



Power Source

As a homage to heritage seeds, an artist traces the roots of regional fare.

Words by Avigail Shaul Photos by Dan Perez

To uncover the roots beneath artist Orna Tamir-Schestowitz's work, you must first unearth her family tree. Tamir-Schestowitz is a descendant of Arthur Ruppin, an avid Zionist who worked to acquire land for the Jewish people and develop agriculture in the land of Israel at the beginning of the twentieth century. "I grew up on the love of the land, in the most physical sense of the word. Traveling on Shabbat mornings to the Ben Shemen Forest to pick mushrooms for soup to be eaten at noon and with the understanding that this land we live on gives us confidence, fruit, and a place to call home. To fuse the dual ideas of land and crops, of then and now, the main material used in all the bowls is local soil and sand, hence the unique rough

appearance that characterizes them, and some of us," Tamir-Schestowitz explains.

Let's talk about the shape, the structure of the bowls, how it was born.

When I created them, I felt that the curve was a kind of womb, a structure that invites ideas, memories, and sensations to be placed inside it. So I set out on a journey of self-exploration, architecture, details and nature. What fascinates me the most are shadows. I am interested in the way in which shadows form on the ground, on water and on buildings. Ultimately the photographs of fruit and vegetables have settled well, aesthetically, ideologically and emotionally.

The whole series includes photographs of fruits of the trees and the earth. Is this a kind of documentary project?

There is a documentary aspect to this, but we don't pretend to encompass all of the local produce, the fruits of the trees and the land. Naturally Israeli elements have been incorporated into the values I believe in. But what stands behind every vegetable, spice or fruit that has been placed on the bowls is that they have all sprouted from heritage seeds. A field I was introduced to during the course of my work, my trips to the Volcani Institute, tours of organic nurseries, ecological gardens, long days spent in the Galilean orchard of my good friend Chef Erez Komarovsky and our agricultural and cultural heritage spanning generations.

In recent years there has been growing awareness of the preservation of heritage seeds.

True, this is an international trend that stems from a desire to save extinct species and preserve culture. Heritage seeds are actually pure seeds that preserve the original genetic traits, created by natural pollination of wind or bees. The vegetation in the "Taste of the Past" - garden plants, spices and vegetables were conceived during the agricultural history and adapted over the years to the conditions of the unique local geography. They are more robust, durable and serve as the world's food reserve.



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In recent years, farmers have understood that genetic modification has great significance. Species that grow in diverse and genetically modified conditions develop resistance to extreme weather and invasive insects. Without sounding too dramatic, heritage seeds are important for the future of humanity. Heritage seeds also preserve the taste of the past.

At the same time, the modern world must provide a solution to accommodate its population, which is close to eight billion. How can we feed them all? We'll have to be more industrious to ensure a longer shelf life.

Modern agriculture that adapts itself to commercial production has caused the extinction of many species. Seventy five percent of the agricultural genetic diversity has become extinct in the 20th-century. If we plant only soy and corn every year, we will kill the land and its agriculture. Since the 1970's the United Nations has established biosphere reserves for the preservation of agricultural environments.

There are more than 1,000 seed banks around the world, the largest being the Seed Savers Exchange in Iowa, where more than half a million heritage seeds are kept. In Israel, we must note the activities of the Volcani Institute, which maintains a bank to preserve the extinct vegetation of the country and the Society for the Protection of Nature which also operates in this field.

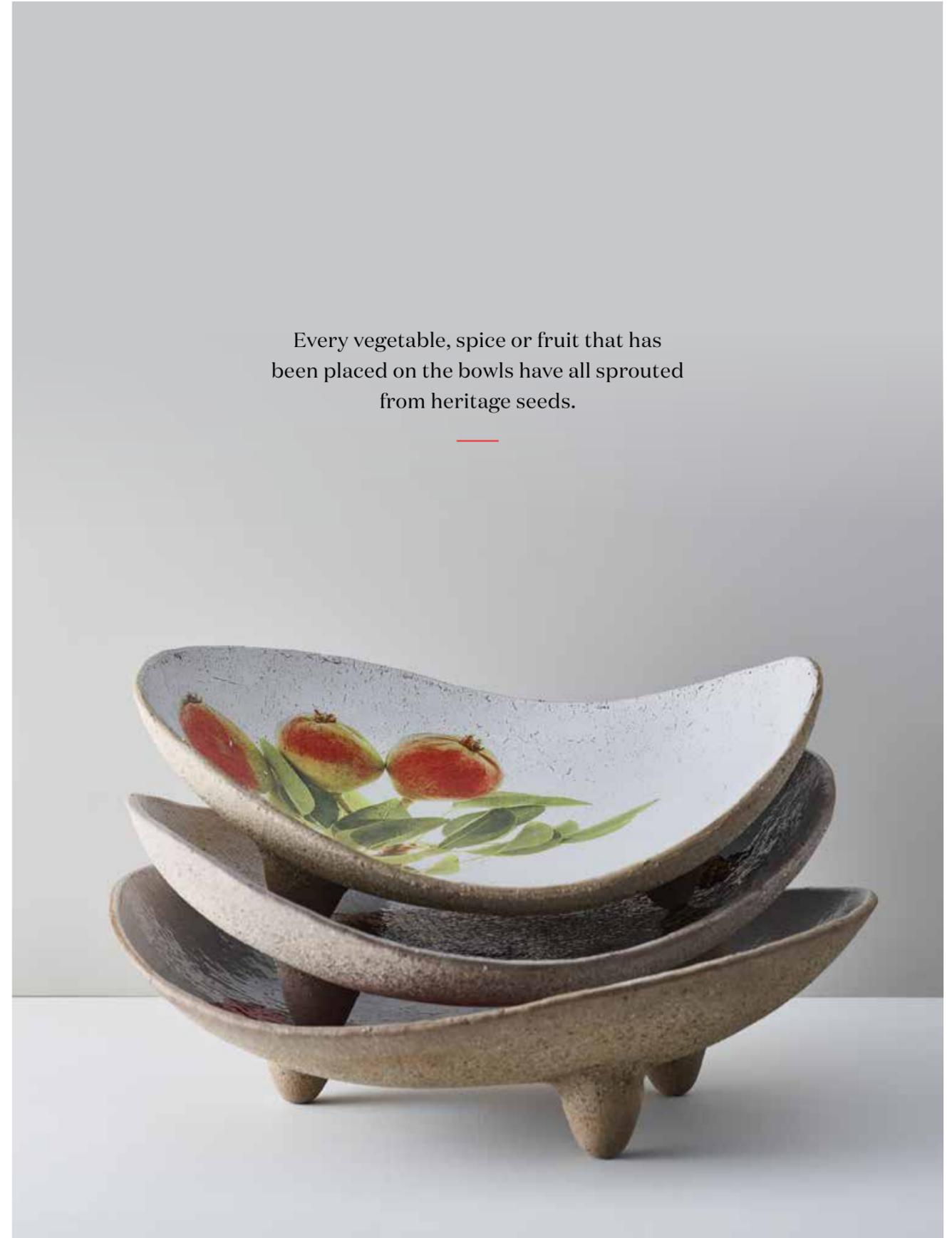
You chose only edible plants. How did you decide what to include in the body of work?

