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Michael Solomonov: Jerusalem in a Bowl

Zahav is a statement for us. We want to bring peace through food.

— Okan Yazici

In late June 2020, Michael Solomonov, a 40-year-old Israeli-American chef and restaurateur, sat down with his business partner, Steven Cook, to devise a plan for reopening Zahav, their Israeli fine-dining destination, the Fourth of July holiday. Zahav, like all restaurants in Philadelphia, had been shut down since March 2020 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. There were many questions to consider and minimal guidance being provided by local, state and federal authorities. Furthermore, Solomonov and Cook had to determine what strategy they personally were comfortable with in terms of protecting the health and well-being of their customers and employees in a time in which there persisted many unknowns about the COVID-19 disease.

Over the previous decade, Solomonov had gained significant notoriety, beginning with Zahav and continuing with many additional restaurant concepts, three cookbooks, a Netflix documentary, and a pile of awards, the most recent of which had named Zahav the best restaurant in the country.¹ Along with Cook, Solomonov had established a small restaurant empire in Philadelphia under the name CooknSolo, which, including Zahav, boasted fifteen restaurants under six brands. The two partners had enjoyed flexing their creative muscles in developing restaurant concepts over the years, and this had afforded Solomonov many opportunities to do something that he craved on a deep level: to tell the stories of Israel, and all its constituent cultures, through food.

Before the pandemic hit, Solomonov and Cook had begun to wonder whether it might be time to rethink their opportunistic approach to expansion and instead pursue a more intentional, disciplined strategy—for instance, by standardizing procedures for one of their proven concepts and focusing on growing just that one, rather than continually reinventing the wheel with new restaurant ideas. The pandemic, however, caused an abrupt and intense change of focus—the goal was no longer expansion, but survival. Solomonov had overcome much in his life, including addiction and the death of his younger brother; these experiences had given him the perspective to take on great challenges in his career, the COVID-19 pandemic being the greatest challenge yet. As the economy cautiously started to reopen in June 2020, how should Solomonov and Cook proceed? How should they think about their

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business in terms of survival through the duration of the pandemic and set themselves up to come back even stronger in the post-pandemic world?

There and Back Again: 1978-2001

Solomonov was born in 1978 in Ganei Yehuda, Israel, a community about five miles southeast of Tel Aviv. His American mother, Evelyn Fisher, had been raised by Jews of Russian descent in the small town of East Liverpool, Ohio, and had moved to Israel at twenty-nine, where she found a job teaching English. She also found her future husband Mordechai Solomonov, an Israeli with Bulgarian family roots. Michael's younger brother, David, was born in 1981, the same year that Mordechai, desiring a fresh start in a new place, led the family to relocate to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Evelyn returned to teaching, and Mordechai owned and managed several Subway restaurant franchises. Living in the heavily Jewish enclave of Squirrel Hill in Pittsburgh, Solomonov remembered growing up with a solidly American identity. Despite his father's work in food service, his early relationship with food was uneasy. A picky eater as a child, Solomonov liked to remove all the cheese from his pizza, wipe off the sauce with napkins, then replace the cheese and enjoy his pizza sauce-free.²

In 1994, much to the sixteen-year-old Solomonov's chagrin, the family reversed course and moved back to Israel. After a year of discontent in an Israeli boarding school, Solomonov convinced his parents to allow him to move back to Pittsburgh by himself, where he bounced between the couches of several friends while finishing high school. Although he had been granted his wish, Solomonov's exposure to the intensity of life in Israel led to a feeling of disconnect from his American peers. In 1995, when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995, Solomonov recalled feeling "Israeli for perhaps the first time."³ A disengaged student, Solomonov barely finished high school, "reluctantly" applied to college, and enrolled at the University of Vermont, where he goofed off more than he studied. In his sophomore year, the situation became untenable. After a night of partying left him hospitalized, Solomonov's parents suggested he leave school and return to Israel for a new start. Feeling he had no other choice, Solomonov accepted. Unable to speak Hebrew, he took the only job he could find, scrubbing sheets pans in a bakery. "I felt cleansed by the hard, physical work," Solomonov remembered, "and I enjoyed the camaraderie among men who shared this secret."⁴ For the first time, Solomonov took a true interest in food, and he decided to embark on a career as a chef, returning to the U.S. and enrolling at the Florida Culinary Institute in 1998. Upon graduating, he headed towards New York City, a mecca for aspiring young cooks. His girlfriend's brother lived in a suburb of Philadelphia, and the couple decided to stop and spend some time there on their way north while they figured out how to make ends meet in the high-priced New York environment. The romance didn't last, but a different lifelong relationship began—Solomonov ended up settling in Philadelphia for good.

Compared to Michael, David Solomonov's early life was fairly stable. Just twelve when the family moved, adjusting to life and school in Israel was easier for him than it had been for his teenaged older brother. The two were close as children but had drifted apart as an angry and resentful Michael went through boarding school, high school, and college, and Michael's brief return to Israel had done little to repair the breach. In 2001, the same year Michael finished culinary school, David entered an Israel Defense Forces infantry unit to begin the mandatory military service required of nearly all young Israelis.

Early Career and Challenges: 2001-2008

One of Solomonov's first jobs after culinary school was at Philadelphia's Striped Bass, a high-end French restaurant. "He was very likeable—charismatic and funny," recalled chef Terence Feury. "He

was driven. I could tell that he was passionate and serious about his career.” Yet, Solomonov’s work was not up to the restaurant’s lofty standards, and Feury fired Solomonov after just a few weeks. “You have to make your young cooks understand that the customer is paying over \$100 for their meal and they have high expectations,” Feury said. “You could see a talented cook, but Michael just always seemed exhausted and was constantly running behind.” Solomonov was disappointed but determined to improve. A few months later, he convinced Feury to give him another chance. This time he succeeded under Feury’s supervision and was eventually promoted to lead line cook. Solomonov credited Feury for teaching him to have high standards, and he was able to leverage his success at the Striped Bass into a position in Marc Vetri’s eponymous Italian eatery, then considered the best restaurant in the city.⁵

While Solomonov had learned the virtues of hard work under Feury, from Vetri he discovered the value of autonomy and creativity, as the chef allowed him significant room to take charge in the kitchen, especially after he was promoted to sous chef. Vetri remembered Solomonov’s penchant for experimenting with Middle Eastern spices and flavors, and the two occasionally butted heads. “He always wanted to push the limits,” said Vetri, “and even then, I could tell what his real flavors were, because he loved to add Israeli spices into our Italian cuisine. There were many occasions in which I had to tell him that it just didn’t work.” Despite this, Solomonov flourished. Fellow chef Andrew Zimmern, a friend of Vetri’s, remembered noticing Solomonov’s talent:

He was a megaton of highly compressed energy with an ability to not only produce food in terms of volume and speed and appeal, but he was also a visionary. When you do what I’ve been doing for a long time, you can sort of walk into a kitchen and see the person that in five years is going to own their own restaurant or become more popular or more important on a different scale. You can tell that there’s someone special in front of you.

David’s Death

In the summer of 2003, with Vetri closed for a three-week holiday, Solomonov flew to Israel to spend time with family, including David, who was on leave from the military. The brothers reconnected and spent a few joyous weeks together eating food and having fun all over the country. “By the end of the trip,” Solomonov remembered, “we were talking and laughing like we had never been apart. We were not only brothers but friends.”⁶ David had just a month remaining in his term of service, and the two looked forward to spending additional time together in the U.S., where David was to attend college.

This trip also marked the first time, according to Solomonov, that he “saw the country through the eyes of a chef.”⁷ He was amazed by the vast array of cultural influences and styles of food that Israel had to offer, and he took advantage of the opportunity to sample and experience as much as he possibly could.

Just a few weeks later, Solomonov was driving his father’s old car from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia to have it ready for David’s forthcoming move to the States when he received a call from his aunt. She delivered the heartbreaking news: David had been killed. It was Yom Kippur, the holiest of Jewish holidays, and David had volunteered to cover a shift for one of his religious comrades-in-arms near Israel’s volatile border with Lebanon, where Hezbollah sniper fire had found him.

After a week in Israel mourning with friends and family, Solomonov returned to Vetri, where he found solace in cooking. “Just sitting at home wasn’t going to help him,” Vetri recounted, “and the work helped take his mind off of everything.” Sensing that Solomonov needed support, Vetri kept a close eye on his sous chef and gave him opportunities to share his feelings while the two sat together after long shifts in the kitchen. A couple of months later, Solomonov was invited to David’s army base

to hold a memorial dinner in his honor. Vetri accompanied him and helped prepare the feast, solidifying what became a close and lasting friendship. It was this event that made Solomonov realize his destiny lay in Israeli cuisine. "Until I visited that place," he said, "I had no intention of cooking Israeli food. But, after my brother's death, the path I was going to take became clear."⁸

Steven Cook and Marigold Kitchen

Vetri had a policy of taking on a new sous chef every two years, and as Solomonov's time at the restaurant came to an end in 2005, he pondered what to do next. He briefly considered joining the Israeli Army himself, but Vetri and Solomonov's new girlfriend, Mary Armistead, whom he would wed in 2006, talked him out of it. Soon after, he got a call from a family friend from Pittsburgh, Shira Rudavsky. Solomonov's mother had been Rudavsky's middle school English teacher, and the two families were close. Rudavsky was engaged to marry a chef named Steven Cook, who was looking for someone to replace him at his restaurant, Marigold.

