

## BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

## TRAVELING WITH JEWISH TASTE

## Open Sesame

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Many Sunday mornings throughout my childhood, my dad would pick me up from Hebrew School and head toward Sam Mandell's delicatessen on Columbus Avenue. While he shopped for pastrami and rolled beef, I would gaze at the countertop, on which sat boxes adorned with the image of a mustachioed and turbaned man. And every once in a while, if my prayers were answered, he (my dad, not the man) would buy me a bar of said man's halvah.

Of course, Joyva still uses the man with the turban as its logo, but I no longer dream about halvah. Unless, of course, it is the variety of the

candy found at Mamlechet Halvah (Halvah Kingdom), one of the dozens of food stalls found in the Mahaneh Yehudah market in Jerusalem — and I'm sure at other open-air markets. In fact, the "king" has several stalls tucked in among the market's many alleys. His offerings are true ambrosia.

And "variety" is the operative word. Unlike the limited choices we had, and still have here, the king's super fresh sweet comes in dozens of flavors. There's even a sugar-free halvah in several flavors.

Back then, I didn't know from sesame. I just knew that halvah satisfied a craving for sweets. Nor did I know that the candy isn't the only food that is based on the seed. It took a year of living and working with Mizrahi Jews in Israel to discover the culinary joys of sesame.

One of the most basic uses of sesame seeds is their oil. When they are pressed, the paste that remains is tahina, based on the Arabic word tahn, which means ground. Tahina can serve on its own as a dip or as part of the recipe for hummus. For decades, as Middle Eastern foods gradually made their way across the ocean, hummus, with or without tahina, was basically it. But once the Israeli food scene entered the firmament of Michelin stars, I found the paste as an ingredient in fabulous savory dishes created by renowned Israeli chefs like Yotam Ottolenghi, Alon Shaya, and Michael Solomonov.

I don't have any data on how much sesame we Americans consume, but Israelis reportedly eat 50,000 tons of the stuff every year. That's a whopping eleven-plus pounds a year. And most of that is in the form of tahina.



Popeye's memorable line "Open, sez me!" is from *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba's Forty Thieves*.

The Mizrahi branch of our Jewish extended family had been using sesame seeds for thousands of years throughout the Middle East and Africa before the establishment of the modern State of Israel. But after the Declaration of Independence, many Arab countries expelled their Jews, and between the years 1948 and 1951, over a quarter of a million came to Israel. They brought their cuisine with them, and sesame seeds were part and parcel to many of their dishes. Here in the States, the seeds are used mainly to flavor and garnish various foods, such as our beloved bagel.

Jews have also used sesame oil for non-culinary purposes. In fact, the Mishnah even has a discussion about whether or not sesame oil is suitable for kindling Shabbat lights. The late Gil Marks writes, "Talmud explained, 'What would the Babylonians do [if only olive oil was permitted for the Sabbath lights] who have nothing but sesame oil?' Apparently, olive

oil was not readily available to the captives by the rivers of Babylon.

Elsewhere in the Diaspora, Indians called their Jewish neighbors Shanwar Teli (Saturday oilmen) because they made their living by preparing and selling sesame oil. The sobriquet came from the fact that the Jews refrained from working on Shabbat.

Experts disagree on the exact origins of the sesame plant, but it likely originated in Asia or East Africa. Documentary evidence supports both claims. Ancient Egyptians are reported to have used the ground seed as a flour. But it was widely used in Asia as well. At least one early Hindu legend claims that sesame seeds are blessed by the god Yama and therefore represent immortality.

The Chinese have employed the seeds for at least 5,000 years, and not just for food. They have burned the seed's oil and used the resulting soot to prepare the highest quality ink. The substance is variously known as India ink and Chinese ink, adding to the confusion regarding the seed's origins.

Much further west, the Romans ground their sesame seeds with the spice cumin to make a spread.

Sesame boasts two special features: 1) the oil is stable enough to resist rancidity; and 2) the seed itself is high in protein, thiamin, and Vitamin B6. But it's the wonderfully nutty aroma and taste that makes me think of heaven on Earth.



## Roasted butternut squash and red onion with tahini and za'atar

Adapted from one by Yotam Ottolenghi

Serves 4

I've made this recipe at least a dozen times since first encountering it. While Ottolenghi offers this as a side dish, the tahini and pine nuts provide enough protein, and the vegetables enough substance, that you could legitimately serve it as a vegetarian entrée.

## INGREDIENTS:

1 large butternut squash, cut into 3/4 by 2 1/2 inch wedges

2 red onions, cut into 1 1/4 inch pieces

3 1/2 tablespoons olive oil

4 tablespoons light tahini paste

1 1/2 tablespoons lemon juice

2 tablespoons water

1 small clove garlic, crushed

4 tablespoons pine nuts

1 tablespoon za'atar

1 tablespoon coarsely chopped parsley

Maldon sea salt

Freshly ground black pepper

## DIRECTIONS:

Heat the oven to 425 degrees. Put the squash and onions in a large bowl, add the oil, a teaspoon of salt and some black pepper, and toss well.

Spread, skin down, on a baking sheet and roast for 40 minutes until the vegetables have taken on some color and are cooked through. Keep an eye on the onions: they may cook faster than the squash, so may need to be removed earlier. Remove from the oven and leave to cool.

Put the tahini in a small bowl with the lemon juice, water, garlic and a quarter-teaspoon of salt. Whisk to the consistency of honey, adding more water or tahini as necessary.

Pour the remaining oil into a small frying pan on a medium-low heat.

Add the pine nuts and half a teaspoon of salt, cook for two minutes, stirring (watching carefully!), until the nuts are golden brown, then tip the nuts and oil into a small bowl.

To serve, spread the vegetables on a platter and drizzle the sauce over all. Scatter the pine nuts and oil on top, followed by the za'atar

If you've ever read "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" from *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, you will know that, at least in one version, sesame seeds were once thought to have magical power enough to open a cave holding magic treasure, as in "Open Sesame" (not Popeye's "Open Sez Me!") However, it turns out that this phrase only appears in Antoine Galland's 18th century French translation of the *Tales*. My sources tell me that no earlier Arabic reference to "open sesame" can be found anywhere.

However (there's always a "however"), the fact remains that farmers may indeed have developed an incantation of sorts around the time of the sesame harvest. According to agricultural sources, timing is everything when it comes to harvesting the plant. If one waits too long, the pods can burst open and scatter the seeds widely. Great for propagation. Not so much for gathering and selling. But reap too early and the flavor of the seed, and its oil, will be blah.

So, "open sesame" may be what farmers chant when they hope to catch the seeds!

**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.