

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Chanukah's Coming

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Chanukah is around the corner and I am already salivating at the thought of crispy, golden potato latkes, their onion-tinged aroma filling the house. I can picture my Bubbie standing over a hot stove, frying up those round fritters for us to gobble up. She was doing as her mother, and her mother before her, had done. I continue the custom. (Of course, with the advent of the food processor, the lack of knuckle skin courtesy of the vegetable grater may change the outcome of the recipe a bit.)

But, how far back does the tradition actually go? Given the fact that there were no potatoes in Judaea when the Maccabees were fighting Antiochus back in second century BCE, it is highly unlikely that Jews were eating latkes back when that legendary cruse of oil lasted eight days.

So, what about those spuds? Despite its long association with the Emerald Isle, the potato did not come from Ireland. In fact, potatoes were unknown in Europe until after 1537, when the Spanish forces of conquistador Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada landed in what is now Colombia to search for gold. They found potatoes. The tubers, originating in their wild form in the mountainous regions of Peru and Bolivia, had probably been cultivated there for thousands of years already, and archaeologists have found remains on the shores of Lake Titicaca that date from 400 BCE. Experts have counted over 4,000 varieties of potatoes, ranging in color from white to yellow, red to purple, as well as about 180 wild, non-edible ones.

Although the Incans prized

potatoes as a delicacy, Europeans feared these members of the nightshade family (and their delicious cousin, the tomato), and turned their noses up. It wasn't until after France's Seven Years' War with Prussia that the vegetable reached a turning point in the public eye. French scientist Antoine-Augustin Parmentier survived five years as a prisoner of war through a diet that consisted almost exclusively of potatoes, and when he returned to Paris after war's end, he promoted the vegetable's qualities tirelessly. Ironically, the French Parliament had prohibited cultivation of the potato due to the belief that it caused disease, and the law remained on the books despite Parmentier's work, until 1772. However, potatoes eventually became popular, spreading from France to Eastern Europe.

Only two years later, as repeated crop failures plagued Europe, Czar Frederick the Great of Prussia ordered farmers to plant potatoes to counter the possibility of mass starvation. Because potatoes grow more quickly in a variety of weather conditions, widespread famine was averted.

Thus did the potato become integral to Eastern European cuisine – and a staple of the Ashkenazi menu. Shtetl Jews, mostly poor and hungry, loved the tuber, and it was on their menu more than often. A popular Yiddish children's song confirms its ubiquity:

On Sunday, potatoes; on Monday, potatoes;

On Tuesday and Wednesday, potatoes; on Friday, potatoes.

On Sabbath, a novelty – potato kugel.

On Sunday, potatoes again.

Bread with potatoes, meat with potatoes, lunch and dinner.

Potatoes, potatoes over and over again.

One meal is a novelty – the potato pie.

On Sunday, potatoes again!

Monotony aside, the potato, containing every essential vitamin and mineral except calcium and vitamins A and D,

saved the Jews from starvation. Evidence of this is the population explosion from the beginning of the 19th century to the end, in what is now Russia/Poland, from about a million and a half Jews to five million.

Potatoes returned across the Atlantic Ocean in 1621, when the Governor of Bermuda, Nathaniel Butler, sent a large shipment of potatoes and other vegetables to Governor Francis Wyatt of Virginia at Jamestown. However, the first

permanent potato patches in North America were established much further north, in New Hampshire in 1719. From there, the crop spread across the country, where they appear today on breakfast, lunch, and dinner menus.

Shlishkes

Oh, how we Jews love our potatoes, whether red, white, russet, or gold. We put them in blintzes, cholent, knishes, kreplach, kugel, latkes – and shlishkes, the Hungarian version of gnocchi. Although not strictly adhering to the "fried in oil" custom of Chanukah, they are browned and toasted in butter, which makes them a nice dairy salute to our ancestor Judith. The beautiful and intrepid Judith talked her way into the tent of the Assyrian commander, Holofernes, and fed him cheese – lots of salty cheese. When he got thirsty, she plied him with wine. He got drunk, fell asleep, and Judith separated the general from his head. When his troops saw what had happened, they fled. Judith's story is connected to the holiday by virtue of her standing up against the powerful, just as the Maccabees did.

You may indeed lose your head over these delicious, soft-as-a-pillow dumplings!

Ingredients:

4 medium Russet or Idaho potatoes
1 large egg, beaten
1 teaspoon salt
1½ cups flour
6 Tablespoons unsalted butter
1 cup bread or cornflake crumbs
¾ cup sugar
1 teaspoon cinnamon

Directions:

Peel potatoes and cut into large chunks.

Boil until fork tender, between 10 and 20 minutes.

Mash the potatoes.

While the potatoes are still warm, place them into a mixing bowl and add egg, salt and flour. Mix well.

Knead until a soft dough is formed, adding additional flour if necessary.

On a floured surface, and with floured hands, roll out a handful of dough into a long strip.

Cut the strip into ¾" pieces.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil.

Working in batches, drop pieces into the water and let them simmer until they float to the top.

Remove with a slotted spoon.

In a separate pan over low heat, melt butter.

Add bread crumbs and stir until browned and toasted.

Add shlishkes and toss until coated.

Roll the shlishkes in a mixture of sugar and cinnamon.

Enjoy!



Bread menorah and dreidl

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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