Cook, who had grown up in Miami and suburban Detroit, graduated with a business concentration from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School in 1995. After six years on Wall Street, despite loving his bosses and feeling that he had a relatively high quality of life for a young person in finance, Cook felt unfulfilled. His true passion was food: "Whenever I rode the subway or sat in a waiting room or had any time on my hands, I brainstormed about cooking," he remembered.⁹ During a vacation at a friend's cottage in Spain, Cook prepared many meals on a camping stove, and the satisfaction he gained from the simple cooking setup led to a realization that he wanted to pursue the culinary arts. With the blessing of his employers, he enrolled at the French Culinary Institute and attended classes at night. "I was the one sneaking out of Blackstone at 4:30 in the afternoon every Tuesday and Thursday, trying to not let other people see me leaving," Cook laughed. After finishing culinary school in 2000, Cook moved to Philadelphia, where he had friends from school and could live better on the \$10-12 hourly wage of a line cook than he could in New York.

Further, according to Cook, Philadelphia was a city with "a great emerging restaurant scene," and he had no trouble securing employment. After enjoying two hard years of work as a line cook, he decided to take the plunge and buy his own restaurant. Combining his savings with loans and investments from friends, he opened Marigold Kitchen in West Philadelphia, with himself as chef. However, before long, Cook started to become miserable. He recalled:

I had met my wife a year earlier. She was a high school teacher, so she was asleep when I got home; I was asleep when she left. It was a hard year. So, I was just trying to figure out what I was going to do. I called Marc Vetri, who is like the godfather of the Philly culinary scene. I asked, 'Do you know anybody that might be ready to be a chef in my restaurant?' At the same time, my wife, who is from Pittsburgh and grew up with Mike, said, 'Well, you ought to meet Mike.' So those two things happened pretty much simultaneously.

The two met and soon agreed that Solomonov would take over for Cook. "In retrospect, it was a pretty hasty, not well-considered decision on both of our parts," Cook conceded. "We didn't really know each other. We had met maybe twice. So, there was a certain amount of luck, looking back, that we got into this partnership really sight-unseen, sort of on a gut feeling, and it worked out. I hired him and took a step back from the restaurant."

It was October 2005 and Solomonov had his first job as a head chef. Marigold had received strong reviews in the year under Cook—it earned three "bells" from Craig LaBan, the food critic at the authoritative *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the highest possible rating for a new restaurant.¹⁰ Yet Cook gave

Solomonov full latitude to change the menu and cook whatever he wished. When Solomonov took the helm, Marigold had a New American menu, but before long, “things were starting to become a little bit Israeli in my cooking,” said Solomonov. “And it wasn’t as concise as me saying, ‘I want to honor my brother by cooking Israeli food.’ It was more like, ‘This is in my blood and I want to do these things.’ And they’re exciting, from a culinary perspective and a cultural perspective. It’s enthralling and different.”

One of Solomonov’s early creations was a dish that involved pouring hot soup over a cold panna cotta of lobster and coconut. But the dish failed to inspire. “Everyone just got room temperature soup,” he laughed, “I thought it was so cool. I didn’t want to hear that it wasn’t brilliant, because I thought it was.” When LaBan made a reservation at the restaurant to sample the new chef’s food, Cook was the one who received the call. “He gets off the phone and says, ‘I think that was Craig LaBan. I think you should consider taking the soup off the menu because nobody likes it,’” Solomonov remembered. In a sudden stroke of inspiration, he decided to make lamb kabobs, wrap them in cabbage, and pour a Lebanese pink lentil soup around them. He recalled LaBan’s reaction:

The food critic came in and loved it. He said it tasted like ‘Jerusalem in a bowl.’ And I thought, ‘Okay, we’re onto something here.’ People embracing what we were trying to do and articulating it without us having to explain was great. They caught onto the fact that I was Israeli, and the more that I could do in that vein, in general, the better. We got more press; we got more customers that were coming in excited. What they were doing was celebrating the part of Israel that I love, the part that I can help promote and market.

Zahav

As he embraced his Israeli roots, Solomonov’s profile began to rise in the city. There was just one problem: Marigold wasn’t making any money. A peculiarity of the Philadelphia restaurant scene was the popularity of BYOB (“Bring Your Own Bottle”) restaurants, in which selling liquor was prohibited but consuming it was not. At BYOB restaurants, such as Marigold, patrons brought their own alcoholic beverages, sometimes paying a token “cork fee” to the establishment. This narrowed profits even further in an already low-margin business. “Because liquor licenses are expensive,” Cook explained, “the lower capital investment makes BYOBs great starter restaurants for chefs. But they aren’t a great business model.”

As Cook and Solomonov got to know each other, Cook began to realize that Solomonov had the potential to be a long-term partner, not just an employee. He recounted a time that Solomonov called him from Marigold to tell him that they didn’t have enough cash on hand to pay the dishwasher: “The general manager at the time said it was fine, and that we would just pay him a day or two late. But Michael said, ‘This is not the way to treat people. This isn’t the way to do business.’” Cook went to the bank and paid the worker that same night. “It was an early confirmation to each other that we were of the same mind,” he remembered.

During slow times at Marigold, Cook and Solomonov would sit on the restaurant’s back step and bandy about ideas for new restaurants at which they could sell drinks as well as food. Their first venture, in 2007, was a Mexican eatery called Xochitl with a chef-partner that Solomonov had known from Vetri. (This partnership did not work out, and Cook and Solomonov sold Xochitl in 2011.) But the conversations kept returning to Israel. The hottest Philadelphia restaurant at the time was a Spanish tapas place led by chef Jose Garces. “Everybody wanted a restaurant like Jose’s, which embodied really cool food that expressed a personal point of view, while also being busy and making money,” Cook recalled. “Mike was always talking about how we had an opportunity to translate this exotic, exciting, healthful cuisine for an American audience in a way that hadn’t been done before. We spent probably a couple years talking

about that.” Solomonov believed that the small-plate approach was particularly apt for Israeli food, as a restaurant that served *salatim* (the multitude of small salads traditionally served at Israeli grill restaurants) and *mezze* (the selection of small dishes served as appetizers in parts of the Middle East and surrounding regions) allowed guests to sample many different dishes, much like tapas did.¹¹

Cook and Solomonov opened Zahav on May 5, 2008. The name meant “gold” in Hebrew, “evoking the sun sparking on Jerusalem stone, like the limestone they installed on the floors and walls” of the restaurant.¹² (See **Exhibit 1** for an image of Zahav’s interior.) The menu included traditional dishes from Israel’s many diverse cultures, including North African, Persian, Palestinian, Eastern European, and more. Zahav represented a big leap of faith, as the capital investment far exceeded those of their previous two restaurants, and the two men went deeply into debt, taking large sums of money, both loans and investments, that added up to around \$1 million from friends, family, and banks alike. They were all-in.

But business was slow. Customers did not respond well to the menu, which had eight separate sections full of foreign words and was mostly devoid of descriptions. The *salatim* section alone listed seventeen options and required diners to choose four, six, or eight dishes (no more or less) for the table. “The menu was all over the place,” confided Zahav general manager and CooknSolo partner Okan Yazici, who started as a busboy at Zahav in September 2008. “The food tasted good, but it wasn’t very approachable.” The 2007-08 financial crisis had also led to a decline in consumer spending across the board. “It was not a good time to own a restaurant,” Cook said. Zahav had 100 seats, but many nights they were only serving 30 people or fewer.

To make matters worse, Solomonov was struggling with addiction. As a young man, he had a healthy appetite for drug and alcohol consumption; such indulgence had played a not-insignificant factor in the ignominious end to his college career. “Culturally speaking, it feels like almost everyone uses drugs and engages in binge drinking occasionally,” Solomonov reflected. “I just did that more than most people and it didn’t become a problem until it was a problem.” In the wake of David’s death in 2003, Solomonov had begun to spiral into a destructive pattern. By 2008, he was hiding addictions to both crack cocaine and heroin alongside a habit of heavy drinking. When going out for supplies during the day, he would make detours to smoke crack in his car; at night, when Mary went to bed, he would sneak out and cruise around the city drinking and smoking, returning at dawn to sleep for a couple of hours. Finally, just a few months after opening Zahav, people in Solomonov’s inner circle began to catch on. “He didn’t look right,” remembered Vetri. Said Yazici, “I could tell something was up with him. Sometimes, he would be shaking or was really hyped up, like he’d had four cups of coffee. Other times he was really moody.” Mary and Cook led an intervention for Solomonov and he went to inpatient detox and rehabilitation.

Solomonov emerged clean, but it was a trying time at the fledgling Zahav. The restaurant was losing money. Cook and Solomonov were forced to make as many cuts as they possibly could, including several key staff members and their own salaries. “They were scraping up enough money to buy six lemons at the store to get through the day,” Feury remembered. For Solomonov, who was in the early stages of recovery, things were especially difficult. He explained:

I couldn’t carry money. I couldn’t drive myself. It was the most volatile time in my life because I couldn’t even trust myself to get from point A to point B without smoking crack. I was pretty much re-learning how to do everything. Being 30 or 40 days clean and trying to do outpatient rehab and go to AA meetings while also managing a kitchen that had seen their leader basically lie to all of them and go to drug rehab—it was a really hard time.

