

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

King Solomon and the Queen of Jewish Cooking

Our Jewish Taste correspondent meets Joan Nathan at Hevreh bookfest

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



GREAT BARRINGTON – At Hevreh of South Berkshire's recent Jewish Book Festival, prolific cookbook author Joan Nathan sat down for a conversation with local critic and historian Seth Rogovoy. A full and rapt audience hung on her every word as she regaled them with stories of her world travels to find the foods of the Jews, working alongside both home cooks and famous chefs. And, after a luncheon prepared from recipes in her latest book, *King Solomon's Table* (reviewed in the May/June issue of the BJV), I was fortunate to spend some time with her.

In explaining why she chose the title of her book, Nathan went back in history to King Solomon as a model for the development for what she calls "immigrant food." The king had a system of sending members of the various tribes to find and bring back foods, spices, minerals, and building materials from the known world. The scouts dispatched to India brought back teak, ivory, spices, and peacocks and started a lively trade with Cochin. Some emissaries, however, never returned, having married and started new lives in the east. So, that craving you have for malai kofta may be some ancient ancestor speaking to you through your taste buds.

Nathan then went even further back in time to the patriarch Abraham who, she contends, brought ingredients with him when he left Ur Hasdim to travel to Canaan, the Promised Land.

Even bagels, a food that many would consider the ultimate Jewish import, Nathan claims to have origins in ancient Egypt.

While working on her book, Nathan became acquainted with some archaeologists, one of whom had done extensive research on cuneiform, the an-

cient language of Sumeria. He discovered a recipe for borscht proving, Nathan said, that there is nothing new under the sun.

While Nathan's mother never made kasha, and in fact rejected any food that smacked of Eastern Europe, many immigrants crave a taste of home, and recipes to satisfy those cravings have passed down through the generations. Of course, the dishes have, by necessity, evolved to incorporate both locally available ingredients and the laws of *kashrut*. One such example is latkes, that icon of Hanukkah parties. At a Shabbat dinner in El Salvador, Nathan found the pancakes made from yucca and served with cilantro cream. Even in a tiny community of only 100 Jewish families, Jewish culinary tradition lives on, if with different ingredients.

Recipes have also become streamlined to fit with modern time constraints. As an example, Nathan launched into a story about an ambassador's wife, a man, and T'beet, a chicken dish from medieval Iraq whose original recipe calls for sewing a pocket out of the bird's skin. Her simplified version appears in *King Solomon's Table*, and while the recipe still has many steps and involves overnight cooking, it is absolutely delicious and worth the *patshke*.

Now back to King Solomon. If legend is any guide, the meal served by the Queen of Sheba to the king must have been fantastic, because generations of Ethiopians claim to be descended from the two royals. So, what would the queen have prepared for their first meeting? Nathan suggests chick peas, nigella seeds, Swiss chard, sesame seeds, and a hot pepper called cubeb.

"Probably the spiciest dish he had ever eaten," she declared.

Did the queen combine the chick peas and sesame to make hummus? Nathan suspects that hummus may have come along later.

So, what does the Queen of Jewish cookery prepare for her own breakfast? Sometimes it's a hard boiled egg dipped in a mix of cumin, turmeric, and salt, while other times she will sauté onions with some Swiss chard from her garden and scramble an egg into that.



Joan Nathan speaks to Seth Rogovoy at July's Jewish Festival of Books, co-presented by Hevreh of Southern Berkshire and the Jewish Federation of the Berkshires, in partnership with the Jewish Book Council and with the generous support of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation.

PHOTO: CAROLINE RAIFSTANGER

Carciofi Alla Giudia

Of all the thousands of foods she has encountered in her storied career, Joan Nathan's favorite food is – drum roll please – Carciofi Alla Giudia, artichokes prepared in the manner of the Jews of Rome. The following recipe is taken from Nathan's *Jewish Holiday Cookbook* (2004, Schocken). While more involved than her breakfast egg, it is well worth the time and effort.

Ingredients

2 tablespoons fine sea salt, or to taste
1 teaspoon ground black pepper, or to taste
Juice and rind of 2 lemons
8 American globe artichokes
Olive oil for frying

Directions:

Mix salt and pepper in a small bowl. Fill a large bowl with water and add juice and rinds of lemons.

Set both bowls aside.

Using a sharp paring or bird's beak knife, shave off the tough outer leaves of artichokes until you reach the tender pale green or yellow leaves and create a bulbous shape. Cut off at least an inch of the thorny top. Trim the stem near the heart, peeling off the outer green fiber and leaving about 2 inches of stem if possible. Immediately put the artichokes in the lemon water to prevent browning.

Fill an electric fryer or deep cast-iron enameled pot with enough oil to almost cover artichokes. Heat to 325 degrees. While oil is heating, dry artichokes well with paper towels. Tap the flat top of the cut artichoke against the table to loosen the leaves. Sprinkle with salt and pepper, rubbing in the seasoning.

Fry artichokes in batches. Cook, turning occasionally with tongs, for about 15 minutes, or until a fork easily pierces the stem at its thickest point. The outside should be bronzed.

Remove artichokes from oil and drain well, stem side up, on a paper-towel-lined baking sheet. Gently open leaves to remove choke (using a grapefruit spoon or melon baller) and encourage the leaves to spread. You can now freeze them or leave them out, stem side up, for a few hours until ready to finish.

When ready to serve, reheat the oil to 350. Working in batches again, return artichokes, stem side up, to hot oil just to crisp. Drain well and serve immediately with a sprinkle of salt. Eat with your fingers.



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.

DERMATOLOGY CENTER
IN THE BERKSHIRES, P.C.DR. SCOTT L. GOFFIN
Board Certified DermatologistPH: 413-528-5184
FAX: 413-528-406917 TACONIC AVENUE
GREAT BARRINGTON, MA 01230

10 CASTLE STREET, GREAT BARRINGTON, MA

413-528-5244

CASTLESTREETCAFE.COM

Mary's
Carrot
Cakemade with
27
ingredientsMary L. McGinnis
413.464.2127 • www.maryscarrotcake.com