

# The Interpreter

Introducing Philadelphia to modern Israeli cuisine, Solomonov-style

By Joy Manning

**A**s executive chef at Marigold Kitchen, one of the city's best-reviewed BYOBs, Michael Solomonov earned accolades in the pages of food glossies. Young and photogenic, with gobs of talent and charisma, he wooed critics and regulars with creative fare that flaunted his formal culinary training, his tenure as sous-chef at Vetri, and his Israeli heritage. But as Solomonov's experience grew, the chef glommed onto a more personal idea for a restaurant, a place where he would cook simply, preparing the food of his family and serving it just the way it's done in his hometown of G'nei Yehuda.

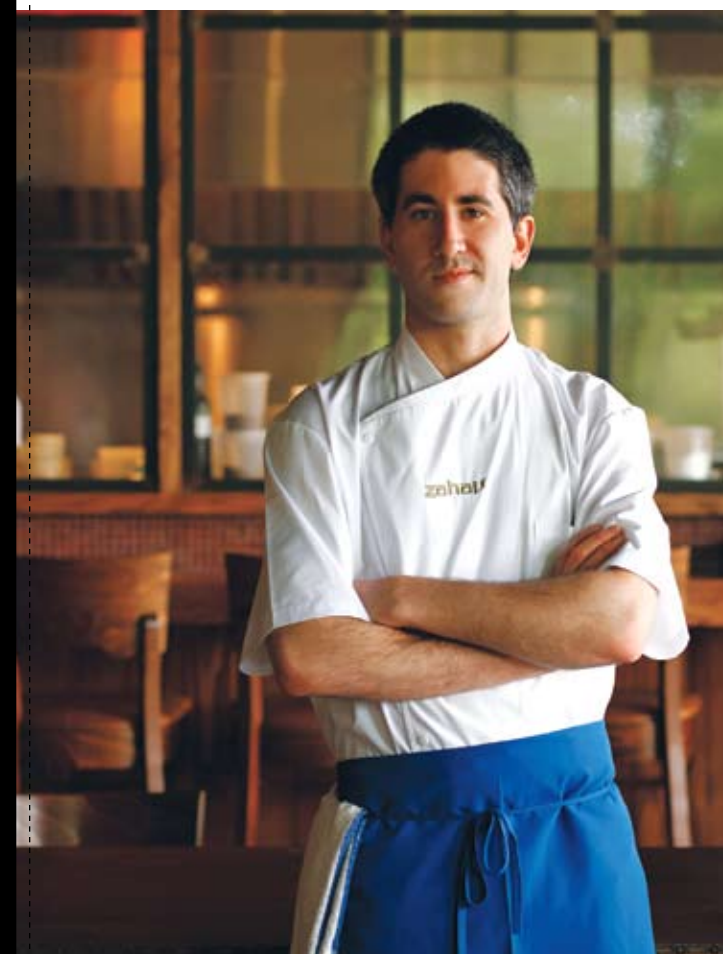
At new Zahav in Society Hill, Solomonov has found a way to communicate his history and heritage through a vocabulary of flavors mostly unfamiliar to Philadelphia diners. Zahav doesn't look like fussy fine dining, but attention to detail in the kitchen,

taken to the level of Marigold and Vetri, elevates the food way above the everyday fare it pretends to be. (A second dining room, opening this summer, offers a more elaborate prix-fixe menu.)

Once you're seated, expect a crash course in Israeli dining from a well-educated server. He'll explain that the family-style meal traditionally begins with salad—an assortment of eight tiny ramekins filled with flavor-packed preparations like velvety twice-cooked eggplant; a chopped mixture of refreshing cucumbers and tomatoes; tart and creamy slaws of red and green cabbage; and silken pureed red peppers—and then proceeds to a course devoted to hummus. (Four varieties are offered.) Next up: a few mezze, or small plates, and finally skewers of meat, chicken, vegetables and fish cooked over blazing coals. The salad course alone can border on sensory overload, with its range of intense flavors and contrasting textures. And it all sounds like too much food. But when the plates start arriving, you'll see that while the flavors are big, most portions—except the skewers—are even more diminutive than tapas.

Zahav's hummus is a substantial part of the meal, especially when eaten with the accompanying flat-bread, which is made to order by a cook who was dispatched to Israel specifically to learn this singular culinary art. Three of the dips with it are based on the same chickpea/sesame paste/olive oil mixture, but the Turkish version replaces the oil with a rich French butter. Like all dishes at Zahav, this hummus is an emblem

**PALATE PASSPORT** Chef Michael Solomonov reimagines the flavors of his Israeli heritage at new Zahav.



of Solomonov's Israel. Each iteration—the masbacha, crowned with warm whole chickpeas; the hummus foul, complemented with large, tender fava beans—illuminates the disparate cultures that have made Israel a culinary melting pot.

Choosing from the 20 options for hot and cold mezze also takes diners around the world. These small plates show Cypriot, Armenian, Balkan, Turkish, Syrian and Moroccan influences, to name just a few. Of this cross-cultural cornucopia, don't miss the exquisite crispy haloumi; the pairing of warm Cypriot cheese with sugary, tender dates and toasted pine nuts is as alluring as a clever cheese-and-wine match. The kibbe naya, essentially a clean-tasting lamb tartare, and the chicken freekah, a bed of roasted wheat topped with impossibly moist and tender shreds of chicken breast, also stand out from the pack of uniformly tasty mezze.