"It was a scary moment," agreed Cook. "Everything was on the line, including our reputations." Solomonov was forced to call his father and ask to borrow money to meet payroll and utility expenses. "I had never had to ask my parents for money in my life," said Solomonov, "and to have to call my dad and ask him to borrow money, at 60 days clean, was the absolute worst." Mordechai immediately called Cook because he was concerned that his son was asking for money because he had fallen off the wagon.

Breakthrough

Finally, when things were at their bleakest and the end of the restaurant seemed nigh, Zahav's fortunes began to turn. Philadelphia, like many other U.S. cities, held "Restaurant Week" events during which local establishments offered a fixed menu for a discounted price, with the goal of getting customers to try new places (and hopefully become regulars). The Restaurant Week format forced Cook and Solomonov to reduce their complicated menu and eliminate a great deal of customer choice. According to Cook, January 2009's Restaurant Week was the smoothest the kitchen and service operation had ever been, customers were happier, and traffic started to pick up. They decided to greatly simplify the menu and reduce the number of choices customers had. Just as importantly, Solomonov realized that he needn't feel constrained by the tradition he was exploring:

We're chefs and restaurateurs. We're not three generations of a family that makes the same falafel. I'm not an Israeli grandmother. We needed to elaborate a little bit and celebrate the fact that we're this conduit of Israel. We're looking at Israel and the 100 cultures or gastronomies that make us Israel from the outside. We have the ability. And we're not oppressed. We have the ability to take this from Yemen, this from Bulgaria, this from Morocco, and put all these things that make up Israel together. And we had fun and were innovative. And it worked.

For example, Solomonov recalled transforming a dish that had been a traditional Balkan-style Spanish mackerel cured and served thick with scallions and olives; the new version was coated with Yemenite spices and served on top of Lebanese-inspired lentils cooked with cumin. (See **Exhibit 2** for an image of Zahav's menu and **Exhibit 3** for an image of select food items from Zahav.)

In May 2009, *Philadelphia Magazine* released their annual restaurant rankings. Cook and Solomonov were already armed with a pedigree thanks to Solomonov's connection to Vetri and the positive reviews garnered by Marigold and Xochitl, so the reviewers gave the new Israeli eatery careful consideration. Liking the overhauled menu, they named Zahav as the best restaurant in the city. According to Yazici, the staff at Zahav went from serving 30 people to 130 overnight.

CooknSolo: 2008-2020

As Zahav took off, Solomonov's reputation began to grow beyond the confines of Philadelphia. After finishing as a semifinalist in the James Beard Foundation Awards (which recognized culinary professionals in the United States) for "Rising Star Chef of the Year" in 2008 and "Best Chef: Mid-Atlantic" in 2009, he captured the top prize in the latter category in 2011. The same year, Cook and Solomonov formed CooknSolo and began to expand with additional restaurants. They struck gold with an idea for a casual restaurant they called Federal Donuts. Inspired by Korean fried chicken wings, beloved by Solomonov and devoured by Zahav staff many a night after a long shift, the pair (along with three other partners) opened their first outlet in 2011. Dedicated exclusively to chicken, donuts, and coffee in a variety of interesting flavors (many with Middle Eastern spices), "FedNuts" soon attracted a huge following.¹³ "Mike had always wanted to do something with fried chicken," recalled

Yazici. “Then we started making donuts with Turkish coffee in them or with spices from Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, which came out really well. There are all these chicken and waffle concepts all over the place; so we decided to just try something where we made one savory item and one sweet item really, really well.” According to Cook, they treated FedNuts as a “cheap experiment.” With a tiny storefront that cost just \$35,000 to build out, “We basically wrote it off as soon as we put it in,” Cook asserted. But the restaurant turned out to be a hit, and over the next eight years they would open a handful of additional outlets, with plans for more in the works.

The success of Federal Donuts inspired them to go further. Their next concept was Dizengoff, a hummus stand, in 2014. “People come to Zahav just to eat that really good hummus,” Yazici observed. “To just serve hummus and good salads on a tray for \$10 was a great idea for its own concept.” In 2016, CooknSolo opened Abe Fisher, a fine-dining kosher style restaurant with a single location, and in 2017, the group launched Goldie, a vegan, kosher falafel shop that also served French fries and tahini-based shakes. “A lot of people are vegan now,” explained Yazici of the latter concept. “We definitely noticed a trend in the market.” As of January 2020, Dizengoff and Goldie each had three locations. With the exception of FedNuts, the CooknSolo brand was built on Israeli cuisine. “You could look at our portfolio and say Federal Donuts is the one that has literally nothing to do with anything else, and it’s true,” Cook reflected, “but it really turned us on to this idea that you could do a lower-rent place that didn’t really offer any consumer choice as long as you did it really well and created a cool factor around it.” In 2019, CooknSolo launched two new Israeli concepts: K’Far (Hebrew for “Village”) bakery and café, and Merkaz (“Central Place”), a pita sandwich restaurant. On the 2020 docket was an Israeli grill and skewer house called Laser Wolf, a play on the name of the romantically challenged butcher, Lazar, in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Each restaurant opening was assisted with funding by roughly the same group of investors that had chipped in for the Zahav opening—about twenty friends and family whom Cook described as silent, limited partners. “We just cut them checks; Mike and I make all the decisions. They aren’t involved in the business at all,” Cook said. For each opening, the partners had the choice to opt out, but most had been retained for all of CooknSolo’s projects, according to Solomonov. Cook attested that they had received strong returns. Meanwhile, thirteen longtime key employees, such as Yazici, were made equity partners alongside the founders, and split a pool of one percent of all CooknSolo revenues. Federal Donuts stood as the exception to CooknSolo’s ownership model: Cook and Solomonov worked with three other founding, controlling partners, one of whom served as Managing Partner and oversaw day-to-day operations. This group of five, each with a 20 percent stake, made decisions by consensus, although Cook and Solomonov retained official control of corporate governance.

Cook and Solomonov had their share of stumbles, as they opened and closed a number of restaurants, including a Dizengoff in New York City’s Chelsea Market and side-by-side outposts of Dizengoff and FedNuts in Miami. “This happens to every group,” mused Yazici. “You open places, you close places. I’m glad it happened with places that are easy to open and close; a hummus shack just has a few employees. Closing down doesn’t break the bank. We’re learning with the mistakes.” Part of the issue in Miami had been an unforeseen construction project that made accessibility difficult, but Cook refused to place blame on anyone but themselves. “This is a brand that is very strong in Philly but not as strong anywhere else,” he said. “We were arrogant and naïve to think that we could go to another market and that people would assign value to our brand without knowing us.”

Solomonov acknowledged that one challenge in geographic expansion had been personnel-related. The “satellite employers” they had worked with in Miami “did a terrible job,” he said. “When you’re 2,000 miles away and you’re serving chicken and donuts and you don’t know what our culture is like, and the leaders can’t emulate and transmit that culture, it’s a huge problem.” Meanwhile, the key

employee tapped by Cook and Solomonov to run Dizengoff in New York City had suddenly left the company, inspired to make a career switch to politics in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. “That was a huge setback,” Solomonov admitted, “but it was a lot more than that, too. We should have hung out there for a summer before we made that move. 35,000 people walk through Chelsea Market every day, so we thought it would be easy, but how many of those people are eating? How many are just there to mark off Chelsea Market on their New York Instagram checklist?” Furthermore, according to Solomonov, Chelsea Market attracted a huge number of Israeli tourists. “You know what Israeli people don’t want to eat when they come to New York? Hummus,” he laughed. As of January 2020, every CooknSolo establishment was located in the Philadelphia area. (See **Exhibit 4** for a timeline of restaurant openings and closings.)

Media

CooknSolo’s restaurants, and Solomonov himself, benefited from good press. Joan Nathan profiled Solomonov for the *New York Times* in 2011 in what Stuart Davidson, prominent Philadelphia lawyer and good friend of Solomonov’s, described as his “seminal bio piece.” Soon after, Solomonov started working with publicist Sarah Rosenberg of Wicked Good Media, formerly of ABC’s “Nightline.” “In three sentences I basically fell in love with the guy,” Rosenberg remembered. “He was so authentic and hilarious—he probably dropped four F-bombs in the first sentence.” Over the years, Solomonov appeared in many publications and TV shows with Rosenberg’s guidance. “His story really resonated with people,” she proclaimed. “Mental health and drug addiction weren’t really talked about in this industry.”

In 2015, Cook and Solomonov published their first book, *Zahav: A World of Israeli Cooking*, featuring the stories of Solomonov’s life and recipes from Zahav. Around the same time, Solomonov was approached by filmmaker Roger Sherman, who was looking to find someone to help him create a documentary about Israeli cuisine. Sherman explained:

A mutual friend of Mike and mine said, ‘If you want the best Israeli cuisine in America, you have to go to Zahav.’ Mike sat down with us and he was warm and amiable, and I instantly realized that I needed someone who understood all of the cultures. Some people say there are 150 cultures that either came to Israel or never left. I needed someone that could relate to all of those cultures and Mike was that guy.

