

# Sourdough: A Love Story.



Zak + Batsheva – The day they announced their engagement.

Several years ago I worked at a Jewish summer camp. I'm gonna be real honest and let you know that this wasn't an idyllic summer. I was back in Asheville, NC after spending a magical year in Jerusalem falling in love with my Judaism, with Israel, with food and most importantly, my now husband. But reality was setting in and I needed some cash money in a big way so while I was still in Israel, I started applying to several Jewish camps as a program director as I had spent roughly 8 years, up to that point, in Jewish programming. It was the obvious choice. I was almost hired by a Jewish camp in the Carolina mountains but they had a real issue with my shabbat-observance (don't even get me started). So, I took another offer. I actually went to this camp as a teenager for one summer. I remember having an amazing time. But, as an adult, it just wasn't my bag. When I arrived, I was instantly homesick. I missed my man, my Israel people and my environment back in Jerusalem. Several days of misery went by and then one

day I decided to visit the camp's edible garden. I don't even really remember the first time I spoke with Zak, but we kind of clicked. I was so desperate for someone more my speed so when I met this Pharmaceutical school drop out cum hippie baker/gardener/cheese maker/wanderer, well, let's just say he didn't have a choice. We were gonna be friends. I was on the cusp of my own food revolution at the time (reading up on the realities of true organics, whole foods, etc.) and here was this guy LIVING a food revolution. On shabbat, I read in the garden he tended for the camp. On our nights, off he introduced me to "Freeganism", which is basically just permanently borrowing people's leftovers/trash. On one particular night off, we went to a Mexican restaurant and 'Freegan-ed" the untouched margaritas left behind by some underage counselors who started running the minute they saw us coming. He also took me dumpster diving in the name of "Freeganism" and I'm pretty sure I still have the cookbook he taught my campers how to make, which introduced them to composting (did you know that poop AND humans are compostable!?). I owe so much to Zak for that summer. I'm still not sure he realizes how much he saved me that summer.



First they came for our carbs, and nobody said anything. Then they came for our gluten, and

nobody said anything. Now they want our grains  
and we say, NO!



The team behind “Zak the Baker”. They do  
smile, a lot, I promise.

Flash forward 2 and a half years and I find out via Facebook that after much travel, Zak is back in Miami, where my husband and I are now living. He came over for a shabbat meal, we caught up and then just as quick as he entered my life for the second time, he was gone. This time, Zak decided to follow his heart to (get ready for this . . . seriously) Tuscany where he opened his own bakery. I mean, can you picture it? When I try to envision it I’m seeing sunflowers, flour clouds every where and hunky dudes with sweat dripping . . . oh, ok, sorry, I’m getting myself under control. Anyway, long story short, he had a bakery in Tuscany, met a girl, they ran away to a goat cheese farm in France, where she promptly realized that farm life is hard and high-tailed it back to the States. Zak then made his way back home to Miami, where a kind and supportive family friend let him set up his own bakery in his garage. Soon it wasn’t just a bakery Zak was housing in his incredibly supportive friend’s garage but also 5 chickens, 4 ducklings, 4 baby goats and apprentices from around the globe (mainly

Israel). When it was clear that the goats were taking over, Zak found shelter with the Earth n' Us Farm in the Little Haiti neighborhood of Miami (find out more about this amazing farm here) and began renting out a space for baking bread in Hialeah. He currently sells every Sunday at the Pinecrest Farmer's Market. He also sells sandwiches and bread at the University of Miami and, most importantly to his ever-growing business, Zak the Baker bread can be enjoyed at celebrity-chef Michelle Bernstein's namesake restaurant, Michy's (as well as other grocers in the area, like Lorenzo's. Check out the blog for a complete list of retailers and restaurants selling Zak's bread).

So, grab a glass of wine and some crusty bread with some soft cheese and tuck in for a very romantic story of love, life, travel and bread.



Zak in action

**Jewhungry:** So how did your sourdough revolution begin?

**Zak:** For 10 years, this is the way my life looked like: I would teach at the camp for 2 months, make enough money and then go back on the road and travel for 10 months. What I would do is I would take everything I learned that year on the road and integrate it into the lesson plans for the camp. I had always done a workshop on bread at the camp. We went through the whole process and the theory of it. It wasn't ever my dream to be a baker and open my own baker. It's a hard life—you wake up so early, it's a hard job. What happened

though was that I came back from traveling and asked myself, "What am I going to do with my life"? I came back to Miami and thought, well, I know how to make bread. I know how to make cheese and work a farm. Miami wasn't my dream spot to open a bakery, but thank Gd, it turned out to be perfect.