Only what grows naturally in this country was included. Pineapples, for example, are grown here today, but do not belong to the local agricultural heritage, and so were not included in the work. I walked around in farms, accompanied by photographer Dan Perez, and documented only what is made from regional seeds.

There is also a political position here - about the relationship between us and the place.

Every work of art has a political aspect. I am interested in the relationship between man,

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nature and society. In this search for sources, I seek the essence of the future in connecting to the earth, to the base, to the moment when everything begins.

Grains, vegetables and fruits, legumes, herbs, seeds and nuts - Dan Perez created portraits of plants. The photos are sharp, tangible and vivid. They invite the hand to feel and the nose to sniff. The entire series presents a group portrait of the plants, a long story, seven hardships and achievements, thousands of years of sowing and harvesting. "It was a process that took a year, because each plant was harvested in the right season and I did not compromise on alternatives to natural growth," Dan Perez said.

From the initial photograph, how was that work transmitted onto the bowl?

The bowl itself was created from a granulated mixture that was found in our soil. It was sent to a large kiln in the Bezalel ceramics department. I placed the photograph in a special substance I developed and the work was then put through another firing.

Tamir-Schestowitz and Chef Erez Komarovsky spent long days in Galilean orchards exploring their shared agricultural and cultural heritage.



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This is the second bowl project that Tamir-Schestowitz is presenting. More than a decade ago, she created a bowl of local material and initiated a collaboration with the Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families Forum. This is how the "Offering Reconciliation" project was created, in which dozens of Arab and Jewish artists painted, printed, and collaborated on works into the foundation bowl. "It was exciting to see that on a common platform you can create personal expression," Tamir-Schestowitz recalls. Israeli artists such as Sigalit Landau, Ron Arad, David Reeb, Menashe Kadishman, Moshe Gershuni, Michal Rovner and Vardi Kahana, together with Palestinian artists Osama Zatar, Farid Abu-Shakra and more created a rich and multi-voiced body of work. This took place in the United Nations in the presence of ambassadors from all over the world. From there it toured universities across the US and eventually was sold in a successful auction at Sotheby's.

Is this art to be used or is it meant for decorative purposes?

I'm less concerned with definitions. I come from the world of design and in my home I use the bowls to serve fruit and nuts. But you can display them or hang them up.

If you examine the entirety of your work you can be characterized as a documentary creator. And that is written in the book *Houses in a Personal Style*, in ceramic works and more.

It's true that documentation is important to me from an aspect of preservation. In the design book I published in the 1990s, I documented homes that managed to maintain an Israeli personal style in a world of imitation and reproductions. It is interesting to find that the authenticity in design is preserved in these homes even after 30 years. I am trying to connect the past and future. That is the essence of heritage seeds, preserving the past with hope for the future.

The "Seeds of Heritage" project was first exhibited at the Fresh Paint art fair. Today, works are exhibited in the ceramics pavilion at the Eretz Israel Museum as part of the exhibition "Israeli Picnic". Alongside a restored table of knights from the Crusader period in Apollonia, the contemporary works of Tamir-Schestowitz are on display, creating a natural link between the past and present, a historical continuity embedded in the seeds. It works well together, because in the end the bowls of the earth are a reminder of the common denominator of the people living in it, and a tribute to their culture, to the basic materials of the place where we live, to a land flowing with milk and honey. They serve as an important reminder in a transgenic and engineered world of exotic crops and trendy super-fruits.

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