The two toured Israel together for three weeks and created a film, *In Search of Israeli Cuisine*, which explored the very notion of Israeli cuisine—a nebulous concept given the country’s brief history and wide cultural diversity. They endeavored to promote Israeli cuisine while also emphasizing inclusivity and deference to specific cultural groups including Palestinian, Turkish, Iraqi, and many more. Sherman found Solomonov so engaging that he adapted his usual documentary style to accommodate his partner. “I don’t use hosts in my films. I find that it takes the viewer away from the experience,” he declared, “but I did with Mike. He can relate to anyone and everyone.”

Sherman, Cook, and Solomonov created a combination book-movie tour, and each bolstered the success of the other. *Zahav* went on to win the James Beard awards for Best International Cookbook and Best Cookbook overall in 2015. “The success and distribution of Roger’s film had a lot to do with the book’s success, because over the course of the two years that the film was shown in over 160 festivals and screenings around the country, they managed to sell books,” reflected Dorothy Kalins, *Zahav*’s producer. “Mike is so likeable, approachable, and interesting in the film that a lot of viewers decided that the book would be a great thing to get. You’re rarely lucky enough to have a film accompany a book.”

Kalins produced two additional books with Cook and Solomonov. *Federal Donuts: The (Partially) True Spectacular Story*, a small, idiosyncratic volume, hit shelves in 2017. “*Federal Donuts* showed how full of beans those guys are,” Kalins laughed. “We got the five partners in a room together to hear them explain how the business was born and named and run, and all the mistakes they made. We recorded for two hours, and it was almost indecipherable, but we figured it out.” The book also included donut and chicken recipes. *Israeli Soul*, a follow-up to *Zahav* released in 2018, was the result of eleven days together on a bus and visits to 81 eateries. The book included recipes for many food items found in Israel that were not covered in *Zahav*. Kalins praised Cook and Solomonov for their “hands-on” approach to the cookbooks: “There is another model of doing cookbooks where the chefs don’t even see the thing or test the recipes themselves before it goes to press. These guys were on every shoot and cooked everything themselves,” she said. (See **Exhibit 5** for cookbook images.)

Zahav Restaurant: 2020

Almost twelve years after opening, *Zahav* had become a well-oiled machine. Offering dinner service only, the restaurant opened at 5 p.m. every day except for major holidays. On a daily basis, in 2008 there had been just three people in the kitchen, including Solomonov, and eight front-of-house employees: three servers, two busboys, one bartender, one host, and one manager. By 2019, the total number of workers on any given night had grown from eleven to fifty, divided in a 30-20 split between the front of the house and the kitchen. While *Zahav* had once struggled to fill the seats in the restaurant, by 2019 they were fully booked two months in advance, according to Yazici. Despite this, anyone who wanted to eat at *Zahav* on any given night could almost certainly make it happen if they were willing to arrive early enough; the restaurant offered sixteen bar seats and six kitchen counter seats for walk-in customers every day. The line for these seats usually started forming at around 4:15 p.m. There was also often a lengthy wait list—up to 400 or 500 names on weekends—for tables in case of cancelled reservations, from which lucky diners were selected by lottery. Last-minute cancellations or “no-shows” meant walk-in parties also had the chance to gain a table. The restaurant boasted two private event rooms, one seating twenty people and the other seating thirty, that were nearly always booked.

With the dramatic increase in the size of *Zahav*’s staff (from about thirty to eighty-five), the restaurant had been able to raise service standards significantly. One big emphasis as part of this effort was the research done for each reservation. Yazici explained:

We go ahead and Google your name to find out about you—where you come from, where you live, what you do. That gives us an insight of what you may like. The idea is to change your attitude about food and inspire you a little bit. If an Iranian person is coming, I will make sure there’s some Persian rice that we cook in the kitchen, for us to send as a gift that is off the menu to that table. It will touch them. They will think, ‘How would they know I would like this? How would they know that my grandmother used to cook this?’

A couple of days before the reservation, calls would be placed to ascertain dietary restrictions and whether there was some special occasion precipitating the dinner. Anniversaries, birthdays, and promotions were valuable pieces of information that the *maître d’* and hosts used as part of the plan for each party. Chefs, restaurant owners, politicians, and other public figures received special attention and often were the subjects of gifts from the house. Similarly, Solomonov asserted that efforts were made to gain information about walk-in customers: “That way, the next time they come in, they’ll be recognized and made to feel even more special,” he said. “If we don’t do that, we’re not fulfilling our obligation to the guest, but just from a pragmatic standpoint, we’re not going to be as good. We’re not going to be better. We have to be better than everyone else if we want to be successful.” *Zahav* started to receive attention for service in 2015, the first of four consecutive years it was nominated for a James

Beard award in the “Outstanding Service” category. In 2017 and 2018, Zahav was a top-five finalist for the award. No Middle Eastern restaurant had ever taken the top prize, according to Yazici, and to do so was one of his primary goals as the restaurant’s general manager.

Although Zahav did not open until 5 p.m., employees showed up as early as 7 a.m. to prepare for that evening’s service. Yazici and the three managers underneath him typically arrived in the late morning to oversee and lead the day’s preparation efforts. Two kitchen chefs serving underneath Yazici and Solomonov managed the back of the house, which allowed Zahav to function smoothly on occasions when the head chef and/or general manager were absent. According to Yazici, nearly all of the managers had been internally promoted. The duties of Yazici and the other managers ran the gamut from accounting to H.R. to leading meetings and more. “It’s a lot of therapy sessions with the staff,” Yazici laughed. “For all of the fifty people working in the restaurant every day, I try to pat everyone on the back at least once and see how they’re doing.” This applied to guests too, as the managers constantly dealt with impatient diners and humored customers who wanted to offer feedback on the food. “I’m basically a smoother,” he explained. “You’ve got to make sure you’re entertaining everyone, especially if their appetizer is running a few minutes late, for example. And you must listen to people telling you their food is too salty, or overcooked, or the music is too loud, or the dining room is too bright or too dark.”

In addition to the service award nominations, the earlier regional “Best Chef” award, and the cookbook awards, Solomonov was nominated for the James Beard national “Outstanding Chef” award on several occasions and won the top prize in 2017. In 2018, Zahav’s pastry chef, Camille Cogswell (who later would be tapped to head K’Far), won the award for “Rising Star Chef of the Year.” Finally, in 2019, Zahav won the James Beard award for “Outstanding Restaurant,” the top national prize for any individual restaurant.

In an industry in which 60% of new businesses did not survive a single year, staying profitable was no mean feat for Cook and Solomonov.¹⁴ Traffic drove sales and was imperative, according to Cook. “There are really only a few numbers that matter,” he explained:

One is your food cost, which doesn’t have a tremendous amount of upside. It’s mostly downside because food prices do nothing but go up. You can’t pass on those price increases to customers because they can’t handle it that quickly. We try to keep it under 30 as a percentage of revenue. Second is labor, which is the most important number. We try to be at 35 percent — we’re usually under 40. It’s a little bit more controllable than food costs, but a lot of it is fixed; there’s just a certain number of bodies that it takes to keep the doors open. You hear a lot about rent, and in a market like New York it actually makes a difference, but rent is never the issue, in my opinion. We try to keep that at 7.5 percent. So you’re at 80 after labor, rent, and all your costs of goods sold. And then add another 10 points of insurance, utilities, professional fees. You get to single digits really fast.

Cook reiterated that the operating leverage gained from traffic and the corresponding strong sales was what allowed them to keep expenses low as percentages of revenue. “Your labor is highly fixed, so the key ratio that I look at is the relationship between sales and labor,” he concluded. “That’s where you make your money, in my opinion.” Zahav had increased revenues for nine consecutive years (See **Exhibit 6**). With sales strong, Cook and Solomonov decided to keep prices comparatively low. Of the five restaurants in the city that had the maximum “four-bell” rating from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, they prided themselves on having by far the least expensive menu, according to Cook. The fixed-price menu they had served for Restaurant Week in 2009 was \$35; ten years later, the price for that option had risen only to \$40. While some, including Yazici, had lobbied to raise prices, the group had ultimately decided to maintain a relatively low price point. This was partly due to Cook’s belief that customers tended to

adjust and purchase less food when prices were raised: “We look at checkout average a lot, and a dollar increase in the cost of a meal doesn’t flow through to a dollar increase in checkout,” he stated. “It tends to be something less than that.”

Solomonov’s friend and former boss, Feury, spoke about why CooknSolo’s ventures had become successful:

With Zahav it’s just a really great story, and I think what fuels their success is the intense personal investment and passion that Michael has in Zahav, in his brand. It’s just a magical example of someone with personal experience and a real point of view through the cooking. Without that he would never been able to build his empire or his restaurant career; everything goes back to that. The cooking is creative and unique, but it’s all coming from really deep inside of him and from his heart.

Dorothy Kalins believed that Solomonov’s drive for improvement was another differentiating factor. “Any time I’ve eaten at one of his restaurants and told him that I had such an amazing meal, his first question is always ‘What was the worst thing you had?’” she reported. “He always wants to make it better. That’s the engine that’s going inside of him.” It was a hard question for people to answer. “They don’t want to tell me that they don’t like something I’ve made, even though I force them to,” Solomonov laughed. “It’s important to have that honesty and transparency. This business demands that. It’s a very bad thing to have a disconnect between yourself and the guest.” Indeed, when the check came to Zahav customers at the end of the meal, it was accompanied by a customer feedback form (See Exhibit 7).

