



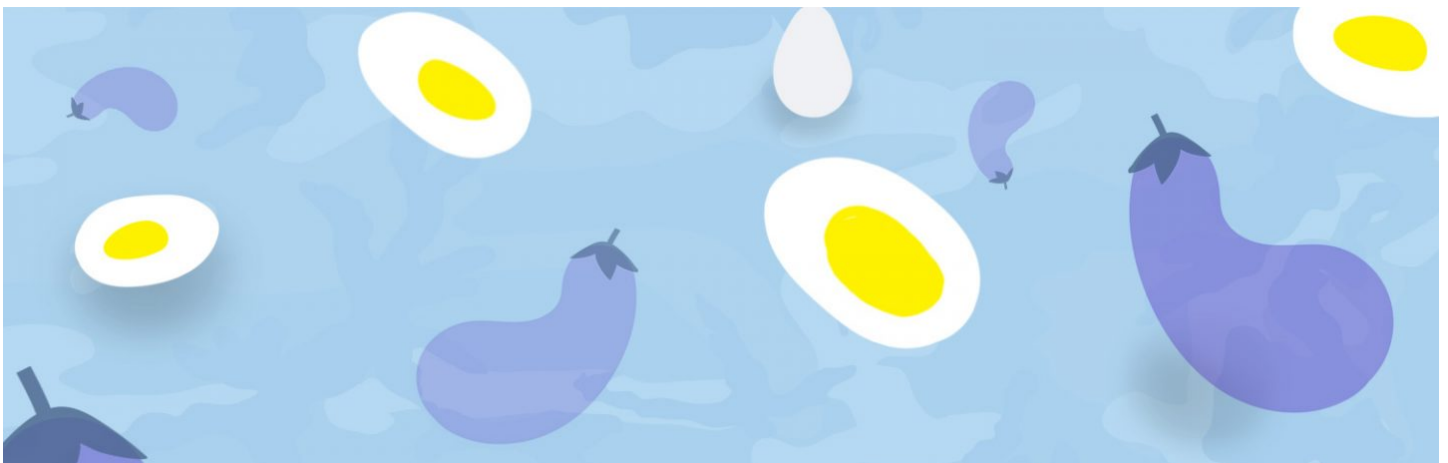
HISTORY

The History of the Sabich

From Sabbath dish, to convenient street-side breakfast, to trendy sandwich.

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It isn't often that an old-world Jewish dish gets any real traction outside the kitchens it's made in. But *sabich*—a pita stuffed with eggplant, a hard-boiled egg, and tahini and further embellished with condiments, pickles, and salads—is having an “it” moment in America.

The sabich has made it on the menus of hot falafel spots from coast to coast. Sababa, in San Francisco, is a sabich-centric spot, and, in New York, chef Nir Mesika lists a “fine dining” version of sabich on the menu of his new East Village restaurant, Timna.

But before it showed up in today's trendy restaurants, before it became a popular on-the-go lunch in Israel, before it even got its current name, the components of sabich were Sabbath dishes. “It was the Shabbat breakfast of Jews in Iraq, who brought it to Israel in the fifties” says Avi Steinitz, a member of the Israeli Association for Culinary Culture.

Shabbat, according to the Jewish religious law, is a day of rest and reflection on which no electric devices may be plugged in or turned on. This practice, embraced by a variety of traditions, including the Hasidic (an Orthodox sect) and the Masorti (traditional, yet more integrated into modern society), has popularized the move of plugging in the hot plate

before the beginning of Shabbat on Friday evening. This compromise allows for a hot Friday night dinner and warm lunch on the Shabbat itself.

“The Saturday Shabbat breakfast, right before everyone would go to the temple, had to be easy to assemble; light, so there’s room for a big lunch; and premade” says Steinitz. The hot plate would be fired up on Friday afternoon for *t’bit*, a Jewish-Iraqi stew containing meat, grains, and vegetables. Eggs, dunked in the stew and browned overnight, were a handy, nutritious breakfast solution on Saturday morning, often eaten along with baked eggplants and tahini sauce, which is easily mixed without turning on the electricity. The *t’bit* itself became lunch, still warm from the hot plate, and garnished with pickled and fresh vegetables.

How did this carefully planned breakfast find itself in a pita and on the streets, equipped with a catchy one-word moniker? Most sources concur that the man responsible for turning a Sabbath breakfast dish into the sabich sandwich was Sabich Halabi, an Iraqi Jew who settled in Ramat Gan in the sixties and decided to sell the traditional breakfast in takeaway form. He opened a kiosk serving eggplant, tahini, and egg in a pita, and turned sabich into a daily affair. Construction workers, bus drivers, students, and neighborhood families—anyone on the quest for an affordable, fast lunch would line up around noon, waiting for a pita stuffed to the brim.

In 1985, another entrepreneur, Oved Daniel, opened a sabich stand in Givatayim, with a cultish vibe and an across-the-counter lingo the founder invented to converse with customers. Daniel took the sabich’s ingredients and turned them into active verbs, using the infinitive verb form in Hebrew, asking customers, “Lehatzil?” (Should I put eggplant?), “Lebatzbetz?” (Should I put an egg?). Oved’s centrally located kiosk was the first to turn sabich into a phenomenon, staging it with theatrical presentation and catching media’s attention thanks to Oved’s campy, friendly vibe. In the interviews Oved had given to the press over the past three decades, he claims that the word “sabich” isn’t a namesake, but an acronym, born from “*salat, beitzah, yoter chatsil*” (in Hebrew: salad, egg, more eggplant). Some believe it originated from *sabach*, Arabic for ‘morning.’

Today, you can find sabich across Israel, often served alongside falafel and shawarma. The original ingredients are now often joined with boiled potatoes and pickles. “Both the Tunisian and the Moroccan cuisines use a cold potato in sandwiches, so the potato addition is a result of Israeli fusion,” says Steinitz, “and the pickles come from European Jews.” No matter the endless changes, the popularity of sabich remains a constant. It’s worth lining up for, in 1961 or 2016.

JEWISH FOOD, SABICH