**Jewhungry:** How did you meet Batsheva

**Zak:** I met Batsheva while I was apprenticing with a cheese maker in Israel on a farm in the North about 3 or 4 years ago. I was working with this really mythical cheese maker who had 200 goats that he would milk every night. I had taken some time off to travel with my friend, Phil, who was a musician. We went to a coffee shop in Jerusalem. Our waitress just happened to be Batsheva's sister. We were playing music outside, drinking coffee and didn't really communicate much with her; just said hi and that was it. I didn't know her at all. Then the next day we were going back up North and waiting in the bus station, hanging out, playing music and drinking coffee and there she was again, Ori, but this time she was with her sister, Batsheva. We invited them over to come and hang out with us at our table. Turns out we had forgotten to pay for our coffee the day before so being the nice boys that we are, we paid for it. And of course, as it works in Israel, one thing led to another and they invited us to their family's house for Sukkot. They live in this very special village in the Gush. The family is beautiful and big and very warm. Phil and I at one point were sitting at this big table under the sukkah and, out comes one beautiful, ethereal sister after that other to sit with us. It was a dream! Phil and I were just sitting there taking it all in. It was a wonderful night and we got along and ate and then Phil and I made our way back up North and life moved on. Then, one day, I received a call from Batsheva's sister, Chedva, who called me up because she and Batsheva wanted to learn how to bake bread with a dream of one day opening their own bakery in Israel. However, no bakery in Israel would let them in as apprentices because they

are women. The bakeries assumed that as women, Batsheva and Chedva wouldn't be able to do the work. In addition, they don't want girls working in the kitchen. So in that moment, when Chedva called, I just thought of course. Come on! And then two weeks later they had a ticket and were on their way. Eventually, I realized, "Wait, let me tell you, this is really hard work. I can't pay you. We work insane hours. It's a work exchange, you work and I give you room and board". And then I told them I have a farm in Miami and you'll live outdoors in a tent. At that point, the girls were imagining rolling hills and building a tent under a chestnut tree and living amongst the greenery. But in reality, it was my old tent in my yard in Little Haiti. Eventually, after about a week of living in the tent, I kept getting, "Zak, mazel cold? Mazer raining? (*Zak, what is this cold? What is this rain?*)" So I gave up my bedroom indoors and I slept out in the tent by the goats for several weeks until a room opened up in the house. Eventually, Chedva wanted to leave but Batsheva wanted to stay and one month turned into 2 and then 3 and then 4 and then all of a sudden, Batsheva and I realize we are in love. We revealed our love for one another on a Friday and by the next day, on Shabbat, we decided that this is it and we want to get married. Now, we are partners. We are in love. We will move forward together as a unit.



Two bakers in love





Siona and I flanked by food greatness

**Jewhungry:** Is the gluten-free/grain-free trend affecting your business?

**Zak:** Those trends and those fashions don't concern me at all. I'm being very nice about my feelings, please understand. I don't want to concern myself with marketing and other things that aren't pure. A lot of these things are being pushed or promoted by marketing/business. Ultimately, I'm not concerned with any of it. At the end of the day, we need bread. We need eggs, we need cheese, we need meat. These are the basics that we need. All these vegan/gluten-free diet phases, they pass and what is always there and what will always be there in the end are the basics. Therefore, I am not concerned with the fashions of the health or the food industry. That's my polite answer. If you want to eat something gluten-free, go eat a tortilla or a rice cracker or a bowl of rice. Trying to make bread gluten-free is like trying to make turkey meat-free.

I'll wait for it to pass and wait for folks to get interested in the next food/health craze and then I'll be disinterested in that as well. So to sum it up in one word: Disinterested.

**Jewhungry:** What is your most favorite or first food memory?

**Batsheva:** For me, it's my mom's chicken soup. My mom used to make a big pot of chicken soup every shabbat. There was nothing special about it. It was pretty plain but it had big onions and all of us used to fight over the onions. She used to make a lot of it and in fact, she had a gemach for chicken soup and so in the village, if someone wasn't feeling well they would call up and she would bring them soup.

**Zak:** When we visited my grandmother in Del Ray, we used to always have an everything bagel toasted well with chopped liver, egg salad, kugel, rugelach, cookies, white fish spread, mayonnaise, a platter of smoked salmon with onions, tomatoes and capers. Of course there would be an assortment of pickles. Oy, I can taste it right now. Ashkenaz food; I'm telling you! (Please note that at this point in the interview, Batsheva is making vomit noises because the idea of the aforementioned Del Ray Bubbe/Ashkenazi spread sounds disgusting to her).

**Jewhungry:** So what are the plans for the bakery?

**Zak:** We are working on opening the bakery in Wynwood. It's mainly going to be a wholesale production bakery but with a retail component where folks can see the whole process from start to finish and also purchase delicious food. ***We want to make the entire bakery kosher so we need help with that. If anybody knows how to get started, how to do it all? A rabbi who can help guide us through the process? All of our products are kosher and we don't use meat at all. All of our sandwiches will be dairy/vegetarian. It just makes sense for where we want to go but we need help.***



Zak's got an awesome beard AND accessories so clearly, Siona's a fan.

**Jewhungry:** Why do you want to go kosher?

**Zak:** Basically, I was trying to impress Batsheva, so I thought, "if I make the bakery kosher, she'd be really impressed with me" and it worked! Just kidding. The reason is that it feels like the right thing to do. We're not far away from it. We don't work on Saturday regardless. All of our ingredients are kosher. And once upon a time, I heard it was a mitzvah to make kosher bread. I want to make something that is delicious and pure and that everyone could feel comfortable

eating but also just happens to be kosher. I don't want people to eat it because it's organic or eat it because it's kosher. Miami has room for what we do, you know? Ultimately, it's the right thing for Batsheva and I to do.