“I think the most important thing is that if you are not constantly improving, you’re dead,” Solomonov mused. “This is very cliché, but every single day that we are polishing silverware and the curtains go up, you have to be better than you were the day before. The restaurant industry has boomed and there are so many ways to get a meal now. Resting on laurels just doesn’t work.” Specifically, Solomonov posited that guest experience was the number one most critical element to continued success. “Nothing else works without that,” he said. “Making sure that our team is happy is a very close second. This is the crude way to put it, but if you’re not comfortable being a slave to your guests and a slave to your employees, then it’s not a good industry to be in.” With regard to the guest experience, Solomonov liked to give away as much complimentary food as possible, sometimes to the chagrin of Yazici and Cook. Sometimes these “comps” could equate to nearly ten percent of Zahav’s sales, but Solomonov believed it was worth the investment:

If I buy a meal for somebody, what does that actually cost me in terms of the raw food? \$20? You will never, ever forget that moment. It costs only \$20 to make you think, ‘I can’t believe this happened. He doesn’t even know us.’ You’ll never forget that, and more than likely you’ll probably say something really nice about us. And maybe you’ll come back in. And I want that. I want you to stop me on the street and say, ‘We had this amazing time.’ Even if we miss out on that customer’s money, it’s worth it for me.

Others attributed Solomonov’s success to other factors. “Michael has a real focus,” said Vetri. “Lots of folks have really amazing thoughts and ideas, but then they don’t have the execution.” Still others believed that Solomonov’s triumph over his personal struggles was the key to his success. “The death of his only sibling and dealing with drug addiction were tremendous challenges that he had to confront,” Davidson observed. “They brought him to the point of despair and destruction. Through his own strength, and the strength of people who love him, he overcame them. That builds extraordinary character.”

Steven Cook Partnership

"It's a mistake to think of Michael separate from Steve," Davidson said flatly. Observed Feury, "It's every chef's dream to have a partner that can facilitate what they do." Cook and Solomonov's partnership model—a chef that was the face of the brand accompanied by a behind-the-scenes business partner—was not uncommon. Many recognizable chefs had a partner in this mold, including Mario Batali, Grant Achatz, and Bobby Flay.¹⁵ Cook was known to be a particularly strong partner. He was well-rounded, the breadth of his skills extending even to his acumen as a writer; Kalins recalled being impressed by Cook when the three were working on the *Zahav* book. "His writing was humorous, soulful, superbly intelligent—it was all the good things that you look for," she remembered. "This man is an investment banker with a degree from Wharton and a degree from the French Culinary Institute, and he can write, too? That just doesn't happen."

The two were extremely close and stayed in near-constant communication. Kalins enumerated Cook and Solomonov's daily contacts: "They're texting; they're on the phone; they go out for coffee; they go for a walk." Observed Sherman, "They're best friends." Peter Rothberg, a Philadelphia-based commercial real estate agent and longtime patron of CooknSolo restaurants, had also gotten to know the pair well. "They have an overt and strong trust for each other, clearly a critical component to any successful business partnership," he declared. Solomonov took it a step further: "I love him like a brother," he said. During Solomonov's addiction crisis and early days of recovery, Cook had essentially been Solomonov's full-time chauffeur, picking Solomonov up every day to take him to and from 12-step meetings and work. "I was a total mess for the first year and I would lean on him with every personal issue that I had," Solomonov remembered. "Actually, I still do."

The two had a mix of complementary and overlapping values and skillsets. "People are always surprised to hear that Mike does have a great business mind. He understands things holistically and we make all the decisions together," Cook said. "By the same token, people always assume all I do is look at spreadsheets. The reality is we both have culinary backgrounds. I don't take any credit for the food at *Zahav*, but for the other restaurants we do everything together." Rothberg offered his outside perspective:

Mike and Steve have clearly defined roles for themselves which have enhanced the growth of their restaurant group. If you speak to people in the Philadelphia business community, Steve gets a lot of credit for some of the business-side things and Michael is the outward-facing personality who loves to mingle and kibitz with clients. They're both comfortable enough in their own skin to divide the responsibilities.

Both men acknowledged their differing levels of celebrity. "As we've grown, Mike's profile has gotten continuously higher," Cook said. "People don't know who I am. I'm fine with that; I prefer that." Solomonov was very sensitive to this issue. "We've had to figure out the dynamics of our relationship in terms of public perception," he said. "It really hurts when we're walking down the street in Philly and someone stops us, gives Steve his or her camera and asks him to take a picture of the two of us, without him." This was especially true given Cook's involvement in the food; Solomonov pronounced that Cook had "an incredible palate" and that the two were equal partners in food development, with the exception of *Zahav*. Solomonov recalled another time this dynamic had been uncomfortable:

We all agreed that Steve was going to write *Zahav*, because he had done this great sample chapter that Dorothy loved. It won two James Beard awards including Book of the Year. This was the first professional thing that Steve had ever written. We showed up to the awards ceremony and there was only one tag that says nominee—for me. Steve wasn't mentioned at all.

Both had been upset, and Solomonov offered to leave the event. Cook refused. When they won the award, Solomonov made sure that they had medals for both men before he would allow his to be placed around his neck. "We have to constantly do that for one another," Solomonov said. In the end, he attributed their successful partnership to open communication. "It's about constantly evaluating and being very honest and sensitive to one another," he opined, "that and the fact that we're capable of auditing each other and saying, 'No, man, I think that's a stupid idea, and here are the reasons I think that.' That's the way that we make decisions down to the amount of shallot in a vinaigrette." The two split everything equally, even the speaking fees that Solomonov took for some events.

Growth Strategy

Another critical area of congruence for Cook and Solomonov was the company's growth strategy. Both agreed that they did not want to open another Zahav. "We could've done a million Zahavs, but there's something really special about having a singular flagship that people travel to," Cook asserted. Over the years the two had received many offers to grow the Zahav footprint. "Some were almost too good to say no to, but we've decided to leverage the specialness of Zahav to grow under different flags," Cook said, and he elaborated on the group's strategy for growth:

When we saw the success of Federal, that really helped for us to think about the little pieces of Jewish cuisine or Israeli cuisine that could be built just around that thing. And in Israel, this exists. The best places to get hummus are the places that only make hummus. And the same thing with falafel. Same with the pita sandwich place, which is different from falafel. You could argue that Zahav kind of pulls a little bit from all of it, but what we've done in our expansion is we've broken Zahav down into its little components.

This approach, as well as the group's containment in Philadelphia, worked well for Solomonov. He was able to spend almost every night at Zahav, the only exceptions occurring when he was traveling for events or for pleasure. "He's at the bread station every single night," Rosenberg attested. "He likes that spot because he can see the front door, and when people walk in, he can wave to them." Zahav's service schedule and the close proximity of all of his restaurants allowed Solomonov to move around to different places during the day, as well. "People ask us how we keep opening new places," Solomonov said, "But it works because I can go to Abe Fisher or Goldie for lunch, have a sandwich, give my input, say hello to forty-five customers, and they'll know that there's actual oversight." These visits were also important opportunities for Solomonov to reaffirm to the chefs and cooks at all of the restaurants that he was invested in what they were doing. "Showing up and just hanging out is a very big thing," he observed.

Cook described an organic, ad-hoc approach to growth with a slant towards taking swings on new ideas, something that he and Solomonov both enjoyed. "I like developing concepts, looking at real estate, being involved in architecture and design and construction," Cook said. "I'm pretty restless, and Mike is the highest-energy guy I've ever met, so we both are." Rather than seeking to standardize, develop, and grow individual concepts, the two preferred to be opportunistic and spread out. For instance, the idea for Laser Wolf popped up when Cook and Solomonov were searching for a new commissary kitchen for Dizengoff and Goldie, having run out of space in the former commissary in the basement of one of their FedNuts locations. "We found this building and fell in love with it, but it was too expensive to just be a commissary space because it was in a good retail location," Cook said, "so we just decided we'll make both a restaurant and a commissary out of it. That's when we had the idea for the skewer place." Solomonov chimed in, "Not only that, but we realized it would be serving another purpose. We'll have 300 people on the Zahav waitlist on Saturdays, so why not have something

a little bit more accessible, a little bit more casual, that still emulates the spirit of Zahav? We can even call ahead and make reservations for people while they hop in an Uber or Lyft.”

This opportunistic philosophy was omnipresent at CooknSolo. “I can honestly say that we’ve never opened a restaurant thinking there’s a chance that there’s going to be a second location of that concept,” Cook admitted. “A lot of pressure comes when you announce an idea and assume it’s going to be a home run before you’ve proven that customers even like it. Nowadays there’s so much private equity money behind new fast-casual concepts.” Cook and Solomonov preferred to avoid the pressure that accompanied grandiose goals. While some of their business decisions came together quickly, they coupled their impromptu impulses with discipline. Rothberg recalled an occasion in which he had set up a meeting for Cook and Solomonov with the Washington, D.C.-based developer of a new boutique hotel who was looking for local restaurateurs to partner with. “They made quite an impression on the developer and I know they were being pursued aggressively,” Rothberg remembered. “The developer was willing to put up a lot of money, so it had limited risk for Mike and Steve, which is unusual in the restaurant business, but they turned it down because it didn’t align with their brand.”

