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Jewish Foodways: 1870-1930

Understanding how immigration, tradition, and the observance of the laws of kashrut shaped Jewish food culture here in America, by Margi Lenga Kahn

Glossary of Terms

Three primary communities of Jews throughout the world:

- Ashkenazi- Jews from Eastern and Central Europe
- Sephardic- Jews from Amsterdam, Greece, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia, and Turkey.
- Mizrahi- Jews from Middle Eastern countries- Egypt, Iran (Persia), Iraq, Lebanon, Israel (Palestine), and Syria.

Major Jewish Holidays:

- Shabbat- The day of rest that begins each Friday at sundown and concludes at sunset on Saturday.
- Tu B'Shvat- Holiday of trees
- Purim- The Story of Queen Esther
- Passover- Celebrates liberation from slavery in Egypt.
- Shavuot- Celebrates the giving of the Torah (Jewish sacred texts) on Mount Sinai.
- Rosh Hashanah-Ushering in the New Year
- Yom Kippur- Day of atonement
- Sukkot- The commemoration of the outdoor dwellings that protected those who worked the land.
- Simchat Torah- A portion of the Torah is read every Shabbat. On Simchat Torah, the last portion of the Torah is read, followed by a reading of the first portion, which begins the reading of the Tora, once again.
- Hanukkah- Celebrates the Jewish victory over the Greek army, and the miracle of oil that burned for eight nights in the Holy Temple during its rededication.

Traditional Jewish Foods:

- Babka- A sweet cake/bread intricately rolled with a cinnamon/sugar or chocolate filling.

- Bagels- A circular roll with a hole that is boiled briefly, topped with various seeds, and then baked.
- Bialys- A circular roll with a depression in the center usually filled with caramelized onions.
- Blintzes- Rolled crepes filled with cheese or cooked fruit.
- Borscht- A soup, either hot or cold, made from beets, vegetables, and broth, topped with sour cream (Smetana).
- Brisket and Flanken- For Eastern European Jews, these were the least expensive cuts of meat, which made it possible for Jews of little means to have beef for a holiday meal. The meat needed to cook slow for a long time to become tender enough to eat.
- Celery Soda- Carbonated water that is mixed with sugar and celery seeds.
- Challah- A lightly sweetened (honey or sugar) yeast bread made with eggs (similar to a brioche) and braided.
- Charoset- Served on Passover to remind us of the mortar from which the Jewish slaves in Egypt built the pyramids. It is usually made from a mixture of chopped apples, honey, nuts, and wine.
- Cholent- A Shabbat stew made primarily from beans and potatoes which is cooked overnight in the oven at a very low temperature.
- Chopped Liver- Cooked chicken or goose livers that are cooked, and then ground with caramelized onions and seasoned with salt and pepper to create a delicious spread for matzo or challah.
- Compote- An assortment of slowly cooked dried fruits in water, such as prunes and apricots. Compote is usually served as a dessert on Passover.
- Corned Beef- Beef brisket that is brined with sugar, salt and spices, and then cooked in water with garlic and vegetables.
- Gefilte Fish- Traditionally, the flesh of a whole lake fish (such as whitefish or carp) is removed from the fish, preserving the fish skin. The flesh is mixed with bread, eggs, and spices, and stuffed back into the skin and sewn shut. The fish is then cooked in fish broth, cooled, sliced, and served with horseradish.
- Gribenes- Pieces of chicken or goose fat and some skin that are cooked in their own fat until crisp.
- Halvah- A confection made from sesame seeds and sugar.
- Hamantaschen- A triangular sugar cookie filled with sweetened poppy seeds or fruit jam to remind Jews of the evil Haman, who plotted to kill the Jews of Persia (now Iran). These are eaten on Purim, which tells the story of Queen Esther, her uncle Mordechai, and their plan to save the Jews of Persia from destruction.
- Herring- Picked small lake fish usually served with pickled onions, and sometimes in a wine or cream sauce.

- Honey Cake- A loaf cake made from flour and eggs, and a good deal of honey. The cake is usually served over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to symbolize a sweet year.
- Kasha Varnishkes- Toasted barley groats that are steamed until tender, and then mixed with caramelized onions and small pasta shells.
- Kichel- An airy unsweetened cookie, usually in the shape of a bow, that is sprinkled with sugar before being baked. These are usually served at the kiddush (recitation of blessings over wine and bread) along with a small luncheon in the Synagogue following Shabbat services.
- Kishke- Lining of beef intestine stuffed with a well- seasoned mixture of flour, onions, garlic, and spices, and roasted.
- Knishes- Individual thin pastries that are filled with seasoned mashed potatoes and onion, or ground beef.
- Kreplach- Dumplings made from a light pasta dough filled with ground beef or chicken, and traditionally eaten in a rich bowl of chicken soup.
- Mandelbrot- A biscotti-like nut cookie that is also twice baked and rolled in a cinnamon-sugar mixture.
- Potato Latkes- Potatoes that are grated with some yellow onion, squeezed to remove excess moisture, and mixed with some flour and salt and pepper. The mixture is made into pancakes and fried in oil. They are usually served with applesauce or sour cream, and a large part of the Hanukkah menu, which focuses on foods fried in oil to recall the miracle of oil on Hanukkah.
- Kugel- Usually refers to a noodle pudding made with cheese, sugar, and sometimes fruit. These can also be made from mashed potatoes for Passover when pasta is forbidden.
- Lox- Cured salmon usually served on a bagel smeared with cream cheese.
- Macaroons- Cookies made with egg whites, sugar, and coconut and without flour, and usually served on Passover.
- Matzo- A flat cracker-like flatbread made from kosher for Passover flour and water and set in a hot oven in eighteen minutes or less, to bake until crisp. Waiting more than eighteen minutes would mean that fermentation would begin, which is not allowed on Passover. It recalls the Jews who escaped from slavery in Egypt and did not have time to let their breads rise.
- Matzo Ball Chicken Soup- A rich chicken broth with dumplings made from matzo meal and eggs.
- Matzo brei- Matzo that is broken into pieces and briefly soaked in water, and then fried with eggs as the most popular Passover breakfast.
- Pickles- Naturally fermented sour and half-sour pickling cucumbers.

- Rye Bread- Bread made from rye flour (which was relatively inexpensive in Eastern Europe) and caraway seeds.
- Schmaltz- Rendered fat from the skin and fat of a chicken or goose.
- Seltzer- Carbonated water that was sold in pressurized siphon-topped glass bottles.
- Smoked Chubs- Smaller, inexpensive whitefish that are smoked for preservation and flavor.
- Stuffed Cabbage (Holipches)- Chopped beef, onions, and potatoes or rice formed into a patty, rolled inside a cabbage leaf, and cooked in seasoned water and sugar.
- Sufganiyot- Jelly-filled donuts fried in oil for Hanukkah.
- Tzimmes- A honey-sweetened carrot stew usually served on Rosh Hashanah or on Passover.