

# ארושת מטבח:

## More Than Bagels, Brisket and Blintzes

By Jennifer Lovy



Photo credit: Courtesy Jennifer Lovy

An intrepid researcher, author Lovy always goes the extra mile in her unrelenting pursuit of journalistic accuracy, as she demonstrates in this photo.

It may be hard to argue against a crispy fried potato latke, fluffy matzah ball or decadent chocolate babka. Still, Jewish cuisine is more than a top-10 list of popular food with Ashkenazi origins. Sephardic and Mizrahi foods bring a unique and flavorful serving of diversity to the table.

A Pew Research Center survey published in May 2021 asked American Jews about their heritage. Were they Ashkenazi, rooted in Central and Eastern Europe; Sephardic, following the Jewish customs of Spain; or Mizrahi, from the Middle East and North Africa? Or something else? Sixty-six percent said Ashkenazi, 3% Sephardic and 1% Mizrahi. Since a vast majority of Jewish immigrants to the United States were Ashkenazi, most talk of “Jewish cuisine” has revolved around the food of the shtetls.

Sephardic Jews, expelled from Spain and Portugal during the Spanish Inquisition, fled to places like Turkey, Italy and areas once part of the Islamic world. As a result, Sephardic food reflects that influence, emphasizing lamb and ground beef, stuffed vegetables, olive oil, lentils and rice. But the world of Jewish cuisine is much larger and more diverse.

Mizrahi food also highlights ground beef and lamb, stuffed vegetables, olive oil, lentils, fresh and dried fruits, seasonings and chickpeas. According to Leah Koenig, author of “The Jewish Cookbook,” some of the most popular Sephardic and Mizrahi dishes include bourekas, haraimi, shakshuka and tahdig.

Tahdig is an ancient Persian rice dish loved by Jewish and non-Jewish Iranians that recently gained popularity on Instagram, Koenig explains. Haraimi is a North African, spicy tomato-poached fish served at Shabbat and holidays in countries such as Morocco and Libya. Best known are shakshuka, which are basically tomato-poached eggs, and bourekas, a version of savory-filled pastries.

“All [Jewish] food started out in ancient Israel and Iran,” says Joan Nathan, author of several award-winning cookbooks. “There was no such thing as Ashkenazi, Sephardic or Mizrahi food. It was Jewish food, and it was based on the dietary laws of ancient Israel and the food that was available from the land. I don't think there's a Jewish food as much as there is a Jewish way of cooking,” says Nathan, who lived in Israel for



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Shakshuka, a spicy mélange of tomatoes, eggs and onions, is popular in the Middle East and North Africa, where the dish originated. It's paired with pita, or with a chewy French baguette.

three years and has traveled extensively, collecting recipes while researching and writing about Jewish cooking in other countries.

### Foods worthy of a wandering people

“We’re looking at the food of a wandering people who were finding ways to follow the laws of kashrut.” Nathan says. “They were constantly roaming, fleeing prejudice and persecution or seeking opportunities, constantly modifying and adapting the local cuisine.”

Rachel B. Gross, a religious studies scholar at San Francisco State University, defines Jewish cuisine broadly. To her, it’s simply “things Jews eat.”

Gross, author of “Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice,” contends that Crisco, a vegetable shortening, is a Jewish food because the hydrogenated cottonseed oil was advertised to Jewish consumers as an alternative to animal fat. “And the Jews embraced it,” she says.

So many cultural and religious practices of Judaism involve food, enhancing celebrations through distinctive dishes. Such meals reinforce the meaning of the holiday and provide families with a deep feeling of connection to their ancestors through shared recipes.

“Sometimes, when the holiday comes, and your family is not around, and your culture is not there, recreating it can get you out of the blues,” says Ayah E. Johnson, a Tunisian-born Jew living in Chevy Chase, Maryland, with her American-born husband. “Even though I was a young girl when I left Tunis, I still have the basic culture embedded in me. It’s dormant, but it’s there.”

Growing up, Johnson didn’t pay much attention to what was happening in the kitchen. She remembers her parents cooking, using taste and smell as a guide. Without stoves and ovens, as they were not available in North Africa in the 1960s, they



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Bourekasim (the plural of boureka) is served with Israeli salad at Café Nol in Virginia Beach, Va. Made with filo dough or puff pastry, these savory fried or baked pies can be crunchy or flaky; ingredients for the fillings run the gamut from cheese and spinach to mushroom, eggplant and poppy seeds, to the most popular, a mix of egg, tuna, potato and onion.

prepared their meals over a small, portable kerosene stove. Food was made daily and focused on fresh fish, meats, chicken, vegetables and fruits. Because there was no refrigeration, dairy wasn’t consumed, except for a café au lait, with a baguette, delivered to their home daily.

Johnson says cooking wasn’t something she enjoyed or did much of until she married and had children. Her lack of fondness for being in the kitchen shifted many years later when she felt a longing for her family and her culture, including the music and the smells of the holidays. She decided to try to recreate a Tunisian Rosh Hashanah Seder and Haroset for the Passover Seder.