Cook believed there were pros and cons with their preferred growth strategy:

You could make the case that if we were actually smart, we would take one of these concepts and only focus on that. Like, we would only focus on opening Zahavs in Las Vegas and New York and L.A. and really narrow in on every little detail that goes into making Zahav great. Or the same with Dizengoff or Goldie, but instead, we’ve chosen to indulge our passion and just say, ‘Well, we think this is a cool idea; we’re going to open this concept even though it is another thing that is completely different.’

It requires completely reinventing the wheel every time. So, if I’m being self-critical, we have sacrificed developing standards and procedures that may have helped us in other markets. We’ve sacrificed that in favor of following our hearts and doing what we thought we would have fun doing. And there’s also the people side of our business, which is built on people that get excited about being involved in something that is handmade. We’re not hiring people from Aramark—to use an example—to come in here and throw a three-ring binder of procedures on the table.

“In this business, you have to be able to be vulnerable. Exceeding expectations in the most subjective field possible for three hundred strangers every day makes for an intangible mess,” Solomonov concluded of his partnership with Cook. “You have to be able to lean heavily on a shoulder and be brutally honest with the person that you’ve collateralized everything you own with. It’s a trust fall to the most extreme degree and if you don’t have that person, I don’t think it works. None of this happens without Steve.”

Bringing Peace Through Food

Solomonov was not the first star chef to peddle Israeli cuisine, but he was the first American. Yotam Ottolenghi, roughly ten years older than Solomonov, was born and raised in Jerusalem before moving to London and becoming a well-known chef, where he co-owned a handful of restaurants and released several best-selling cookbooks, the first of which was published in 2008. “So, there was a bit of precedent,” Kalins pointed out, “but not in this country. When we went to sell the book, *Zahav*, publishers thought Michael could be the American Ottolenghi.” Indeed, said Zimmern, “The timing was right. They were the first mouse to the cheese on the fine-dining Israeli food experience in America.”

Solomonov had a strong desire to connect with his roots and to expose others to Israeli culture through food. “Americans inhale other cultures primarily through their mouths,” Zimmern observed wryly. This was a tricky endeavor, as many struggled to conceptualize “Israeli cuisine” in the first place. “What even is Israeli food?” Yazici mused. “It’s a country that’s just 70 years old that doesn’t really have its own cuisine. It’s all immigrants getting together and bringing their own food cultures to that country. People might tell you that Israeli food is falafel or shawarma, but those have been foods for Arabs for over one thousand years.” Zimmern also pointed out that distinguishing by country could be a self-defeating exercise: “These cultures and their food come from a time before there were artificial borders put on the ground by colonial powers. The differences lie more in tribal and religious roots rather than the borders of countries,” he explained. To him, Zahav represented “the food of the Levant in general, and food with a story.” For example, Solomonov had a powerful urge to share *borekas*, pastries made with sourdough and often filled with potato or cheese, which starred on the menu at the recently opened K’Far Café:

My paternal grandmother is from Bulgaria. Her family had come there from Spain after the Inquisition, bringing the dough they used for *borekas* with them. They took Russian last names because the Russians helped arm them when they rebelled against the Ottomans, so my last name changed from Bakhar to Solomonov. They survived the Holocaust because the king of Bulgaria protected them. Afterwards, they all moved to Israel and brought the dough for *borekas* with them. Now they’re everywhere in Israel.

The *borekas* I grew up with from my grandmother were a very important thing for me. I loved her *borekas*, and that was her love language with me especially because we didn’t actually have a mutual spoken language. I want people to eat that here, and to understand it when they’re in our restaurants. That’s also why we write cookbooks – those things are a pain in the ass and do not make much money. I want people to flip through and have a magical and special way to learn about Israel.

“To really get it, you have to explain it, and Mike knows about history like no one I’ve ever known,” Rosenberg asserted. “He is both a teacher and a chef. He wants you to walk away with either answers or more questions. He makes people listen and learn about different cultures while they’re bumping elbows with each other and ripping pita.” Yet there was a controversial aspect to the relationships between Israeli cuisine, the state of Israel, and the nation’s most oppressed cultural group. “Many Palestinians believe that Israeli cuisine is the expropriation of their identity and tantamount to cultural genocide,” Davidson contended. One former Palestinian critic was a Jerusalem-born cookbook writer, Reem Kassis, who recalled, “The first time I ate at Zahav, there was *freekeh* on the menu.^a I remember feeling frustrated that the best Palestinian dish I ate in the U.S. was in an Israeli restaurant.”¹⁶ But Kassis soon came to realize that she and Solomonov had more in common than they had apart. The two struck up a close friendship and collaborated on several occasions, such as cooking a dinner together for the Parents Circle Families Forum of bereaved Palestinians and Israelis in February 2019. “We started an important, even if uncomfortable, conversation about how things need to change,” Kassis said. “There were tears but there was also a lot of love.”¹⁷

Many believed that Solomonov had made a tangible impact. “Mike has helped spark Israeli cuisine in America. Israeli restaurants are exploding in number,” Sherman attested. Vetri proclaimed, “He just lives Israel. He breathes it. It’s everything to him. And that shines through in the food.” In 2017, Solomonov was named Israel’s official culinary ambassador.

^a Freekeh is a cereal food made from unripened wheat that has been roasted and crushed into small pieces.

Philadelphia

Over the years, Solomonov had become passionate about Philadelphia and was an ardent defender of some of the city's most vulnerable populations. Along with Davidson, he served as a board member for Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE), which focused on criminal justice issues of mass incarceration, re-entry to civil society, and record expungement. Much of PLSE's work related to helping those suffering under the burdens of illegal drug charges, a cause that resonated with Solomonov given his own history.

Solomonov was also generous in his efforts to aid Philadelphia's housing- and food-insecure populations. As FedNuts grew, CooknSolo became one of the largest purveyors of chicken in the city, and Solomonov began using the plethora of spare chicken parts to make soup, which he donated to Broad Street Ministry, an organization which, among providing other services, practiced "radical hospitality" by serving quality meals in dignified settings to those in need. Eventually, Solomonov realized he could make a greater impact by giving money directly, so in 2017 he opened a charitable restaurant, The Rooster, which featured chicken soups and donated 100% of its profits to Broad Street Ministry. The project had been funded by public donations on Kickstarter.com amounting to roughly \$200,000.

Unfortunately, the Rooster failed to become financially viable, and Cook and Solomonov were forced to shutter it in 2019. Despite this, said Davidson, "People here know that Michael is one of the most passionate advocates of the city of Philadelphia. And they love him for it." To some, Solomonov's rise epitomized the city's recent cultural and economic resurgence. "It's only recently that Philadelphia has emerged as a world-class restaurant venue," Davidson observed. "We've been dominating the James Beard awards for a few years now. Michael is young, active, and visible, and he participates in virtually all of the events that attract young people in a city that once had the lowest retention rate of college graduates and has now risen to the highest on that list."

Opening Up about Addiction

Early on, Rosenberg had told Solomonov that she would only work as his publicist if he came clean publicly about his history with addiction. "He had to think about it, because obviously you are afraid everyone will judge you and leave your restaurants and you'll never have work again," she laughed, "but as a former reporter, I had to make sure that everyone knew the truth and we didn't gloss over something that I felt like people could relate to — that triumph over adversity." In 2014, Frank Bruni of the *New York Times* wrote an article entitled "Grief, Smoke, and Salvation" that detailed Solomonov's downward spiral after his brother's killing. "People really responded," Rosenberg said. "It was the first time that mental health and drug addiction had really been talked about in this industry. Everyone embraced him, and it seemed to start a trend of being more open about these issues. Now, no one really asks him about it anymore. It's no longer relevant because of all the things he's accomplished since that article."

Zimmern, a fellow chef and recovered addict, believed that Solomonov's triumph over addiction was a critical part of his story:

I had no doubt in my mind, when Michael sobered up, that he would become one of the most successful people, let alone culinarians, that I knew. How you run your life really does affect your leadership skills. It affects how you run your business. It affects how you operate every area of your life as a father, as a husband, as a workplace leader, as a workplace co-worker. I think there's a direct correlation there. I think it's what makes him a very special person and makes his work environment a very special one.

Solomonov asserted that being honest about his past had been therapeutic, and he knew that telling his story helped others, as well. Said Zimmern:

His story inspires people—I think it does quantifiably. It can possibly change lives and transform other people's ideas. For people like Michael and me, living transparently everywhere makes life easier, and when you're doing that, you wind up not only being a more empathic human being, but you end up being a beacon for others who are in trouble with anything in their life. Even today, I can't open up my laptop without seeing a letter or a tweet from a mother who says that their child watched my show, saw me talking about sobriety, and was able to talk to their family about what they're struggling with simply because they saw someone in the public eye solve these problems. I know Michael gets that as well, and it's really a magical thing. Being public about our recovery allows us to touch and help a lot more people.

In 2019, Solomonov determined to establish a new wellness program for CooknSolo employees, especially geared towards those without insurance. Participants would have three personal therapy sessions fully covered as well as gain access to physical fitness and yoga classes. The initiative would cost tens of thousands from Cook's and Solomonov's pockets. "Restaurants are dealing with such big problems," Solomonov reflected. "Addiction, gender inequality, immigration—these are at the forefront of what we do every single day. They are not new concepts for us. We want to try to change the narrative of what it means to be in hospitality. We need to take a step in the right direction."

