

## CULTURE & ARTS

### TRAVELING WITH JEWISH TASTE

## Go Fish!

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



It's Sunday morning and time for brunch. Or it's *kiddush* after shul. Or it's time to break your Yom Kippur fast. What's on the menu? For sure there will be at least one fish dish. Yes, we Tribespeople lay claim to a host of pickled, smoked, and seasoned fishes. At least, the *Ashkenazi* branch of the family does. The *Sephardim* work more with fresh fish, which we'll look at in a bit.

Gefilte fish may be among the most maligned dishes in the Eastern European repertoire of foods. And frankly, if you insist on eating the stuff from a jar with that icky jelly, then yeah, the stuff deserves your disdain. But home cooks have made their own for generations (my bubbe's was terrific), so if you don't mind smelling up the house, then by all means, go for it. However, these days you can find a nice log in the freezer section of the grocery store. Baked with carrot, onion, and celery, it's delicious.

For the more literal-minded, you can't beat the Israeli version of gefilte fish. At my first Sukkot dinner while living on a kibbutz, I found on the plate before me an actual fish skin stuffed with ground fish, breadcrumbs, and seasonings. It was called *dag memuleh*. In English, an actual (stuffed) fish.



"The stuff from a jar with that icky jelly"

For Sunday brunch, bagels, lox, and cream cheese is the iconic combination. Or is that smoked salmon you're eating? The difference? Lox in Eastern Europe originally referred to salmon brined in salt water. Lox, from the Yiddish word for salmon, *lox* or German *lachs*, is cured in salt, a technique of food preservation that our ancestors used for generations in Eastern Europe. (Scandinavians also cure their salmon in salt.)

Smoked salmon is, well, exactly that. But it can be cold-smoked or hot-smoked. The cold smoked variety looks similar to lox, with a glossy finish and sliced thin to go on a bagel with cream cheese, while hot-smoked looks more like a cooked fish. Despite the term "hot," the smoking temperature for this variety ranges only between 70 and 90 degrees, so its texture is juicy and flaky. But kippered salmon, another form of hot smoked, is prepared at around 180 degrees and has more of a cooked feel than its cousin.

**Then there's Nova** salmon, a hybrid of the two preservation techniques. Named for the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, it is lightly brined, then cold smoked. Today smoked salmon comes not only from Canada, but Norway, Scotland, and Ireland, as well.

Back to kippered salmon. It should not be confused with the kippers that our British cousins like. Those delights are made with herring that is cold-smoked. But herring is a very flexible fish, and kippers aren't the only way to prepare them. Whether in wine sauce, tomato sauce, or sour cream, in chunks or chopped, herring in any form is comfort food for many. I include myself among its fans, even as it makes my feet swell.



Some believe that fish are not subject to an "ayin hara" (evil eye) because they spend all of the days underwater and thus out of sight. For this reason, some believe that eating a fish dish, including gefilte fish (made from carp, above), is supposed to bring good luck or at least less bad luck.



"Herring," by Steve Marcus

Jews embraced it as a cheap source of protein. When they came to America, they brought their recipes for herring with them, where herring continued to nourish working-class immigrants.

Whole smoked whitefish was the Sunday breakfast at Camp Ramah back in the day. I became pretty proficient at pulling the spine from said fish without leaving behind any bones that could get stuck in my throat. Alas, those days are long gone. Occasionally I'll see a nice big golden fish at a bar mitzvah kiddush, but not too many other places. However, whitefish salad, when made well, is sublime on a bagel or challah roll or even straight up out of the spoon.

Finally, we come to sable. No, not the fur coat. Sable, the last of our *Ashkenazi* fishes, is also known as black cod or butterfish. Smoked and coated in paprika, it's used as a topping for bagels when sliced. With its silky smooth, buttery texture, sable is a nice alternative to lox, smoked salmon, or whitefish.

As for the *Sephardi* branch of the family tree, all the fish dishes that I've come across from our cousins are based on fresh white fish neither cured nor smoked. (BTW, that's white-fleshed fish, not whitefish of the smoked variety.) That makes sense given that most countries in which the *Sephardim* have lived border the ocean, where fresh fish is readily available. One of the most popular dishes is

probably the Moroccan *Chraime* (pronounced hray-meh), made with a spicy tomato sauce – appropriate, as the name is based on the Arabic word for hot. It is a regular on Shabbat dinner tables.

The dish known as *peshkado frito* has a Jewish history of its own. This fried fish dish was an important tool in evading the "holy" inquisitors of the Inquisition. Because Portugal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was ruled by the iron hand of Catholic monarchs, everybody was expected to be Catholic. Hence, everybody was expected to eat fish on Fridays. Authorities closely scrutinized the *conversos*, many of whom continued as crypto-Jews, practicing their Judaism secretly. The *conversos* figured out that they could have their fish on Erev Shabbat and save the leftovers to eat cold on Saturday, thereby avoiding cooking on Shabbat. (Faking the pork thing was an entirely different matter.)

When the Jews fled Portugal for England, they brought their traditions, and their recipes, with them. *Peshkado frito* was among them. The inimitable Claudia Roden writes in her *The Book of Jewish Food* that Thomas Jefferson sampled fried fish while visiting London and reported that he ate "fish in the Jewish fashion." So, what would make it Jewish? Victorian chef Alexis Soyer explained the moniker in his 1845 cookbook, *A Shilling Cookery for the People*. He included a recipe for precisely that dish, "Fried Fish, Jewish Fashion." It called for oil, not lard.

As for the chips part of the wildly popular fish and chips equation, those fried potatoes probably originated in Belgium, not from the Tribe.

Fish is healthful and delicious, so go wild! Or farmed, if you prefer.



### Chraime: Moroccan Fish in Spicy Tomato Sauce

The word "*chraime*" comes from the Arabic word for "hot," but you can adjust the seasoning on this recipe to suit your own personal taste. What makes the dish even better is that prep time is less than 30 minutes!

#### INGREDIENTS:

- 2 pounds of firm, white-fleshed fish (I used haddock)
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 5 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 large onions, chopped
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 28-ounce can diced tomatoes
- 1 long hot Italian pepper, seeds removed then chopped
- 2 teaspoons cumin
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 cup water
- ¼ cup fresh cilantro, chopped (or parsley if you can't stand cilantro)

#### DIRECTIONS:

- Sauté the minced garlic olive oil over medium heat for about 30 seconds.
- Add the onions and sauté until caramelized, 3 to 4 minutes.
- Add the spices and the tomato paste, and sauté until fragrant.
- Add the chopped tomatoes and stir. Cover the pot and let simmer for 10 minutes.
- Mash the softened tomatoes with a vegetable masher.
- Add the water and stir until combined.
- Carefully place the fish filets into the pot, and spoon making sure to cover well with the tomato sauce.
- Cover the pan and simmer for 10 minutes. Turn the fish over and season with salt and pepper.
- Sprinkle the cilantro or parsley over the fish, cover the pan and cook another 5 to 8 minutes until the fish is ready.

**Carol Goodman Kaufman** has just published the second picture book in what is planned as a series about nature for young children. Written under the name Carolinda Goodman, *Pirate Ships* and *Shooting Stars* is written in rhyme, and its lively stanzas encourage young children to use their imaginations when looking up at the sky. From rainbows to constellations to pictures in the clouds, Kaufman believes there is much to see if only they lift their eyes.

In addition to her work for children, Kaufman also writes under her "real" name about food history (including for the *Berkshire Jewish Voice*), and her first novel, a murder mystery, will drop in 2023.