She wasn’t familiar with gefilte fish, so the first time her husband came home with a can, she assumed that because it was fish it needed cooking. She combined it with vegetables. Ironically, it was a hit. Later, she created a fusion and made it into a soufflé. Fish, she said, is never eaten cold. “I don’t look forward to making it, but they like it, so I still make it,” adds Johnson, blending a new tradition with an old one.

A Google search of Tunisian recipes yielded some results, but nothing as complete as the foods she remembered. Relying on her memory, she says, was the only way to reconstruct the Seder.

Johnson made spinach patties, squash fried in tempura batter, fava beans, pomegranate, sesame candy and specially prepared garlic, with each item symbolizing an omen. During the Seder, blessings are recited to welcome the New Year and wish health, peace and safety to those gathered around the table.

“I thought I would do it one time, and my kids wouldn’t like it. But I wasn’t that lucky,” she says with a laugh before explaining that Tunisian cooking, with African, Italian and French influences, is very labor-intensive as it involves a lot of vegetables and spices.

Popular spices include harissa—a hot chili pepper paste,



Photo credit: Lauren Volo for The Gefilteria

Celebrating remembrance of holidays past, The Gefilteria's Shabbat “tablescape” brings together a mouthwatering array of Ashkenazi cuisine, rebooted to appeal to contemporary taste.

garlic, paprika, black pepper, cumin, cardamom, curry powder and cinnamon. Parsley, cilantro, onion, olives, olive oil, capers, anchovies and tuna are other common Jewish Tunisian foods and ingredients.

Gross's book devotes a chapter to examining how artisanal, or what she calls hipster delis, are reshaping American Jewish food.

“Jewish delis, in general, tell a story of a certain type of American Jewish food developing in the United States in the 20th century,” she says. Some newer delis are taking a different approach, trying to introduce “contemporary food trends of sustainability, sourcing local foods....”

“If you're in a place like Berkeley, California,” Gross says, “you need to provide vegetarian alternatives. And often, the Sephardic and Mizrahi foods appear as side dishes to the Ashkenazi main dish. But, if you're a deli, you're telling an Ashkenazi story by necessity; the Sephardic and Mizrahi foods are not the main story.”

### Trending for the times

The Gefilteria, not a restaurant but a food venture launched in New York in 2012, is also part of this trend. Founder Jeffrey Yoskowitz and his partners noticed there wasn't much in the world of Ashkenazi Jewish food beyond the Jewish delis, which were dwindling significantly. They decided to provide the missing ingredient at workshops and other events.

Yoskowitz, 37, and co-founder Liz Alpern discovered a shared affection for Ashkenazi cuisine. However, the two lamented that it wasn't a sentiment shared by other millennials. Together, they authored “The Gefilte Manifesto: New Recipes for Old World Jewish Foods,” and they added the adjective “artisanal” to what had once been food for the impoverished.

Like a lot of ethnic food, gefilte fish arose out of poverty and need. Gefilte fish, which means stuffed fish in Yiddish, is made from a variety of fish—typically pike, carp or whitefish. This much-maligned dish served at least two essential functions. First,



Photocredit: Lauren Volo for The Gefilteria

Leading immersive culinary workshops and collaborating on dynamic events and media projects, The Gefilteria founders, Jeffrey Yoskowitz and Lauren Alpern, bring people together through innovative reimagining of traditional Jewish food.

by adding matzah meal, eggs, spices and other fillers, poorer families could make smaller amounts of their fish last longer. Second, because gefilte fish is made by grinding up deboned fish, it allowed religious Jews to eat fish on Shabbat without having to separate bones from flesh, which, by Jewish law, is prohibited during the Sabbath.

“It felt like a lot of people looked negatively upon the cuisine. We use gefilte fish as an example of that. The food was mocked, yet we both liked gefilte fish,” recalls Yoskowitz, who also prepares and sells gefilte fish during the holidays. “My grandmother made it from scratch, and many of my peers only knew of it in the jar. They didn't know what it could be or its history, and we felt like it was erasing some of the richness of Ashkenazi cultural heritage....”

“We started The Gefilteria to re-instill a sense of pride, love and excitement in this food tradition, drawing inspiration from the old world, the shtetels and the cooks of generations past.”

Yoskowitz is all about tradition if modernized. Traveling to promote his book, he learned this firsthand. “People cried, talking about memories of these foods, memories of their families and memories of cultures lost. There are a lot of foods that [their] parents made, but they never learned how to make, and now those recipes are gone. I've seen people cry eating stuffed cabbage because it reminded them of their mother's.”

Although Jewish food may defy simple definition, there is a commonality in the kitchen in what Jews look for when cooking and eating. “They want good food,” says cookbook author Nathan, “and they want an attachment to whatever background they have.” 🍴