



A Jerusalem cheesecake tour

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Ahead of Shavuot, a Jerusalem cheesecake

tour offers a slice of the city's sweet side

Sampling 14 different cakes at seven capital cafes and bakeries, kosher food influencer Jamie Geller explores recipes and history as she looks to start a new holiday tradition

By **ZEV STUB**

From the start, Jamie Geller's cheesecake crawl of Jerusalem was more decadent than expected.

"I asked them to bring us one slice of cheesecake for us to share, but they brought out their whole Shavuot collection — five different kinds," she exclaimed with mock horror as the group sat down at its first stop at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. "We're really going to have to pace ourselves to make it through all the stops we have planned for today."

Ahead of the Shavuot holiday this Thursday evening and Friday, Geller, a bestselling cookbook author and kosher food influencer who is also the Chief Media and Marketing Officer at Aish, led a small group of journalists to explore some of the best cheesecakes in the Holy City.

"Our goal is to sample a variety of different styles of cheesecake ahead of the holiday," Geller explained at the outset. Many Jerusalemites have a similar custom of sampling Sufganiyot donuts during the Hanukkah season, she noted.

As the group embarked on a three-hour tour that would include sharing 14 slices of cheesecake at seven different kosher establishments and bakeries in the center of Jerusalem, Geller hoped that others would follow in her path in future years.

"We can make this a new Jerusalem tradition," she said.

History and local customs

For centuries, many Jewish communities have embraced the tradition of eating dairy foods on Shavuot, with a range of mystical and practical reasons suggested over the ages. As early as the 13th century CE, Rabbi Elazar of Worms, Germany, referred to a custom of beginning the holiday meal with a bit of cheese before cleansing his palate and switching to a meat meal. But in recent years, the holiday has been transformed into a festival of dairy foods for many. In Israel, sales of dairy products rose more than 60 percent in the week before Shavuot last year, the Agriculture Ministry said earlier this week.

Many Jewish families around the world now observe Shavuot by serving festive meals filled with gourmet cheese platters, cheesy pastas, and lasagnas. Dessert, alongside the ice cream and buttery pastries, reaches its pinnacle with the presentation of the cheesecake.

“Every year at this time, people start calling me asking for my favorite cheesecake tips,” said Geller, who offers numerous recipes on her website. “It’s one of the holiday’s most recognizable symbols.” Different cheesecake varieties are popular in different places, Geller noted. In Israel, the most popular cheesecakes are baked with soft white cheese, typically 5%-9% fat, along with sugar, cornstarch, and eggs, with a crumbly crust and crumbs on top. New York-style cheesecakes, in contrast, are typically much heavier and richer, baked with cream cheese and thick sour cream.

Another variety, the no-bake cheesecake, never sees the inside of an oven. Instead of eggs, it relies on gelatin or other setting agents to hold its shape, and is chilled until firm, usually on top of a cookie or biscuit

crust. It tends to be lighter in texture and often feels more refreshing, making it popular in warmer climates like Israel, Geller noted.

The Basque cheesecake, also known as San Sebastian cheesecake, is a recent variation originating in Spain, often baked with eggs and flour or cornflour, and ideally served with a slightly burnt top.

Geller pointed out the differences in type and texture as she led the group from the bakery to the cafe.

“It’s fascinating to see how each of these cheesecake styles are so different,” she noted.

Touring Jerusalem’s cafes

The group began its tour in grand style, in the lobby of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Five different cheesecakes from the hotel’s Shavuot collection were presented, each on fine China: two Basque cheesecakes drizzled with chocolate and pistachio sauce, and three non-baked varieties: chocolate, wild berries, and lemon-passion fruit. Participants noted the difference in the textures and mouthfeel of the two varieties — the Basque was a bit softer and less firm than the non-baked, but all were delicious. At NIS 62 (\$21) per slice, these were the most expensive items on the tour.

After that, we visited Moulin Doré, a French bakery in the Friends of Zion Museum at Rivlin Street 14, a charming setting with a beautiful outdoor seating area. (Moulin Doré has another branch on Emek Refaim Street as well.) The cheesecake, at NIS 30 (\$10) per slice or 190 (\$65) for a whole cake, was okay, but at NIS 120 (\$41), the flan, a French pastry made with sweet cream, stole the show.

“French immigrants have really taken over the bakery scene here in Israel,” Geller noted. “Particularly in the last five years, they have really elevated the culinary scene with their family-owned bake shops, each with its own signature flavor and style. I love how their pastries are so luxurious, decadent, and rich.”

Our next stop was another French cafe, Napoleon Patisserie at Yo’el Moshe Salomon St 10. The group sampled a slice of cheesecake, priced at NIS 25 (\$8.60), and a cheesecake-like pastry that the cafe called “cheese mousse” for NIS 42 (\$14.50). The latter, a round cake covered with caramel sauce, was delicious, dense, and rich, and was chosen as one of the best of the day.

“I’d say this is the closest we’ve had to a good, heavy New York-style cheesecake,” Geller said.

Helen Family Bakers at Agripas 6 was the next stop, a popular bakery that serves only one kind of cheesecake, white with berries and cream on top, for NIS 40 (\$14). This one was a surprise: members of the group agreed that this was the best cheesecake of the day, perfect in texture, sweetness, and balance.

“I believe we have a winner,” Geller declared.

Before we were done, though, there were a few more places to go as we approached the Machane Yehuda Market. Yolo Bakery at Ki’akh 1 offers a creamy cheesecake for NIS 43 (\$15) that the group felt tasted too strongly of lemon. At Teller Bakery at Agripas 74, we had a Basque-style cheesecake with a slightly burnt top, as well as a berry cheesecake, which ran NIS 30 each. Finally, Marzipan Bakery at Agripas 44, world-famous for its soft, chewy rugelach, offered a variety of frozen cheesecakes in different flavors. Eating it straight out of the freezer, we

tried a crumb cheesecake at NIS 40 for a family-size cake that Geller called “the quintessential Israeli cheesecake.”

As the tour concluded, participants were slow to get out of their chairs, enjoying their fat and sugar highs and basking in the afterglow of a delicious adventure. Geller, meanwhile, was already planning her next food crawl.

“We can do *cholent* [a traditional Jewish stew] in the winter, maybe honey cakes before Rosh Hashanah,” she mused. “Enjoying traditional foods together is one of the best ways to get into the holiday spirit.”