

Traveling with Jewish Taste[®] Hanukkah: Here and There, Now and Then

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Growing up in mid-twentieth century Pittsfield, my Hebrew School circle of friends consisted of kids like me, the grandchildren of Eastern European immigrants.

At Hanukkah we decorated with construction paper chains (no lights or tinsel for us). At home my mother helped me light multicolored candles on a menorah her mother had carried from Lithuania. (We didn't call it a hanukkiyah back then.) Those candles came from the same little blue boxes you can buy at the supermarket today – no fancy schmancy, hand-dipped candles in those days.

Gifts were much less lavish than today's, but my parents hid them throughout the house to raise the excitement level. I can still remember the thrill of finding a

John Gnagy "Learn to Draw" set under the den sofa.

And the food: potato latkes with applesauce or sour cream, and tiny yellow mesh bags filled with gold foil-covered gelt.

That was it for Hanukkah.

Then, I moved to Israel and landed at Kibbutz Malkiya, so far north that it sat on a mountain right on the border with Lebanon. The kibbutzniks were mostly Mizrahim, immigrants from the Arab countries, and their culinary offerings were so different from those to which I was accustomed. Salad, olives, and yogurt for breakfast, anyone?

When the holiday came around, I was working in one of the kindergarten houses. I expected to see crispy, golden latkes served to the children, and to us in the communal dining room.

Levivot? No, that's for Ashkenazim, the head nanny told me. She proceeded to introduce me to "sufganiyot," ("jelly donuts"), and had me injecting jelly into a gross of dough balls prior to frying.

Jews in North Africa have a long tradition of eating sfenj, small, deep-fried doughnuts, at Hanukkah. In Israel, where Jews were gathered "from the four corners of the Earth," Ashkenazim met with the North Africans, and Yiddish ponchkes and the African sfenj merged to become sufganiyot.

Since that time, I have learned of other culinary traditions for Hanukkah from around the globe, but one of two characteristics unites them all: they are either fried in oil or contain cheese.

Except for brisket. Why brisket is considered the centerpiece of a traditional Hanukkah meal alongside latkes, I don't understand. It is neither fried nor dairy. But, there you have it. A meal of brisket and latkes is listed many places as the quintessential Ashkenazi Hanukkah repast.

The custom of frying in oil is based on the story of the Maccabees, who came from Modi'in to restore the Holy Temple, desecrated by the Syrian Greeks under Antiochus. They found one sealed cruse that contained enough olive oil for only one day. That small amount miraculously burned for eight days, thus providing time until more ritually pure oil could be pressed and brought to Jerusalem.

The tradition of eating cheese-based foods is grounded in the story of Judith. Although the book does not mention Hanukkah and is not even included in the Tanach, it is believed to have been written about the same Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids.

We read that in his quest to conquer Judea, the general Holofernes besieged the town of Bethulia, cutting off its water supply. Though the town elders were ready to surrender in the hope of avoiding starvation, the Hasmonean Judith, was not.

The beautiful widow was able to talk her way into Holofernes' tent. Once inside, she gave him cheese. The salty cheese made him dry, so she then gave him wine to quench his thirst, which of course made him drunk – and sleepy. Once he fell asleep, Judith grabbed his sword and decapitated him, bringing the head back to her village in a basket.

The next morning when Holofernes' soldiers beheld the headless body of their leader, they fled in terror. In honor of both Judith's cleverness and courage, we incorporate cheese into our Hanukkah menus.

Deep-fried fritters called bimuelos in Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language, are the most popular Sephardic Hanukkakh treat. Bimuelos are one of the foods emblematic of conversos, the Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism during the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions but who secretly practiced their Judaism.

They spread throughout the Mediterranean world after the Expulsion from Spain in 1492. Many Sephardim top their fritters with a honey syrup flavored with orange or rose water.

My Cuban-born friend, Mattie, prepares the recipe learned from her Turkish parents, and offers to pit her bimuelos against my latkes. Nobody loses in that contest! Greeks call similar deep-fried puffs loukoumades, and they dip them in honey or

sugar in salute to the cakes they believe the Maccabees ate during the revolt because they were easy to prepare for the fighters who had little time to sit for a full meal.

In recent years, a growing group of Latinos, while researching their genealogy, learn that certain rituals practiced in their families have Jewish origins. These include lighting candles on Friday nights, kissing the doorjamb on entering the house, and eating fried foods around the holiday season.

Probably in a nod to the ubiquitous Christmas cookies one sees in December, sugar cookies in various Hanukkah shapes have become popular in recent years. They are neither cheese nor fried, but perhaps in another hundred years they, too, will be considered traditional.

This year, of course, the first day of Hanukkah falls on Thanksgiving, what some wags have dubbed "Thanksgivukkah." What to serve? Potato latke stuffed turkey? Pumpkin bimuelos? Cranberry stuffed sufganiyot?

No matter what you choose, you won't have to worry about the combined menu for another 79,000 years.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She recently launched the blog "Food for Thought," on her website at carolgoodmankaufman.com. She invites visits and comments.

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Hanukkah Hot Chocolate Gelt

If Thanksgivukkah this year brings cold weather, you will love sipping from a nice mug of hot chocolate while curled up with the great novel that somebody will undoubtedly gift you. (Hint?)

With this very easy recipe, you can use up that ubiquitous Hanukkah gelt – the gold-foil-wrapped chocolate coins, not the real stuff that your bubbie might stick in a greeting card.



Ingredients:

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| 1 cup Hanukkah gelt, at room temperature | Pinch nutmeg |
| 2 cups milk, divided | Pinch cinnamon |
| 1/2 cup water | Pinch cloves |
| Pinch cayenne | 1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract |

Directions:

- In a small saucepan, heat one-half cup of the milk until just steaming.
- Remove from heat and add chocolate. Stir with a wire whisk until ingredients are completely blended.
- Using the fork, gradually incorporate the rest of the milk and the water.
- Add the spices and vanilla extract.
- When the mixture is blended, heat over a medium burner until hot.
- Add marshmallows if you wish.

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