Challenges and Decisions—2020 and Beyond

The growth of CooknSolo brought challenges on several dimensions. One was finding quality staff. "He and I, and every chef in America, is faced with the same challenge of finding employees," Feury opined. "As an industry, we are constantly understaffed. You're always trying to stick your finger in another hole in the dike. It's madness." When Feury and Solomonov commiserated with one another on staffing challenges, they came to the same conclusion: Invest in the employees they already had. "Mike has a very infectious, fun attitude where he demands a lot from his employees, but he also makes it really fun and inspiring for them," Feury said. Yet, the more restaurants CooknSolo opened, the more formidable this challenge became. Vetri wondered whether continued growth was worth the trouble. "More restaurants doesn't necessarily mean more revenue, more notoriety, more happiness, or better balance in life. Sometimes it just means more headaches." Solomonov acknowledged, "When you scale up, it becomes harder to maintain culture. We have over 200 employees at this point."

Personal balance was also a challenge, especially for Solomonov. He was at his happiest in the kitchen at Zahav, and every additional restaurant stretched him thinner. One way he dealt with stress was an active exercise regimen that included regular surfing and boxing. He also had two sons, aged eight and five, to whom he was determined to be a heavily present father. Having separated from Mary in 2016, this required additional compromises and complications. He often brought his sons with him on trips for work and pleasure, from tours of Israel to events in all corners of the U.S. Under the terms of his custody agreement, Solomonov's children lived with him for half of each week. He realized that he could gain five or six extra hours a week at Zahav, without taking away from his time as a father, by hiring a babysitter to come after his sons had gone to sleep at night so he could return to the restaurant. "It takes some creative thinking and some sacrifice, because the last thing I want to do at night after being with my kids is to put my shoes on and go back into work," he reflected. "I definitely don't sleep a lot, and I have to be creative in the way that I parent and in the way that I deal with my relationships on the team."

Despite the difficulties, halting expansion altogether was barely a consideration. The reasons for this were twofold. First, said Cook, “We saw early on that if we didn’t grow, we were going to be developing these great people and they were just going to leave because there would be no opportunity for them to move up.” Indeed, nearly all of the managers and chefs tapped to head new locations and concepts were internally promoted, according to Yazici and Solomonov. Second was the ever-present need to stay relevant. “For us, it’s always reinvention and reevaluation,” Solomonov mused. “Whenever there’s an opportunity for us to be complacent, we never take it.” While part of this was pragmatic and strategic, there was also a psychological restlessness preventing Solomonov and Cook from being content with what they had. “I envy people that have one restaurant and just go and try to make it a little bit better every day,” Cook admitted. “But that’s not me.” Solomonov echoed this sentiment:

Steve and I both have the same romantic idea that we would own one restaurant that would win some awards and that would be the restaurant that would support us and feed our kids. It’s just not the case. I just don’t think we have whatever that gene is to make you appreciative only of the things that you have in front of you.

If Steve was the general manger and I was the chef of this restaurant and we decided to only do Zahav, we would probably have a whole lot more money. But it’s difficult for the two of us to say, ‘Let’s limit things. Let’s not do another book. Let’s not open another restaurant.’ I’m in love with the idea of people cracking open *borekas* and eating *borekas* out of a greasy brown paper bag. I have to make it happen.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

All plans of expansion, however, were forced to come to a halt in early 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. In order to protect people from the rampant spread of the disease, restaurants throughout the United States, including Philadelphia, started shutting their doors to customers in March at the direction of local and state governments. The length of the shutdown would be indefinite and contingent upon the rate of disease transmission. Solomonov described his and Cook’s initial actions after the shutdown occurred:

Sixteen restaurants coming to a complete stop is something you never plan for. We had 460 employees the day after we had to close every one of our businesses, and we had to make some very difficult decisions. The challenge was to not bankrupt our restaurants and to use grants and PPP [the Paycheck Protection Program] and leverage unemployment for our hourly employees while keeping our salaried managers’ health insurance valid. We also shifted to doing takeout.

In addition to caring for their employees as best as they could, Solomonov and Cook continued to engage in philanthropic work throughout the city. Their business continued to provide meals for 400-500 homeless people per week through the Broad Street Ministry. They also provided meals for 150 healthcare workers weekly. In mid-June, they donated their net proceeds to PLSE. As Solomonov explained:

We’re trying to stay relevant not only in the eyes of our guests and the media, but also in our mission to take care of people. At the end of the day, the thing we are all in control over is our attitude, and that’s basically it. Every single day you have to reinvent what it is you care about, what your commitment is to our businesses, our restaurants, our banks, our investors, our city, all of our employees and our overall mission.

On a personal level, Solomonov reflected on the challenges and “silver linings” of the pandemic. For example, he struggled with not being able to cook for the patrons of his restaurants and missed the

opportunities for interpersonal interaction. “Having to reevaluate the business every single morning while not being able to cook and serve is difficult,” Solomonov said, “We’re doing everything by Zoom, but I like to serve, I like to clear tables, I like to greet people, I like to make food and give it to people, and I can’t really do any of that, except for my kids.” Solomonov acknowledged, however, that the extra time he was afforded with his sons was “a gift”. He also acknowledged how the pandemic positively affected his relationship with Cook: “I have reaffirmed my relationship with Steve. We’re going through hell, the hardest thing we’ve ever had to go through. To rely on him as a business partner and friend through it all has been incredible.”

Reopening and Considerations for the Future

Solomonov considered all the ways in which the pandemic could alter the future outlook for not only his business, but the entire restaurant industry:

I think we’ll see a lot of independent restaurants that are barely solvent, like so many restaurants, crashing. There’s still really no guidance from a municipal, state government or federal level. Nobody knows the answer. Customers are going to be pretty apprehensive, habits are going to change, and we may have some pretty tough economic times ahead of us. I think people are going to be more selective about how they eat and how they choose to spend their money. People have also seen what it’s like to spend quality time with their family and cook. In terms of expense accounts, what will business dinners even look like? I think there’s going to be a lot of change and upheaval. I’m an optimist, and I think we’re going to be okay—I think everyone’s going to be okay—but this will expose greater vulnerabilities than we’ve ever considered before.

But before tackling the long-term implications of the pandemic and planning as much as possible to be prepared for an uncertain future, Solomonov and Cook had to start with plans to reopen Zahav on the upcoming Fourth of July weekend. Solomonov explained:

Zahav is going to start with outdoor seating. We’ll probably do three seatings of twenty people on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. In a way, it’s cool because we’ll be able to provide a service experience we’ve never been able to provide before as a very busy restaurant. This might be the best version of Zahav. It won’t be permanent, but I can’t wait to try it. Philadelphia is also opening up for indoor seating that weekend, but we’re not doing that. I don’t trust it. What does fifty percent capacity restriction even mean? We’d have a hundred people waiting outside. As business owners, are we going to tell them to not come in or push them aside? We’ll probably have to open in some restricted capacity eventually, but I don’t trust it right now.

How do Solomonov and Cook proceed from here? How should they prepare for the short-term and the long-term when there remained so much concern about the spread of COVID-19 and so much uncertainty in regard to customers’ behaviors, government restrictions and the state of the economy? Solomonov and Cook built a business poised to expand, but now they had to put their plans for expansion on hold. How can they stay relevant and keep the dream of expansion alive so they are ready if the opportunity eventually comes? How do they manage through this crisis and come out on the other side unscathed, if not stronger?

Exhibit 1 Image of Zahav's Interior



Source: Company documents.

421-016

Michael Solomonov: Jerusalem in a Bowl

Exhibit 2 Image of Zahav's Menu

	
Salatim & Hummus in the beginning...	
Salatim six daily vegetable salads	16/28
Hummus served with laffa baked in our wood-burning oven choose one:	9/13
Tehina sesame, garlic, lemon, olive oil, cumin, green tehina	
Daily topping tehina hummus with chef's selection of topping	
Turkish with butter and garlic, served warm	
Mezze small plates	10
Fried cauliflower labneh, garlic, mint, aleppo	
Salt roasted sweet potato smoked onion, harif, kishk	
Grilled Persimmons feta, crispy lentils, urfa	
Roasted carrots labneh, pine nuts, rose petal	
Tunisian tuna tartare castelvetrano olive, preserved lemon, harissa	
Haloumi in brik apple, savory, huckleberry	
Kibbe naya raw lamb, bulgur, pea falafel, tomato, amba	
Grilled duck hearts sweet potato, apple schug	
Al Ha'esh grilled over coals Served with rice pilav	14
veal kebab cinnamon, carrot, horseradish	
Grilled acorn squash celery root, tehina, pickled celery, pepita	
Chicken shishlik amba, tehina, cabbage	
Hanger steak ajvar, harissa	
Eggplant walnut, tomato, tehina	
Branzino cucumber, tzatziki, asian pear	
* consuming raw or undercooked meat, poultry, seafood or eggs may increase your risk of foodborne illness	
Tayim taste of zahav	
salatim & hummus with laffa	
two mezze	
one al ha'esh	
dessert	
\$48 per person for the entire party	
Wine Pairings	
three 3 oz. pours 1.5 oz dessert pour	
jean cavaille jacquere "apremont", Saviole, 2016	
Kavaklidere Çalkarasi rosé aegean, 2017	
Thalvin syrah "syrocco", zenata, 2015	
Covenant late harvest chardonnay "zahav" sonoma county, 2016	
\$36 per person	

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 3 Image of Select Food Items from Zahav

Pictured: Iraqi *Laffa* Flatbread, Hummus, and Six Salatim.



