

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Jewish Soul Food: From Minsk to Marrakesh – Global Cooking to Satisfy Guf and Nefesh

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



It was such fun cooking my way through Ottolenghi and Tamimi's cookbook, *Jerusalem*, that I've decided to try another. This time it's Janna Gur's recent volume, *Jewish Soul Food: From Minsk to Marrakesh* (Schocken, 2014), a large format, beautifully illustrated volume whose photographs are cause for salivating. Anybody who comes within ten feet of my kitchen, whether family, friend, or plumber, must sample the results of my experiments.

I started my journey with Gur's version of krupnik. No, not the honey-spiced vodka of the same name, but the delicious Polish mushroom barley soup. More like a stew than a soup, it is chock full of stick-to-your

ribs ingredients perfect for a chilly night (luckily – or not – we had a cold streak in June): barley, two kinds of mushroom, onions, garlic, carrots, celeriac, parsnip, potatoes, and more. Fall will be here sooner than we like to admit, so try this soup.

I had noticed that many recipes from both Gur's and Ottolenghi's cookbooks call for preserved lemons, a condiment commonly used in Indian, North African, and Cambodian cuisine, so I decided to try my hand at making them. I was, frankly, a bit nervous to pull out the mason jars – visions of botulism poisoning dancing in my head – but then relieved to learn that the Bell company now advises that putting them through a cycle in the dishwasher is good enough to prevent a hideous death.

The lemons sat for a month in the fridge steeping in spices and chili peppers, at which point said flavorings were removed. Then they sat alone in their lemon juice bath for another couple months.

The lemons' inaugural appearance came in the form of a Moroccan Spicy Carrot Salad, an appetizer commonly seen on meze platters – and for good reason. Their bright color makes for a sunny visual contrast to the darker eggplant and tabouli salads, while the lemons add a notable punch to the salad, assisted ably by garlic, cumin, and mint.

Another salad I tried was Blue Ones and Red Ones, a Romanian dish from Gur's childhood that she claims is the best eggplant salad she's ever tasted. It is not that for me, but the combination of eggplants, tomatoes, onions, and garlic provides tang and texture. As for the onions, I would recommend using a sweet variety such as vidalia, so as not to overpower the other ingredients.

Our first entrée from the book was Salona, an Iraqi sweet and sour fish casserole made with eggplant and tomatoes. The house smelled wonderful and the dish featured an interesting blend of flavors. The eggplant, however, was a bit tough, so using the long and thin ichiban variety, cut into coins, might yield more tender results, and eliminate the extra step of peeling.

T'bit (Stuffed Chicken and Rice Hamen with Honey and Spices), is a Sephardic version of cholent, the long-cooking stew observant Jews prepare for the Shabbat afternoon meal. This Iraqi version calls for baharat, a mix of spices that includes cardamom, nutmeg, ginger, allspice, cinnamon, salt, and pepper. The heady aroma of the chicken cooking in spiced rice filled the house with anticipation, and we were rewarded with an excellent meal (I was thrilled, because the *mehutanim* were with us for the weekend). The chicken fell off the bone, so much so that I would recommend letting the bird cool after taking it out of the oven so that you can remove the skin and bones before serving.

The two former recipes both call for grated tomatoes and onions in addition to chopped, something I had never encountered before. I'm not sure that this step actually added much to the recipes, so you can probably skip this if you are short on time.

My favorite recipe in the book (so far) was Bulgarian Peppers Stuffed with Rice and Meat. We don't use red meat in our house very often, so preparing this recipe was a special occasion, and I prayed that it would be worth the cholesterol. Was it ever. The variety of textures – onions, pine nuts, ground beef – paired beautifully with the savory flavors and aromas. Be forewarned that the recipe is way off on several points, however. The called-for ten to twelve peppers for ten ounces of meat is pretty stingy. I used a pound of ground beef for seven large peppers. And, the recipe's call for a cooking time of one and a half hours would have rendered my peppers into mush. I found they were perfect at forty-five minutes. As a bonus, the orange peppers looked like cheerful little pumpkins with jaunty caps, making me file this recipe away for use on Sukkot, when stuffed foods are traditional fare to honor the harvest holiday.

The first Jerusalem kugel I ever saw was actually in Jerusalem, at the Yeshurun synagogue on King George Street. Tall and imposing, it was unlike any kugel I had ever tasted, a contrast of sweet and spicy. The very few ingredients in Gur's Ashkenazi Jerusalemite Jerusalem kugel recipe include a full tablespoon of black pepper that, combined with caramelized sugar, made for an unusual result. The family loved it. I could take it or leave it.

For dessert, I decided on Bonnie's Jam and Pecan Rugelach, an American twist on the traditional Ashkenazi pastry. Using apricot preserves, toasted pecans, brown sugar, and cinnamon in a dough made with lots of butter and cream cheese, it was decadently rich – and delicious. We and the *mehutanim* polished off three dozen in three days.

Deadline loomed, so I had to stop before trying more dessert recipes. My bathroom scale is heaving a sigh of relief, but I've given it notice that I still have Sep-

hardic date-filled cookies and flourless double almond cookies on my to-do list.

Jewish Soul Food, while providing a nice selection of recipes from Diaspora kitchens, suffers from a lack of thoroughness in the editing. Throughout the book, I found several glaring errors and omissions that were frustrating. Gur, for example, tells the reader that it is okay to put the eggplant into the oven or broiler for Blue Ones and Red Ones, but doesn't say for how long or at what temperature to do so. In the rugelach recipe, her neglecting to advise the reader to roll the dough out on a floured surface can lead to messy results for the inexperienced baker. And sometimes, the title of the recipe and its components don't match. Honey was in the long name of T'bit, but was not listed among the ingredients. The stew was fine without the honey, but could it have been so much better with it?

Moroccan Spicy Carrot Salad

Serves 6 to 8

I chose to make the pickled lemons myself because I like to do stuff like that. To make this recipe a lot faster (the lemons take several months to cure), hike thee to your nearest specialty grocer and buy them.



Ingredients:

6 medium carrots, sliced into ¾-inch (2-cm) coins	below or store-bought)
3 cups water	5 garlic cloves, minced
1½ teaspoons sugar	3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
1½ teaspoons salt	1 teaspoon ground cumin
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice	¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
1 to 2 tablespoons harissa	Salt
1 tablespoon pickled (Moroccan) lemons, finely chopped (see	¼ cup fresh cilantro or mint leaves, chopped

Directions:

Put the sliced carrots in a saucepan and add the water, sugar, salt, and lemon juice.

Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer, partially covered, for 10 to 12 minutes, until the carrots are tender but still have some bite.

Transfer the carrots to a bowl (save some of the cooking liquid).

Add the harissa, pickled lemons, garlic, lemon juice, cumin, olive oil, salt, and about ¼ cup of the cooking liquid and mix.

Let cool. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

Refrigerate for a few hours, preferably overnight, to let the flavors meld. The salad will keep for 3 to 4 days in the fridge.

Before serving, bring to room temperature and toss with the cilantro or mint.

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