

Food in the Jewish Culture

FOOD AND FAITH

All Jewish tradition revolves around family, food and faith, elements that sustained them over thousands of years and through turbulent times, taking them to every corner of the globe. Wherever they lived, the Jews adapted, but never lost their identity as a distinct religious and cultural community.

In culinary terms, the Ashkenazi world is a cold world of chicken fat, onion and garlic, cabbage, carrots and potatoes, and salted freshwater fish. The Sephardi world is warm, glowing with peppers and aubergines, courgettes and tomatoes, rice and cracked wheat, sea fish and olive oil.

FOOD AND FAMILY

For Jewish families, cooking has always highlighted the Sabbath and festivals. All celebrations - whether they commemorate a religious holiday, an episode of Jewish history, or a moment in the cycle of life - are still ruled by tradition, and special foods are part of these traditions.

Traditional food is a link with the past, a celebration of roots, and a symbol of continuity. Dishes are the part of an immigrant culture that survives the longest, sustained even when clothing, music, language and religious observance have long been discarded. Cooking is not easily destroyed. It is transmitted in each family like genes, and has the capacity for passing on memory and experience from one generation to another.

SHABBAT - THE JEWISH SABBATH

On Friday night Jewish families adorn the Sabbath table with traditional delicacies. In Ashkenazi homes, the table groans under the weight of the *challah* (two loaves of bread), chopped herring, gefilte fish, brisket, *tzimmes* and sweet *lokshen* (noodle) pudding. The *challah* consists of three strands of dough, which are braided in a plait. These strands are said to represent truth, peace and justice. The twelve bumps formed by the braid, represent the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Sephardic kitchen has as many traditional Sabbath dishes as communities - from Turkey to Italy to Spain to Persia and Morocco. Dishes include spicy fish, garlic, exotic fruits and most notably, *dafina*, a fragrant and spicy casserole cooked overnight.

The emotion, the spiritual upliftment and the family tradition of Friday night, form an integral part of the Jewish culture.

FOOD AND FESTIVALS

Rosh Hashanah - The Jewish New Year: Rosh Hashanah is traditionally celebrated by dipping apple in honey, in the hope of a sweet and complete year to come. *Lekach*, a honey cake is traditionally served. The *challah* is baked in a round shape to signify a rounded year, sometimes with raisins for a sweet year. The *shofar*, a ram's horn, is blown in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and at the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur - The Day of Atonement: Yom Kippur is a day of contemplation, fasting and asking forgiveness. It commences at sunset and ends with the appearance of the evening star the following day. Traditionally, the Fast commences after a light meal, without salt. The Fast is customarily broken with tea, and sweet buns or sponge cake. This is followed by a generous meal, including herring, chopped liver, *kichel* (sweet biscuits), chicken and stewed fruit.

Passover - Pesach: This holiday marks the exodus of the Jews from Egypt and is celebrated with a ritual meal known as the Seder. Jewish families relate the story of the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery, the exodus from Egypt, and their subsequent wandering in the desert. *Matzo*, unleavened bread recalls the hasty flight from Egypt, when the dough did not have time to rise. It is eaten throughout the week of Passover. No raising agents (known as *chametz*) are permitted in cooking during the festival.

Purim: Purim celebrates the heroism of Queen Esther, the Persian Jewish queen, and her uncle Mordechai, who saved the Jews from the villain Haman's evil plot to annihilate them. Jews eat *hamantaschen*, triangular yeast pastries filled with cream cheese or poppy seeds or even dates, in the shape of the Haman's hat (or his ear, according to Israeli legend). Wearing fancy dress is a popular Purim custom. Jews are also required to give charity, and to exchange gifts with one another, and to listen to public readings of the Book of Esther.

Chanukah - the Festival of Lights: Chanukah celebrates the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, after the Maccabees expelled the Greeks from the holy site. A miracle occurred when oil for the sacred lamp in the Temple, sufficient for only one day, burned for eight days and nights. Candles are thus lit in ascending order for eight consecutive nights in commemoration of the miracle. Fried food such as *latkes* (potato pancakes) and doughnuts are eaten throughout the week-long festival.

Shavuot - The Feast of Weeks: Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is also known as the Festival of the First Fruits, because it occurs in the Mediterranean spring. Homes and synagogues are decorated with green branches and dairy foods are eaten, specifically *blintzes*, pancakes wrapped around a sweet cream cheese filling.

Succot - The Feast of Tabernacles: This holiday commemorates the Jews' wandering in the desert for forty years, after their flight from Egypt and before their arrival in the Promised Land. During the seven days of the festival, Jews are required to eat all their meals in a *Succah* (plural: *Succot*), a hut with leaves and branches as the roof, through which the stars are visible. Pious Jews also study and sleep in the *Succah*. *Succot* are built in gardens, on terraces, balconies and even rooftops.