

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Breaking Bread

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



They say that man cannot live by bread alone, but the Jewish culinary treasure chest overflows with such delicious options that following such a diet might be tolerable. After all, who could say “no” to a buffet of bagels, bialys, rye bread, challah, pita, malawah, and even matzah?

The first Jewish bread to get a lot of press was probably matzah. We are told that when our ancestors fled Egypt, they did so in such a hurry that their bread did not rise, thus giving us the Passover staple. Forgive the heresy, but I suspect that the matzah of 4,000 (give or take) years ago was not perfectly square, with parallel lines of perforation. And there was probably no cream cheese and jam to make it palatable. No, it probably was more like lavash, the Middle Eastern flat bread. And that lavash probably got very hard and dry in the desert heat – sort of like shmurah matzah, but definitely not square.

And while most people today buy their matzah in boxes marked Goodman's or Streit's or Manischewitz or Yehudah, saving us from having to make it ourselves, many communities hold annual matzah baking workshops at which participants can try their hand at getting the bread from mixing bowl to oven in less than 18 minutes. It's a fun way to relive at least part of the exodus experience.

Challah wouldn't have appeared on the table until after Sinai, once we got Shabbat. My Bubby Fannie, who was a most spectacular cook and baker, made a fabulous, slightly sweet version of the egg-infused bread. An avid consumer of her cooking, I asked her to write down her recipes for posterity. Her response: until I could read, write, and speak Yiddish, no dice. (It didn't matter that I knew Hebrew. It was Yiddish or nothing.) Unfortunately, she didn't issue that directive until two months before she died, so I have spent my entire adult life attempting to duplicate her challah. The one rule she did share with me: use unbleached flour only.

Perhaps the bread most associated with immigrant Jews in North America is the bagel. Paired with lox, cream cheese, and the *New York Times*, the bagel is the ubiquitous Sunday brunch food. Whether New York or Montreal, the roll-with-a-hole is always boiled before baking, just as my other bubby, Sarah Deborah, did, giving it a dense and chewy interior.

The New York bagel differs from its Montreal cousin in that the latter is smaller, thinner, sweeter, denser, with a larger hole, and always baked in a wood-fired oven. Both types of bagel have their proponents, often vocal.

Bagel's cousin, the bialy, (shortened from *bialystoker kuchen*) is harder to find, although I can't understand why because they are delicious and, frankly, easier to make. The slightly crispier bread roll that originated in Bialystok, Poland is not boiled before baking. And, rather than a hole in the middle, it has a depression over which are strewn onions and poppy seeds.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the other star of the delicatessen, the quintessential sandwich bread: the rye, and its darker relative, pumpnickel. My heart breaks when I hear people order pastrami on white bread, and I feel the need to establish a Deli 101 class for these poor, uneducated souls. On the other hand, my heart rejoices when I manage to get to the West Stockbridge farmers market in time to snag a loaf or two from the Pittsfield Rye Bakery. Wonderfully chewy crust with a soft, but not too soft, interior, the rye bread of my youth – and my oldth – is the best on the planet.

Pita burst onto the American scene in the 1970s, when all things Israeli suddenly became trendy. Students returning from youth group trips and volunteer stints on kibbutzim brought with them a love of falafel, hummus, and the bread so necessary to enjoy both. However, even today, finding pita that doesn't taste like the cardboard found in most grocery stores requires detective skills worthy of Miss Marple. (I refer you to my recipe for soft, fluffy pita in the April 7, 2014 issue of the *Berkshire Jewish Voice*.)

Finally, we come to a bread that I didn't discover until a beautiful summer day in 1994. On the terrace at the old Yemenite Step restaurant on Yoel Moshe Salomon Street in Jerusalem, we were introduced to the heaven-on-earth that

is malawah, a layered fried bread brought to Israel by Yemenite immigrants. We devoured both sweet and savory versions of this flaky, pancake-like bread, served with a selection of toppings including sautéed spinach, chopped hardboiled eggs, zhug, and honey. We fell so hard for this bread that we vowed to find a source for it upon return home. Unfortunately, only the frozen version was available, and none locally. Luckily, with the rise of interest in world cultures and foods, recipes are now easy to come by.

Baking bread fills your home with unbeatable aromas and your belly with sustenance. Breaking it with family and friends is a life-affirming experience.

Malawah



Serves 8

The old adage tells us that it is the buttered side of the bread that will fall to the floor. While all sides of this treat are buttered, you will be thankful for it.

Ingredients:

4 cups all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon sugar
1 tablespoon kosher salt
 $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon baking powder
1½ cups water
1 stick butter, melted

Directions:

Prepare two baking sheets by lining with lightly buttered parchment paper. In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, sugar, salt and baking powder. Make a well in the center and slowly add the water, stirring with your hands or a wooden spoon, until all ingredients are incorporated. You may need to add more water, depending on how well absorbed it is. Transfer the dough to a clean surface and knead until smooth and elastic. Wipe the bowl clean and lightly coat it with oil, then place the dough inside and cover with a kitchen towel to let rest 30 minutes. Turn the dough onto a clean surface and cut into 8 even pieces. Brush with butter, then cover and let rest another 30 minutes. Roll out each ball of dough into a very thin rectangle. Starting from long edge of the rectangle, fold over the dough in 1-inch increments until a long rope is created. Coil the rope and place on the baking sheet. Cover with plastic wrap. Repeat with the remaining pieces of dough. Let stand for 45 minutes. Use a rolling pin to flatten the coil into 8-inch circles. Lightly butter a large non-stick or cast iron pan and place over medium-high heat. When the pan is hot, but not smoking, add a piece of the flattened dough to the pan and turn the stove to medium. Cook the dough 1 to 2 minutes per side until it is golden brown. Serve with your choice of accompaniments (sautéed spinach, zhug, hard-boiled eggs, honey, or even chocolate sauce).



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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 and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.