

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Carob: The Twenty-Four Carat Bean

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Tu B'Shevat, the New Year of Trees, is almost here, and with it comes a feast of dried fruits and nuts like those grown in Israel. A typical holiday menu will feature figs, dates, apricots, and almonds, and a Tu B'Shevat seder will include wines ranging from white to dark red.

One item I have not seen, but which my mother spoke of fondly, was the carob bean pod, what she called "bokser" in Yiddish. As a child, I thought that only Jews ate "bokser." (I also thought that only Jews ate brisket, but that's another story). Much later I learned that carob also goes by the names locust bean and St. John's Bread, the latter name stemming from the Christian belief that St. John the Baptist subsisted on the pods in the wilderness. (Of course, back in the day, John was a Member of the Tribe.)

The Yiddish bokser is a corruption of the German *bocks'horn*, or ram's horn. Readily available in Israel (*haruv* in Hebrew) by simply picking neighborhood trees found throughout the country, the hard-as-leather pods my mom remembered were a treat from the Holy Land for kids and, I imagine, a boon for dentists, as they resemble the ram's horn not only in shape; they are hard as a rock.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the carob bean has been used as food for thousands of years, and for much of that time it has been considered a poor man's food. During World War II, the people of Malta commonly reported eating dried carob pods as a supplement to their food rations.

While the carob may have been used as a source of nutrition for the poor, it also proved valuable to the well-off. Its seeds are so consistent in size and weight that they were the original gauge of the carat measure used by jewelers.

Surprisingly, although the tree and its curved, brown seed pods are native to Israel,

there is no reference to them at all in the Tanach. However, the fruit is mentioned many times in rabbinic literature, and the custom of eating carob on Tu B'Shevat is specifically mentioned in the Talmud.

But why do we eat the carob on Tu B'Shevat? Food historians posit that Jews in Eastern Europe wanted to celebrate the holiday with something from the motherland, and found that it was the only fruit that could travel from Palestine to Europe without spoiling.

That people are able to subsist on the carob is due to its excellent nutritional value. The lowly bean has protein, magnesium, calcium, iron, and a host of other vitamins and minerals. It also contains just one-third the calories of chocolate, and is virtually free of fat.

Locust bean gum is routinely used as a thickener in dairy products such as ice cream, due to its ability to prevent the growth of ice crystals. It also has other practical uses such as the production of cosmetic facemasks, fodder for livestock, and firewood.

The carob tree is known for its exceedingly long life; Italy boasts one well over 200 years, and many others in the Mediterranean are over 100 years old. This longevity, and the length of time before fruiting, gave birth to what is arguably one of the most famous legends in Jewish literature. Here is a version of the story as told by Peninnah Schram:

One day, Honi the Circle Maker was walking on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked the man, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?"

The man replied, "Seventy years."

Honi then asked the man, "And do you think you will live another seventy years and eat the fruit of this tree?"

The man answered, "Perhaps not. However, when I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees."

A little off the carob track, who was this Honi? And what is a circle maker? This real man was a first century BCE sage who is credited with a miracle. The winter rains

failed to come to the Land of Israel, so Honi drew a circle in the dust and stepped inside it (So there you have it. A circle maker draws circles.) He told God that he would remain inside the circle until God would provide rain. When a drizzle

started, Honi wasn't satisfied. He insisted on more rain, so God send a deluge. Honi then demanded a calmer down-pour, which God then sent, thereby bringing an end to the drought.

Next time you're in Israel,

take a drive up to the Galilee. Just a few minutes from Rosh Pina is Hazor HaGlilit, where you can visit Honi's tomb. And while there you can pick your own carob beans from the trees that grow nearby.

Really Good Carob Cake – No, Really

Carob is touted as a healthy alternative to chocolate, as it has lots of healthful nutrients and no stimulants such as caffeine or theobromine to give you the jitters. However, the bean has long been denigrated as an inferior chocolate wanna-be, nothing more than a poseur. This delicious cake redeems the lowly bokser and is so moist it doesn't require frosting, but including it doubles the pleasure.

Ingredients:

2 c. unbleached all-purpose flour
2 c. sugar
2 t. baking soda
2 t. baking powder
½ c. high quality carob powder
½ c. coconut oil
1 c. orange juice
2 extra-large eggs
1 c. hot coffee

For icing:

2 sticks unsalted butter at room temperature
4 cups confectioner's sugar
2 t. orange emulsion (or extract)
2 T. milk

Directions:

For cake:

Preheat oven to 350°.
Grease and flour two 8-inch round cake pans.
In the bowl of an electric mixer, combine first five ingredients.
In a second bowl, mix the oil, milk, and eggs.
Pour liquids into dry ingredients and beat, starting slowly.
While beating, add the coffee and gradually increase to high speed.
Beat for two minutes.
Pour batter into prepared pans.
Bake for 30 minutes or until toothpick placed in center comes out dry.
Cool for 20 minutes, then tip cakes onto cake racks.
When cakes are completely cooled, ice.

For icing:

In bowl of mixer, beat butter until creamy.
Gradually add confectioners' sugar with mixer set to slow speed so that it won't fly all over the kitchen.
Add extract and milk.
Increase speed to whip icing to a nice, fluffy texture.



Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at carolgoodmankaufman.com and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.

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