Source: Company documents (photo credit Alexandra Hawkins).

Exhibit 4 Timeline of CooknSolo Restaurant Openings and Closings

May 2008: Zahav opens

October 2011: Federal Donuts (2nd Street) opens

October 2012: Federal Donuts (Center City) opens

March 2014: Federal Donuts (West Philly) opens

June 2014: Federal Donuts (North Philly) opens

August 2014: Dizengoff, Center City, opens

September 2014: Abe Fisher opens

May 2014: Dizengoff NYC in Chelsea Market opens

January 2017: The Rooster (then named Rooster Soup Co.) opens

April 2017: Goldie Falafel opens

June 2017: Dizengoff and Federal Donuts located in Miami open

November 2017: Goldie and Federal Donuts open at Whole Foods Market, Fairmount

March 2018: Goldie at Franklin's Table Food Hall at the University of Pennsylvania opens

March 2018: Dizengoff and Federal Donuts located in Miami close

August 2018: Dizengoff NYC closes

October 2018: Federal Donuts (South Street) opens

June 2019: The Rooster closes

July 2019: K'Far bakery and café opens

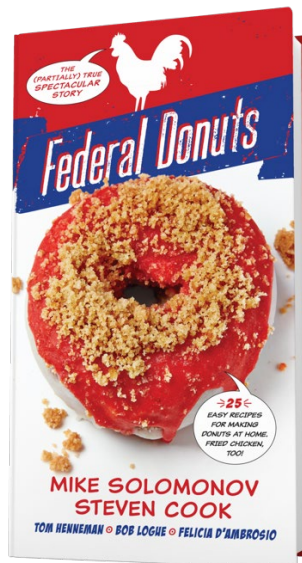
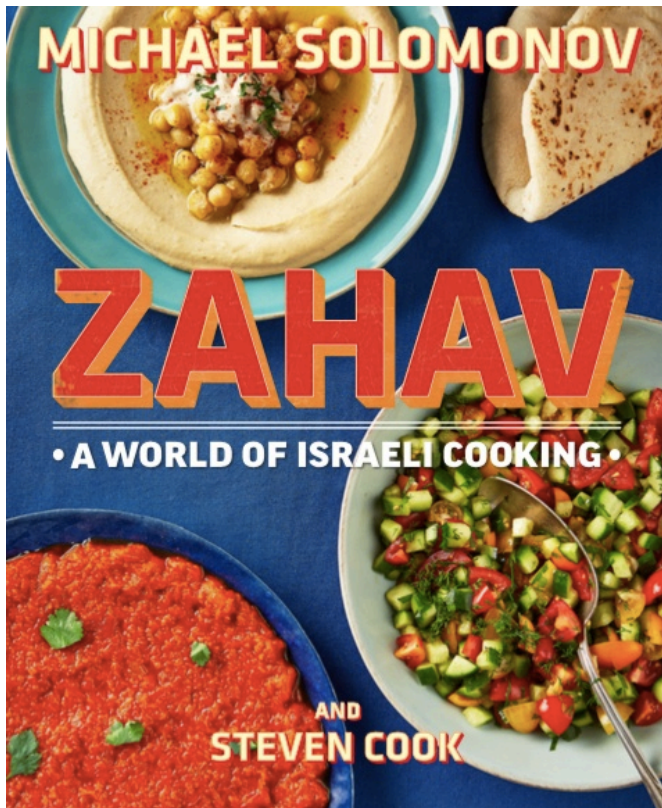
November 2019: Merkaz opens

December 2019: Dizengoff at Franklin's Table Food Hall at the University of Pennsylvania opens

February 2020: Laser Wolf opens

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 5 Images of Cookbooks by Michael Solomonov and Steve Cook



Source: Company documents.

421-016

Michael Solomonov: Jerusalem in a Bowl

Exhibit 6 Zahav Restaurant Normalized Profit & Loss Statement, 2009-2017

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Income									
Misc. Sales	100.0%	259.7%	492.3%	49.4%	682.9%	989.4%	1203.8%	2513.7%	2537.3%
Bar Sales	100.0%	105.3%	124.5%	143.1%	187.0%	189.9%	198.3%	245.8%	272.7%
Food Sales	100.0%	102.1%	115.9%	138.2%	174.0%	185.0%	203.6%	244.3%	244.2%
Total Income	100.0%	103.1%	118.6%	139.6%	178.1%	186.8%	202.4%	245.8%	253.8%
Cost of Goods Sold									
Food Purchases	26.3%	26.7%	29.5%	30.0%	30.0%	30.3%	30.5%	29.4%	29.6%
Bar Purchases	31.8%	30.6%	29.5%	33.0%	30.1%	28.4%	28.8%	28.8%	28.2%
Merchant Account Fees	2.7%	2.9%	2.9%	2.7%	2.8%	2.8%	2.9%	3.0%	3.1%
Restaurant Supplies	1.8%	2.3%	2.1%	2.2%	2.6%	2.4%	2.7%	2.2%	1.9%
Total Cost of Goods Sold	32.4%	33.1%	34.4%	35.8%	35.3%	34.9%	35.5%	34.3%	34.1%
Gross Profit	67.6%	66.9%	65.6%	64.2%	64.7%	65.1%	64.5%	65.7%	65.9%
Expenses									
Advertising and Promotion	1.6%	2.1%	2.0%	2.0%	1.6%	1.5%	1.6%	1.7%	1.2%
Bank Service Charges	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Business Licenses and Permits	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
Charitable Contributions	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%	0.3%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%
Dues and Subscriptions	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%
Insurance Expense	2.4%	2.5%	2.5%	2.0%	2.3%	2.6%	2.3%	2.2%	3.1%
Linen Expense	0.8%	1.0%	0.9%	1.0%	0.9%	0.8%	1.0%	1.1%	1.3%
Meals and Entertainment	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%
Miscellaneous Expense	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Office Supplies	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.3%	0.2%	0.3%	0.2%
Payroll Expenses	36.2%	36.6%	35.4%	34.6%	31.7%	34.1%	35.5%	33.5%	40.1%
Postage and Delivery	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Printing and Reproduction	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Professional Fees	0.2%	0.3%	0.6%	1.1%	0.5%	0.4%	0.5%	0.2%	2.8%
Rent Expense	3.5%	3.2%	3.1%	3.0%	3.3%	3.6%	3.0%	2.6%	2.5%
Repairs and Maintenance	0.6%	1.3%	0.9%	0.8%	1.0%	0.7%	0.8%	0.9%	0.8%
Telephone and Internet	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Travel Expense	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.6%
Utilities	1.6%	1.7%	1.6%	1.6%	1.3%	1.3%	1.3%	1.2%	2.0%
Pest Control	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
Auto Expense	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%
Equipment Rental	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%
Trash Removal	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total Expenses	48.0%	50.6%	48.7%	47.9%	44.5%	46.8%	47.8%	45.1%	55.9%
EBITDA	19.5%	16.4%	16.9%	16.2%	20.2%	18.3%	16.6%	20.6%	10.0%

Source: Company documents.

Note: In 2017, CooknSolo settled a class-action wage lawsuit, classified under "Payroll Expenses."

Exhibit 7 Image of Zahav's Customer Feedback Form

THANK YOU FOR DINING WITH US.
PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT TO HELP US
SERVE YOU BETTER.

ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 5, WITH 1 BEING
"POOR" AND 5 BEING "OUTSTANDING",
HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE FOLLOWING?

FOOD	1	2	3	4	5
BEVERAGES	1	2	3	4	5
YOUR SERVER	1	2	3	4	5
OTHER SERVICE STAFF	1	2	3	4	5
OVERALL EXPERIENCE	1	2	3	4	5

IS THIS YOUR FIRST VISIT TO ZAHAV? Y N

IF NOT, WHEN WAS YOUR LAST VISIT?

WILL YOU JOIN US AGAIN? Y N

HOW COULD WE HAVE IMPROVED YOUR
DINING EXPERIENCE?

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

THANK YOU FOR YOUR FEEDBACK. PLEASE
FILL OUT THE INFORMATION BELOW TO BE
ENTERED TO WIN A \$50 GIFT CERTIFICATE.

NAME _____

EMAIL _____

BIRTHDAY _____

ANNIVERSARY _____

Source: Company documents.

Endnotes

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¹³ "How Not to Start a Donut Shop (But Maybe Do)," Bonappetit.com, September 19, 2017, <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/federal-donuts-opening-story>, accessed July 2019.

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¹⁵ Joy Manning. "Steve Cook Is Not a Secret," Eater.com, March 9, 2016, <https://www.eater.com/2016/3/9/11135974/restaurant-partners-steve-cook-michael-solomonov-zahav>, accessed July 2019.

¹⁶ Jordana Rothman, "Common Threads: Food & Wine Goes Home for the Holidays With Two Chefs: One Palestinian, the Other Israeli," Foodandwine.com, November 19, 2018, <https://www.foodandwine.com/holidays-events/michael-solomonov-reem-kassis-holiday-dinner>, accessed July 2019.

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