

A TASTE OF JEWISH FOOD



Kuchen



Abigail's bagels



Macaroons

As varied as the origins and journeys of the Jews themselves, recipes for Jewish food have spread from the Diaspora onwards. We can find wonderful recipes from many parts of the world, from the Ashkenazi Jews of Germany, who migrated east to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Russia and Romania to Sephardim who settled in Spain and Portugal until the Jews were expelled, then spread to Turkey, Greece, Morocco and Algeria. Mizrahim, Jews from the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia also have contributed distinct flavours and foods. These influences have become part of English cuisine and what follows is just a taste.

Fried fish was a speciality of the Sephardi Jews from Portugal who escaped the Inquisition and sought refuge in England. It was described as 'Fish in the Jewish fashion'. From a religious viewpoint fish was and is very useful for those wishing to keep to a kosher diet, it is not meat but also not a dairy food; both not eaten by the observant in the same meal. For the Murrans, who had pretended to be Christian during the Inquisition, they could eat fish on Fridays when meat was forbidden by the Church but also eat it cold on Saturday to avoid cooking on the Sabbath. The fried fish became an English favourite, becoming enjoyed with chips somewhat later; credit is due to an Ashkenazi Jewish immigrant, Joseph Malin, who opened the first fish and chip shop, in London, in 1863.

Winston Churchill claimed that fish and chips helped the British defeat the Nazis; it was so valuable to national morale that it was never rationed.

Gefilte fish, chopped fish mixed with eggs and seasoned matzo meal then poached or fried, which is the English custom, is another Jewish favourite useful for the Sabbath as there were no bones to remove and it can be cooked in advance. Smoked fish, especially smoked salmon, is another very versatile Jewish favourite.

Latkes are thought to have their origins in the pancakes fried in oil made from ricotta cheese in Italy and eaten by the Jews to celebrate Chanukah as far back as the 14th century. The potato variety of latke was used instead of cheese following crop failures in Poland and the Ukraine which resulted in widespread potato planting. These Ashkenazi delicacies, relatively cheap and filling, helped to keep out the winter cold. Latkes can now be bought in many supermarkets all year round as well as from specialist Jewish shops. Also of Ashkenazi origin, blintzes, small pancakes generally filled with sweet cheese, folded and fried in butter, became very popular.

Still going strong from the 19th century is the Grodzinski family's kosher bakery business which started with a barrow in the East End of London. They initially sold just a single product, a wedding roll, a bread roll enriched with egg but now sell a vast array of baked goods as well as deli items.

When my father first visited his soon to be mother-in-law, (my grandmother) she cooked prunes that she called in Yiddish 'flamen'. My father said lovely but he really hated them... so my grandmother cooked him prunes every time he visited!! Prunes are a common ingredient in tzimmus a stew sweetened with dried fruits.
Anne



Mandelbrod

In the East End, street vendors would sell foods familiar to the immigrants such as bagels and herrings from baskets and pickled cucumbers from barrels. Britain was, at this time, the largest exporter of pickled herrings, much to the Jews of Eastern Europe.

My Grandfather, Abraham, used to sell bagels from a barrow in Brick Lane, London. He bought them for three farthings each and sold each one for one penny. My mother would often help him before she went to school. Once, when visiting him and my Bubbeh (Grandmother), we went shopping in the Lane and I remember seeing this huge barrel of 'wallies' (pickled cucumbers) and the shopkeeper dipping his arm right in to retrieve one. They were delicious.
Christine

The markets were colourful, the stall holders often equally so. Blooms kosher restaurant, established 1920 became infamous for the surly waiters as well as good food. In the early days the waiters were paid a proportion of their customer's bill, not a salary; a quick turnover was facilitated by the waiter whipping plates away quickly, sometimes before a diner had even finished.

I took some chopped herring I had made to Robert; it didn't seem familiar to him. A big hug greeted me on my next visit, "Hadn't had that since my mother made it when I was a boy!" he said. Robert, born in Austria, came to England with the Kindertransport in 1938
Jenny



Stuffed monkey

A traditional Jewish Friday night dinner would be likely to include chicken soup, perhaps after a chopped liver starter. Fragrant and golden, laden with lokshen and kneidlach (matzo balls) or kreplach (dumplings filled with minced meat) the soup could be considered a meal in itself, but no, this would typically be followed by a roast chicken main course then lokshen pudding. And later, possibly, a nosh of almonds and raisins or a lemon tea with cake. The lightness or otherwise of the kneidlach though was, and is, a measure by which a cook could be judged. The menu on a Friday night these days is rather more varied and participants are more likely to be able to move afterwards.

