently harvested vegetables and fruits that have been brought straight to market; they still have the lovely smell of the field or tree where they were picked. As we walk around the stalls, we let our noses lead the way. When we smell something super-fresh, we know we should buy that bunch of parsley or coriander; a zingy smell usually leads us to the best lemons or freshest ginger;

and just a whiff of earthy richness has us running to the beetroot stall, rubbing speckles of mud off the bulbs to see the purple skin beneath. It is all part of the experience.

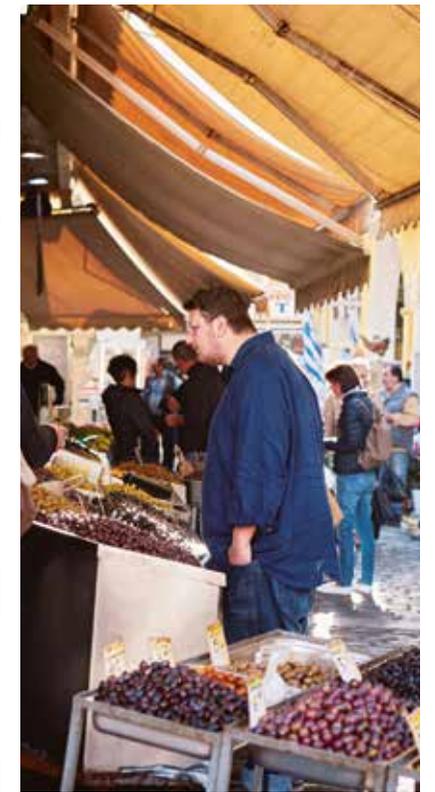
We try to buy and eat seasonally, as the flavours are so much better, and honestly, one of the best things about travelling is visiting those markets that keep the tradition of only selling what is in season. Green almonds appear for just one month a year; figs are a cause for celebration when they arrive; and strawberries, well, they always remind me of my birthday and the start of the Mediterranean winter, awakening the excitement I felt as a child.

In the Levant, grilling vegetables is often about getting as much flavour as you can into those veggies which have to be cooked and need an extra lift – potatoes, corn, aubergines, artichokes – the usual suspects. They taste great when baked in the embers or charred

over a flaming grill and, with the addition of a sauce or dressing, can make a meal on their own.

Grilling really works its magic on unlikely vegetables and fruits. Add a touch of smoke to young courgettes with their flowers still attached, dress them with some fresh grapes and yogurt, and suddenly they become something truly special. Griddle ripe peaches or soft, succulent figs and you can use them to create decadent salads that are true show-stoppers.

Don't limit yourself to grilling on a summer's afternoon. Try lighting the BBQ on an autumn or winter evening and grilling some chestnuts, apples and pumpkins. Cooking over glowing coals will transform the way you see fruits and vegetables, and the fire will keep you warm on a chilly night.





London, England: 216 Great Portland Street

A big, square room, white walls, neon lights, plastic chairs and Formica-topped tables set with napkin dispensers and cutlery in jars. The service is friendly but curt. The menus are laminated but nobody looks at them, as everyone comes here for the grilled chicken. The waiter just wants to know how much of it you'd like.

This is Nimer Restaurant in northern Israel. Sarit's family has been coming here for years and we came together early in our relationship, when we were introducing each other to our favourite eateries. The table filled up with the usual mezze and stacks of fresh bread; the famous chicken came sizzling from the grill, charred and juicy. We talked about the skills required to pull a bird off the heat at just the right moment, and how this and places like this are exactly what we enjoy: buzzing, welcoming and egalitarian; not fancy, never painful, just delicious, easy fun. That night, that conversation started us on a decade-long journey to many such places around the world, from Marrakesh to Istanbul, a journey that led us to Honey & Smoke.

In late 2014 we were looking for a place to open our own grill house. It had to be big enough for a proper kitchen and preferably no more than five minutes' walk from Honey & Co, our first restaurant. We were shown a shop in Great Portland Street which was way too big and expensive, but we had no choice – it was perfect. A tile showroom on a main road, it needed to be converted to become a restaurant, which meant zoning applications and expensive building work, but it also meant we could have the kitchen exactly as we wanted.

Negotiating the contract took two years, and the resulting agreement allows our satanic landlords to harvest our organs at will. The fit-out took a nerve-wrecking six months, in which the builders had to dig down three metres for the drains and build up fifteen metres to install the extractor system, but when

they finally left we had a neon-lit room with a hundred plastic chairs set at laminated tables, a shiny new kitchen with bright yellow floors, a state-of-the-art bakery, plenty of fridge space and, at the restaurant's heart, the grill of our dreams, now a reality.

While a dream is a fixed idea, and somewhat rose-tinted, reality is ever-changing, evolving and complex. The place was busy from the moment we opened the door and has only got busier with time. With just the two of us in the kitchen at the start, we had to adapt quickly to the demands of a busy hundred-seater restaurant. As people joined us, they had an impact on our offering: for a long time we had a big Greek contingent who introduced *gyros* to the menu, while our Argentinian head chef Maria Paz brought her discerning palate and imagination to many of the dishes we now serve.

It turned out that nobody but us liked the neon lights and the plastic chairs, so they went at the first opportunity, but we have always made sure there is the warmest of welcomes. Our ideas of what the menu should be have changed as well. The early notion of meat-stick-fire felt a bit limiting when so many beautiful vegetables and fruits entered our kitchen with the ebb and flow of the seasons, all taking so kindly to the heat and smoke of our grill.

What started out as a dream of a Middle Eastern eatery ended up being a very London restaurant: a crossroads of cultures, a meeting place of old and new, traditional and contemporary. Like London it is influenced by the movement of people and goods, and a commitment to having a good time and a good dinner. But the smell of smoke, the sizzle of the grill and the glow of the embers, warm and lambent, the promise of tasty food and fun times – the things that remind us of Nimer and countless other places like it – are always there.



