

Beyond latke: Branching out for Hanukkah

By Sharyn Jackson
Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

Jewish holiday meals are often oozing with symbolism, and Hanukkah is no exception. The festival, which begins this year at sundown on Dec. 22, celebrates ancient Jews’ victory over an oppressor and commemorates a miracle in the aftermath of battle. In the desecrated Temple in Jerusalem, enough oil to light a candelabra for only one day astonishingly burned for eight.

On holiday tables worldwide, foods fried in oil represent the marvel that occurred that week more than 2,200 years ago.

“Many Jewish holidays have symbolic foods, which is part of what gives Jewish rites of passage a lot of sensory memory and pleasure about them,” said Alana Newhouse, editor of the 2019 “The 100 Most Jewish Foods.”

In America, perhaps the most visible of those symbolic deep-fried foods is the latke, a pancake of grated potatoes and onions, bound with egg and fried to a crisp like a hockey-puck-sized hash brown. Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe popularized the dish, now available on many American delis’ and diners’ year-round menus, served with sour cream and applesauce.

“It’s very hard to eat a latke and not think about grease,” said Newhouse.

But a potato isn’t the only ingredient worth frying. All manner of fritters, both sweet and savory, would be right at home at a Hanukkah dinner. Breaded proteins and deep-fried doughs also work. Sufganiyot, jelly doughnuts brought to Israel by Polish Jews, are a Hanukkah staple in that country and, increasingly, here.

“It was interesting to me to learn just how much Jews fry food, both for Hanukkah but also year-round,” said Leah Koenig, the author of several books on Jewish cooking, including the encyclopedic “The Jewish Cookbook,” which has a whole chapter on fritters and savory pastries eaten by Jews all over the globe. “There are a lot of things that are latke-adjacent.”

While she stays true to her family’s latkes-and-brisket tradition, Koenig recommends an international Hanukkah meal of Roman-style fried artichokes, and green-flecked



chicken, green onion and ginger fritters from Calcutta called arook tahine. In fact, with recipes for Turkish leek fritters, Italian sweet rice fritters and Syrian herb omelet fritters, you could put together a “global latke table,” Koenig said.

Iraqi Jews will eat savory handheld turnovers, called sambusak, on Hanukkah. Stuffed with a cheese filling, the easy-to-make pastries can be baked. But fried in oil, the dough becomes a chewy puff that merges with the melty filling. It’s a heavenly appetizer served hot.

Newhouse’s grandmother, who hailed from Macedonia, often made a leek-and-lamb patty, seasoned with cinnamon, allspice and cayenne pepper. Newhouse learned later that these keftes de prasa were a Hanukkah specialty because they, too, were fried.

“It comes out of the whole schmaltz universe of thinking,” Newhouse said.

California-raised, Israel-based cookbook author Adeena Sussman also uses oil as her guide for the holiday. In her book “Sababa: Fresh, Sunny Flavors From My Israeli Kitchen,” find recipes for her Hanukkah favorites, such as broccoli and cottage cheese pancakes, pistachio-lemon bars made with both olive and coconut oils, and Moroccan deep-fried flower-shaped pastries called shabakia.

She also suggests making a bread spread of garlic confit, which can be used in salad dressing or as a rub for a roast chicken. “The resulting garlic oil, fragrant yet mild, is a multi-use Hanukkah miracle of its own,” she said.

For a holiday main course, try Sussman’s sesame schnitzel, a crisp chicken cutlet that’s been seasoned with dukkah, an Egyptian hazelnut and spice blend that’s also delicious atop hummus.

In Israel, jelly doughnuts are a “major craze,” said Suss-

man, “with bakeries attempting to outdo one another with outlandish flavors like dulce de leche and nutella-filled doughnuts, or assorted syrups injected into the doughnuts with plastic syringes.”

But while they’re iconic, they’re not to everyone’s liking. In “The 100 Most Jewish Foods,” subtitled “A Highly Debatable List” for good reason, famed Israeli-English chef Yotam Ottolenghi called the doughnut “a greasy, tacky, sugary oddball, injected with smooth, gummy red jam that hasn’t seen a single berry in its life. This could easily be shortlisted for the worst Jewish foods, quite possibly topping the list.”

For a twist on the jelly doughnut, skip the jelly, go smaller, and try bimuelos, doughnut-hole fritters that originated as a Hanukkah dessert among Sephardic Jews in pre-Inquisition Spain.

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Margoe Edwards/Dreamtime-TNS
There’s more to Hanukkah food than latkes.

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HAGENDIRECT

INSPIRE

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As the rules required, he wrote an essay on his life story and not long after was accepted. He could not have imagined what would come next.

Soon, he was on his first airplane ride, a trip to Massachusetts to learn of such things as hot running water, in-room light switches and McDonald’s. At school, he started running, and was good at it, earning a scholarship at Northern Arizona. With an elevation approaching 7,000 feet, Flagstaff is a well-known training site for long-distance runners.

And Lomong thrived there.

In 2007, not long after our interview, he won the 1,500 meters at the NCAA championships. A month later, he became a U.S. citizen.

In 2008, Lomong made the U.S. Olympic team with a surprise third-place finish in the 1,500 meters.

And, with his remarkable story as a backdrop, he was chosen to carry the U.S. flag at the opening ceremonies in Beijing.

He won the U.S. Title in the 1,500 in 2009 and 2010 and with a third-place finish in the 5,000 meters qualified for the London Olympics.

Through it all, with help from HBO, Lopez was reunited with his family in Africa and arranged to sponsor two younger brothers who are now running collegiately. He started a foundation aimed at providing aid to those in need in his native South Sudan.

At 34, he’s still running, winning the 10,000 at the 2018 U.S. Championships.

With an unfailingly positive attitude and a perpetual smile, Lopez knows how fortunate he is, especially considering his journey.

“It’s great, it’s amazing,” he said back in 2010. “Again, why me? I am just so blessed.”

Then there was a freckle-

faced, redheaded 11-year-old boy with an astonishingly terrific attitude who I interviewed in 1998 at his family’s home in Keizer, near Salem.

You see, Kacey McCallister has no legs. When he was 5 years old, they were severed below the knee when he was struck by a truck.

But Kacey did not feel sorry for himself. There was not one word of self-pity when I talked to him.

He loved sports and played Little League baseball. He was a catcher and would propel himself by scooting along, propelled by his arms.

“I realized there was nothing I could do to change it unless they come out with something that can grow legs,” he told me back then. “I just go with what I have.”

As a high school senior, he was runnerup in his weight class at the state championships.

The attitude that Kacey exhibited to me that day has served him well. He’s married

PERSIMMON

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“Fuyu” persimmons are never astringent (puckery) even when green. They have firm flesh like an apple and a round, flattened shape, orange in color.

“Hachiya” fruit is slightly pointed and is astringent unless very soft.

The American persimmon (Dispyros

Virginians) grows in zones 3-9. It’s a small tree with attractive gray-brown bark fissured into a checkered pattern. The leaves are oval, broad and glossy. Fruit is small, 1 1/2 to 2 inches, roundish, orange to brown and astringent until very soft.

An old variety is “Meader” and was commonly grown. Astringent until very soft. I’m trying to grow a Meader

persimmon here but it is not thriving so I suspect it should be in zone 6 or 7.

After the leaves drop in the autumn, persimmon trees are very beautiful with all the orange fruit still hanging on the tree. Persimmon wood is a highly prized hardwood related closely to ebony.

If you have garden questions or comments, please write to greengardencolumn@yahoo.com. Thanks for reading!