Replicating Jewish recipes can be a trial for some:

Lokshen pudding is cooked egg vermicelli mixed with sugar, dried fruit and sweet spices such as cinnamon, bound with egg beaten up in milk and baked, which produces an equivalent of bread pudding and equally likely to feature in Slimming World.

I had a memorable encounter with it when prepared by a new cook at the university Jewish Society. She had obviously assumed she was making something similar to a rice pudding, a runny milk pudding, boiled not baked. Saying 'shut up, I followed the recipe' (clearly not true) she ladled into our bowls something resembling lokshen soup with the chicken stock replaced by hot milk with sugar, spice and currants, possibly thickened a little with custard powder.
Leonard



Challah rolls

Rich in herbs and spices, Sephardi and Mizrahi food is lighter than Ashkenazi, featuring many interesting dishes; readily available are hummus, cous cous, baba ganoush and marinated, stuffed and roasted vegetables. Home made though, we find, is superior in taste to our supermarket options. Aubergines became unavailable in many supermarkets during Covid-19 lockdowns as home cooking became more adventurous. It is interesting to note that this style of Middle East cuisine has become very fashionable with new restaurants featuring Jewish favourites. It just isn't always featured as such.



Hamantaschen

In Cheltenham, many of us continue to make our own Jewish favourites, mainly Ashkenazi reflecting our backgrounds, introducing friends to novel tastes and winning new fans for Jewish cuisine.

We mark the Jewish calendar and our Cheltenham community calendar with traditional delicacies. Abigail's bagels, topped with cream cheese and smoked salmon, have become a highlight at our Synagogue Anniversary brunch in May each year. We make honey cake for Rosh Hashanah and eat apples dipped in honey as we wish each other a sweet and fruitful New Year; we also add pomegranate seeds hoping that our good deeds in the year to come can equal the number of seeds in a whole pomegranate. We make hamantaschen (triangular filled pastries) at Purim, cheesecake at Shavuot and latkes at Chanukah.

I make latkes every Chanukah and it can sometimes take me a batch before I get the temperature of the oil just right. I know I have it just as it should be when I hear those magical words from my partner "You are going to have to make these more than once a year!"

David



David's latkes

During Passover we eat matzo, an unleavened bread, and cook and bake without ordinary flour and raising agents; we still manage to create an array of tempting treats. Plava, macaroons made with ground almonds and coconut pyramids all fit with religious requirements and are popular beyond Jewish communities.

My mother made a superb plava, a fatless sponge. It was a constant in our home and lived in a Wedgewood blue tin with a white embossed pattern on the lid. It was ubiquitous, offered to all visitors with tea or coffee, baked for coffee mornings, sales and the Chanukah fair and most importantly served as pudding after meals (almost all meals) with or without fruit.

By the time I left home I thought I had eaten more than enough of it, but of course I missed it, it represented home. Saddest of all in these memories is that after baking it almost weekly for her married life my mother's dementia left her unable to remember how. Memories are bitter sweet.

Jane

It is interesting to note that the recipes for matzo and challah are stated in religious law. The challah, a rich bread, used to have to be made from a source of running rather than still water to be pure enough for the priests to eat; if not available eggs were used. No longer a religious requirement, this has remained the custom for making challah today.

Léa recalled the special taste and crunch of Camisbrot, (mandlebrot) from family memories in Brazil; the family was descended from Russian immigrants. She shared her recipe with me; it is a twice baked biscuit similar to but richer than a biscotti. Léa still remembers the smile on her late brother's face when she made them for him when he visited Cheltenham.

Jewish cooking has integrated into English cuisine; some foods have evolved, others retain their own identity. It nourishes, sustains and nurtures. It keeps memories alive and contributes to new ones. Enjoy!

Share your stories with us

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A selection of Passover treats