The skewers section of the menu conforms most closely to traditional restaurant portions. These entrées share a ubiqui-

**MELTING POT** A meal at Zahav starts with miniature Israeli salads (below). From the grill, the Sambra chicken kebab (right).



tous Israeli cooking method; all are threaded on stainless steel skewers and cooked over open coals. The searing heat, which reaches 800 degrees, imparts intense flavor and texture to anything it touches, but high-quality ingredients and creative accoutrements keep these kebabs from tasting the same.

This section also represents the menu at its most didactic—each dish is named for the country or culture it's drawn from, mapping out which world cuisines have influenced Israeli food

### Zahav

237 St. James Place,  
215-625-8800,  
zahavrestaurant.com

**FOOD: A SERVICE: A-  
ATMOSPHERE: B+**

**AVERAGE PRICE FOR  
THE RECOMMENDED FIVE  
PLATES: \$40.**

**FOOD:** Modern Israeli.  
**WINE:** A global list—with a bottle  
or two from Israel.

**GET:** The \$50 chef-choice Mesibah.  
**DON'T GET:** Dressed up for dinner.

and how. The approach may seem heavy-handed to the uninterested, but the results aren't. The Farsi combines succulent lamb with aromatic saffron and a sticky, berry-dotted rice. The Bulgarian trio of lamb and beef patties is amazingly juicy considering the burnished exteriors, and the rice and white beans it's served with soak up the big, meaty flavors. Even the token vegetarian skewer, the Galil, is hearty and delicious, with sweet baby eggplant dusted with pistachios.

From the time you place your order, food flies out of the kitchen whenever it's ready, whether there's space on your table or not. Meal pacing isn't a priority here, as it was at Marigold; the emphasis is on the food itself and the conviviality of sharing. It's a break from the rules and regulations of formal fine dining. And while service is smart, the servers are casual in kitschy t-shirts with ironed-on logos from Israeli pop culture. Used silverware and plates aren't swapped out during dinner, and the skimpy paper napkins are more company picnic than trendy restaurant.

For traditionalists, this glib vibe may diminish the dining experience, especially at this price point. As at other small-plate venues, the tab, especially with drinks, can add up fast. But for the large contingent of diners who've embraced informality, communal eating and relaxed table manners, Zahav has tapped into the ethos of the moment. And for Solomonov, who wants his adopted hometown to know the pleasures of the Israeli table, a certain amount of mess and chaos is essential to the experience.

E-MAIL: jmanning@phillymag.com



Foie gras terrine

## Le Bec Finished?

Fine dining may be dying, but Perrier's kitchen is still full of life

Eyebrows went up in 2006 when Le Bec-Fin introduced a less pricey four-course menu for weekday diners. Late last year, when the restaurant cut back on lunch service, the rumor mill churned. But that was nothing compared to the buzz this spring, when Action News ran promos showing a teary Georges Perrier intoning, "It's time." Was the Le Bec-Fin era over?

When the segment rolled, Perrier didn't announce Le Bec's closing. Instead, he heralded a new à la carte menu, a cheaper alternative to the prix fixe, and said he would even welcome diners in jeans to his heretofore jacket-required restaurant. But weeks later, it's hard to tell what has changed in the chandelier-lit space. The woven silk walls are still lustrous. The staff is as formal as ever. And there certainly isn't a stitch of denim in sight.

Only once you open the menu do the differences emerge. A delicate poached salmon with asparagus, smoked caviar and a hibiscus-scented

sauce costs only \$24. The dish is inexpensive—at least relative to the old days—but the kitchen's trademarks of fine ingredients and perfect technique are still in effect. Of course, many entrées cost more, but the level of excellence invariably matches the price. Tender veal medallions, at \$35, are complemented with a generous serving of meaty morels and a velvety mushroom sauce. A pressed foie gras terrine is costly for an appetizer at \$17, but its buttery flavor tastes like luxury.

Contrary to the sound bites of the recent PR push, Le Bec is no bargain. It remains an unapologetically opulent place to indulge. In fact, almost half its diners still order the \$140 seven-course tasting menu. And they still want to linger over their \$255 burgundy. (Which is good, because bargains are hard to find on the wine list.) And, as always, they'll happily pay for the experience.

Today's Le Bec-Fin isn't the peerless jewel it used to be. The à la carte menu changes the once-uniform pace of the evening, and the formerly impeccable service has slipped to merely excellent. (On one visit, servers placed entrées before the wrong guests; on another, appetizer dishes weren't cleared before entrées arrived.) But the food reveals a gifted chef still on his game after 38 years. It's not yet time for Perrier to turn in his toque—but there's a palpable countdown in the air. Restaurants like Vetri and Lacroix have muscled into Perrier's kingdom of culinary superlatives and updated our notions of fine dining. Diners in denim, if they ever arrive, won't extend Le Bec-Fin's swan song forever. —J.M.

### Le Bec-Fin

1523 Walnut Street, 215-567-1000,  
lebecfin.com

**FOOD: A SERVICE: A- ATMOSPHERE: A  
AVERAGE ENTRÉE PRICE: \$35.**

**FOOD:** Fancy French.

**GET:** French classics like beef bordelaise.

**DON'T GET:** An à la carte meal if you can splurge  
for the tasting.