

# BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

## Traveling with Jewish Taste

### Who is the Winner – Old Country Cook vs. Today’s “It” Caterer?

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



This month I present two books about food. And two more different volumes could not exist. One is the memoir of a self-described American “wild child,” the other the work of a noted vegetarian nutritionist.

Let’s start with (or get over) *The Raging Skillet*, described as “The True Story of Chef Rossi/A Memoir With Recipes.” Slova Davida Shana Ross (she dropped the first three names and added the “i” to the last) was a rebellious teen. According to her publisher’s bio: “Rossi’s parents felt they have no other choice: they shipped her off to live with a Chasidic rabbi in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Within the confines of this restrictive culture, Rossi’s big city dreams took root.”

She ran away from home immediately after high school graduation, and lived a peripatetic alcohol- and drug-infused lifestyle for more than a decade before settling into life as the “it” caterer in New York. The memoir is a fast read, I’ll give it that, but I tired quickly of Rossi’s constant denigration of her parents, whom she describes as loud and cheap. It isn’t until much later in the book that she seems to have matured enough to give the reader a more balanced and compassionate view of them.



Chef Rossi

The recipes in the earliest chapters are obviously for dishes made in her years living in rat holes with room-mates. Hot Plate Hebrew Nationals and Pasta and White Trash But Keepin’ it Kosher Tuna and Macaroni Salad are but two entrees. Dessert is Leftover Entenmann’s and Pudding Cake. As Rossi matures, the recipes evolve with her, but at no point did I see recipes that might actually be part of a New York caterer’s repertoire. The I Did It All for Love Chicken was bland, and while the vegetables in her Turkish salad were crisp and colorful, the vinegar and oil dressing recipe added nothing.

At one point Rossi avers that (her mother) Harriet’s Turkey and Rice Meatballs were “killer,” so I was happy to try the recipe, especially since I just happened to have all the ingredients in the fridge. That dish was so flavorless that I had to pull out the ketchup bottle.

On the completely opposite end of the cookbook spectrum is *The Vilna Vegetarian Cookbook*, its backstory as interesting as its recipes. Fania Lewando, a noted nutritionist and cooking teacher in early 20th century Vilna, also ran a popular vegetarian restaurant. Artist Marc Chagall was known to have been a patron, along with other members of the intelligentsia. In the fall of 1941, Soviet soldiers captured Lewando and her husband as they were fleeing the Nazis. They died in the hands of the Soviets.

But, before she died, Lewando had written a cookbook in Yiddish, and in 1995 a couple attending an antiquarian book fair in England found a copy of it, bought it, and donated it to New York’s YIVO Institute. Sometime later, two women perusing the shelves on the Lower East Side discovered the book published in 1938. They had it translated, and now we have *The Vilna Vegetarian Cookbook*.

The raw ingredients in the recipes are those we associate with Eastern Europe: potatoes, beets, cabbage, apples, and kasha. And loads of butter and sour cream. Because Lewando was working with a wood stove, she gives no directions as to oven temperature, so experience in the kitchen is necessary so as not to overcook or undercook the dishes.

On the savory side of the menu is a very simple-to-make Fresh Cucumber Salad. Lemon juice, sour cream, and dill bring out the summer in this starter, a nice treat when the weather turns dreary.



An image from the older book

While the only times I’ve ever eaten kasha it was made with bowties or as a turkey stuffing, or maybe by mistake in a knish when I thought I was getting potato, buckwheat stars in five distinct recipes in this book. And for good reason. I will be making the Baked Buckwheat Kasha with Cheese again and again. This very easy recipe combines protein and whole grain in a delicious and hearty main dish.

Two sweet dishes, both perfect for a Sunday brunch, manifest the truth of the old adage, “the proof is in the pudding.” The first, Semolina Porridge, with slivered almonds, almond extract, sugar, raisins, vanilla, and orange peel, made enough to serve a crowd. I would recommend a slight change to the recipe. Rather than use the called-for candied orange peel, simply grate an orange into the mix. You won’t miss the extra sugar. We certainly didn’t.

As an Ashkenazi Jew, I have probably eaten more than my share of kugel, whether of the noodle or potato variety, but until now, I’d never had



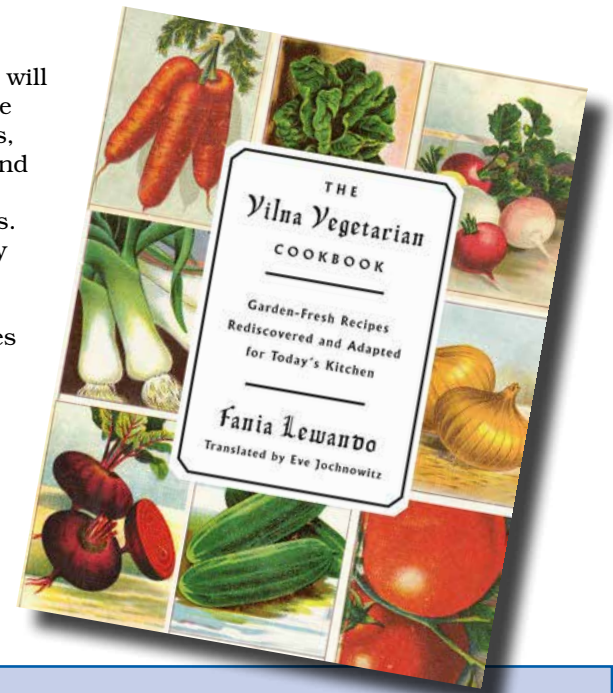
Fania Lewando



The original cookbook

one made with rice. I certainly will again, however. Lewando’s Rice Kugel, calling for grated apples, orange peel, raisins, and almond extract, made the house smell divine. The flavor: scrumptious.

If these four recipes are any indication, it’s easy to understand how Fania Lewando’s century-old plant-based recipes attracted a loyal following. I highly recommend this book.



### Rice Kugel

From *The Vilna Vegetarian Cookbook*

This Sunday-brunch-perfect recipe is really easy to make and so delicious, Joel has asked for a repeat. Please note that Fania Lewando didn’t have a thermostat on her wood stove, so you may have to adjust time and temp for your own oven.

#### Ingredients:

- |                                       |                            |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 ¼ cups rice                         | ¾ cup raisins              |
| ½ cup plus 1 tablespoon melted butter | ½ cup candied orange peel* |
| 4 tablespoons sugar                   | ½ teaspoon almond extract  |
| 1 large grated apple                  | 2 eggs                     |
|                                       | salt                       |

#### Directions:

Following package directions, cook rice in 2 ½ cups water until soft

Mix all ingredients well and pour into a small loaf pan.

Fill a larger baking dish with water, and place the loaf pan into the water bath

Bake until brown.\*\*

\*I used freshly grated orange peel, and it was just fine. Save the sugar for another occasion.

\*\* I set my oven to 350 degrees for 45 minutes.

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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](http://carolgoodmankaufman.com) and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.