

## The varied culinary traditions of Hanukkah

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Growing up in a small town in Western Massachusetts, my Hebrew School circle of friends consisted of kids who, like me, were the grandchildren of Ashkenazim, Eastern European immigrants. At Hanukkah we decorated with construction paper chains (no lights or tinsel for us). We lit multicolored candles on the hanukkiyah, the Hanukkah candelabra, that my maternal grandmother had carried from Lithuania. Those candles came from the same little blue boxes you can buy at the supermarket today. No fancy schmancy, hand-dipped candles in those days.

Gifts were simple, too, but to raise the excitement level my parents hid them throughout the house. I can still remember the thrill of finding a John Gnagy Learn to Draw set under the den sofa. (Unfortunately, despite Mr. Gnagy's valiant efforts, I never did learn to draw.)

And the food: latkes, potato pancakes, with applesauce or sour cream, and tiny yellow mesh bags filled with gold-foil-covered gelt, chocolate coins.

That was it for Hanukkah. Then I moved to Israel and landed at Kibbutz Malkiya, so far north that it sat right on the border with Lebanon. The kibbutzniks were mostly Mizrahim, immigrants from Arab countries, and their gastronomic offerings were quite different from those to which I was accustomed. Vegetable salad, olives, and yogurt for breakfast, anyone?

When Hanukkah came around, I was working in one of the kindergarten houses, where I expected to see crispy, golden latkes served to the children. No, that's for the Ashkenazim, the head nanny told me. She proceeded to introduce me to sufganiyot, jelly donuts, and set me to

labor injecting raspberry jam into dozens of dough balls prior to frying.

Curious as to the source of the tradition, I did some research. Jews in North Africa have a long Hanukkah tradition of eating sfenj, small, deepfried doughnuts. In Israel, where Jews gathered 'from the four corners of the Earth,' the North Africans met and mingled with the Eastern Europeans. Polish ponchkes and African sfenj merged to become sufganiyot.

Since that time, I have learned of other Hanukkah culinary traditions from around the globe, but two unique characteristics define them: they are all either fried in oil or contain cheese. Sometimes both. (Except for brisket. Why brisket is considered the centerpiece of a traditional Hanukkah meal alongside latkes, I don't understand. It is neither fried nor dairy. But, there you have it. A meal of brisket and latkes is considered by many as the quintessential Ashkenazi Hanukkah

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**Cheese Bourekas** GETTY IMAGES

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## Hanukkah

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repast.)

The custom of frying in oil is based on the story of the Maccabees, who organized a revolt against the

who had little time to sit for a full meal.

The tradition of eating cheese-based foods is grounded in the story of Judith. Although the book does not mention Hanukkah and is not even included in the Jewish canon (nor is the Book of the Maccabees, for that matter), it is believed to have been written about

oppressive Syrian Greek King Antiochus IV Epiphanes. At war's end, when the Maccabees returned to Jerusalem to reclaim and rededicate the Holy Temple, they found that the troops fighting under the general Lysias had desecrated it. The legend tells us that the Maccabees found one sealed jar in the Temple that contained enough olive oil for just one day. But that small amount miraculously burned for eight days, thus providing time until more ritually pure oil could be pressed and brought to Jerusalem.

Deep-fried fritters called bimuelos in Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language, are the most popular Sephardic Hanukkah treat. They are one of the foods emblematic of conversos, the Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism during the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, but who secretly practiced their Judaism. After the Expulsion from Spain in 1492, Sephardim spread throughout the Mediterranean world, where in some communities they top their fritters with a honey syrup flavored with orange or rose water.

My Cuban-born friend Mattie Castiel (aka Worcester's intrepid commissioner of Health & Human Services) prepares the bimuelos recipe learned from her Turkish ancestors. She once offered to pit her bimuelos against my latkes any day. Nobody loses in that contest. You're on, Mattie!

Greeks call similar deep-fried puffs loukoumades, and they dip them in honey or sugar. They believe the Maccabees ate these pastries during the revolt because they were easy to prepare for fighters

the same seven-year-long war. We read that in his quest to conquer Judea, the general Holofernes besieged the town of Bethulia, cutting off its water supply. Though the town elders were ready to surrender, hoping to avoid starvation, the Hasmonean Judith was not. The beautiful widow was able to talk her way into Holofernes' tent. Once inside, she fed him cheese. Salty cheese. The cheese made him thirsty, so she gave him wine to quench that thirst. Lots of wine. Which of course made him drunk — and sleepy. Once the general fell asleep, Judith grabbed his sword and decapitated him, bringing the head back to her village in a basket.

The next morning, when Holofernes' soldiers beheld the headless body of their leader, they fled in terror. In honor of Judith's courage, we incorporate cheese into our Hanukkah menus. Turkish boyos (spinach and cheese filo pastries), Middle Eastern sambusak (empanada-like pastries), and bourekas (Middle Eastern savory turnovers) all contain salty cheeses similar to the one Holofernes would have eaten, while cheese blintzes and farmer cheese pancakes provide a sweet take on the tradition.

Whether you go sweet or savory, we wish you a happy — and delicious — Hanukkah!

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