

Purim: Celebrating a topsy-turvy holiday with Persian Halva

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When American Jews, who are mostly of European origin, think of the upcoming holiday of Purim, our mouths begin to water in anticipation of hamantaschen. Whether made from cookie or yeast dough and filled with poppy seed or prune, apricot or chocolate, the threecornered delights are so yummy that many bakeries — and not just Jewish ones — feature them yearround. But there's so much more to savor at holiday time that here I offer a Purim culinary mini-world tour, along with a recipe to enhance enjoyment of the holiday. And everybody is invited to partake!

But first, a CliffsNotes background on the holiday itself: The biblical Book of Esther recounts the story of a young maiden who becomes queen to the Persian King Ahashveros. When her uncle, Mordechai, refuses to bow down to the evil vizier, Haman, Haman convinces the king to okay his plot to commit genocide against the entire Jewish population of the empire.

He carries in his pocket the lots, or purim, designating the days on which the Jews were to be hanged on the gallows.

Mordechai overhears Haman's men discussing the plot and tells his niece, Queen Esther, urging her to tell the king. Because Esther has had to hide her Jewish identity until this point, she risks her life in an elaborate plan to let the king know of the nefarious plot and plead for her people. The King hears her plea and, to Haman's dismay, honors it.

As a verse in the book states, "whereas it was turned to the contrary." Contrary indeed. Instead of murdering the Jews, the king honors Mordechai and sends Haman and his cronies to the very gallows Haman had constructed. And, in celebration of yet another verse, "from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a holiday," on Purim we dress up in costume and party on. We also witness normally sober and serious Jews get so drunk that the world spins upside down. This silly behavior all takes place, of course, in adherence to the prescription by the ancient sage Rava, who said, "A person is obligated to drink on Purim until he does not know the difference between 'cursed be Haman' and

that nobody would get the connection between the full moon and a round cookie that looks like every other cookie on the block, so the crescent shape lets us know that it is in honor of the holiday's position in the calendar.

Butter, brown sugar, and finely ground almonds make these cookies delectable alone or with tea.

Once the hangover has abated, we turn things upside down yet again by performing good deeds, bringing goodie baskets to friends, family, and shut-ins, and give gifts to the poor.

So, in this spirit of the being contrary, topsy-turvy, and upside down, let's eat!

Persian Halva

This Persian recipe for halva is very different from that for the sesame candy found in American delicatessens. Its fudge-like texture and exotic rose water flavor is addictive. It's no wonder that Persian Jews often include this treat in the baskets they traditionally bring to family, friends and neighbors on the holiday.

Ingredients:

1 cup sugar ½ cup water ¼ cup rose water* 1 cup unsalted butter 1 ½ cups all-purpose flour

Directions:

Bring sugar and water to a boil in a saucepan.

Cook, stirring constantly, until sugar is dissolved, about 7 minutes. Stir in rose water and saffron into the sugar mixture. Cover saucepan and remove from heat. Melt butter in a large saucepan over low heat. Stir flour into the melted butter until mixture makes a smooth paste. Continue to cook, stirring often, until the paste turns golden. This step could take anywhere from 20 to 30 minutes.

Slowly whisk sugar mixture into paste until smooth. Remove saucepan from heat and spread halva evenly onto a shallow large plate or platter, using the back of a spoon or an offset spatula. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least one hour.

Cut the halva into diamonds or other shapes. Decorate each piece with a whole almond or pistachio, or

‘blessed be Mordechai.’ Basically, a religious injunction to get loaded.

Back to food: tradition has it that Queen Esther, in order to observe the Jewish dietary laws while living in the palace, was a vegetarian relying on legumes, seeds, and nuts for protein. Hence poppy seed-filled hamantaschen.

But it’s not all hamantaschen.

My friend David is of Moroccan descent. When he was growing up, his mother, as well as all the women in the neighborhood, prepared a wonderful sweet dairy couscous with dried fruit. The Jews of the Caucasus Mountains are proud of their origins in ancient Persia, so for them the holiday has a personal resonance. They enjoy a halva made with flour, almonds, rose water, and saffron, not at all the same thing as the sesame-based confection sold in delicatessens around this country.

Because the holiday of Purim falls on a night with a full moon, Jews of Yemenite background prepare almond crescent-shaped cookies to eat and to share. My guess is that the Yemenites realized

chopped nuts. Place into mini paper cupcake liners.

**Rose water is available at many Middle Eastern shops such as Ed Hyder’s or Bahnan’s in Worcester.*



Traditional hamantaschen cookies for the Jewish festival of Purim. [BLUEENAYIM, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO]