

The Roots and Routs of Jewish Cooking

Joan Nathan

Description: For the past several years, and really throughout the majority of her professional life, Joan Nathan has been digging into the roots and routes of Jewish cooking investigating how food has changed and adapted as Jews moved throughout the Diaspora, and how the foods themselves have been transported across countries after centuries of exploration and conquests. She will talk about a few of her findings, such as the curious question of cornmeal's popularity in Italy and Romania, how a New World tuber came to be known as the Jerusalem artichoke, and how the spice trade has shifted and evolved over the centuries, changing not only the flavors of our food but also the very nations that grow and trade them.

SETTING KING SOLOMON'S TABLE

A speech based on excerpts from the introduction to Joan Nathan's forthcoming book, *King Solomon's Table: The Roots and Routes of Jewish Cooking* (Knopf, 2016)

Joan Nathan considers food through the lenses of history, culture, and tradition. She regularly contributes to *The New York Times* and *Tablet Magazine* and is the author of ten award-winning cookbooks. Her most recent book is *Quiches, Kugels, and Couscous: My Search for Jewish Cooking in France*, which was named one of the ten best cookbooks of 2010 by NPR, *Food and Wine*, and *Bon Appétit* magazines. In 1994, Nathan's *Jewish Cooking in America* won both the James Beard Award and the IACP/Julia Child Cookbook of the Year Award. Eleven years later, these awards were bestowed upon her 2005 cookbook, *The New American Cooking*. She is presently working on a book for Alfred Knopf, entitled *King Solomon's Table: Joan's Journey with the Roots and Routes of Jewish Cooking*. Ms. Nathan was born in Providence, Rhode Island. She graduated from the University of Michigan with a master's degree in French literature and earned a master's in public administration from Harvard University. The mother of three grown children, Ms. Nathan lives in Washington, D.C. and Martha's Vineyard with her husband, attorney Allan Gerson. For more information, visit her website at: joannathan.com.

On a recent family trip to India, we went to Kerala, a tropical state on the southwestern Malabar Coast. At an Indian Jewish home in Kochi, I bit into a potato *pastel* -- a dish originating in Spain, but seasoned with spices from India. Next I ate a rich chicken curry flavored with cinnamon from Ceylon, cilantro – (called “parsley from China”), and ginger and pepper from India. Each bite held its own roots and its own story, each ingredient giving clues to the journey of the dish.

It was then that I realized how this food, at an outpost in the Jewish world, crystallized an important insight about the Jewish people: no matter how you observe Judaism, as you sit around a Sabbath or holiday table laden with specific food,

stories come tumbling out that have held your family together through generations. The spices and the countries may vary, but the stories are strikingly similar. But even more than stories bind us together -- the laws of kashrut, the Sabbath foods, and the proscriptions for Passover have held Jews together for 3,000 years as they journey throughout the world. It is quite amazing and can even take my breath away, particularly when family and guests gather at my Passover table and I realize that the story is being recited all over the world on the same day, as we all carry on traditions culminated through years of travels and explorations.

What makes Jewish cuisine unique – and the reason that I love studying it so much – is that unlike the cuisine of empires that is influenced by the cultures it vanquishes, or national cuisines that have a homeland or stable center with defined

boundaries, Jews have left their homes again and again whether following trade routes or fleeing prejudice. As their geographic home in the land of Israel was relatively short-lived, Jews, like Armenians, Lebanese, and so many others, have riffed on a variety of culinary traditions. Yet despite this lack of physical borders, Jewish cuisine is bound, sometimes stubbornly, by allegiance (no matter how strict) to the laws of *kashrut*, or the dietary laws.

As a wandering people Jews have impacted so many of the cuisines of the world, so the history of Jewish food is almost like a history of the world's food.

The beautiful walls of the Paradesi Synagogue in Kochi are adorned with the history of the Jews in India. One inscription includes the speculation that Jewish traders may have reached India from Judea, crossing the Indian Ocean during the reign of King Solomon. Of course, I thought, since, as scholars have told us, until the 11th century, 90 percent of the Jews lived in the Middle East, with the Indian Ocean as their major “highway.”

Unable to go back in history to the Solomon period in India to learn more about this arduous journey and what spurred the Hebrews to make it, I did the next best thing: I visited Chendamangalam, a tiny village about 20 miles up the southwestern coast, overflowing with coconut, mango, and cinnamon trees and cardamom and pepper vines. As I walked toward the bank of the nearby Periyar River, which flows into the Arabian Sea, I imagined ancient Hebrew adventurers and traders arriving on the shores and marveling at the lushness of the terrain.

Although we have little evidence as to when, it is clear that Hebrew traders traveled to this area in search of spices, stones, timber, and ivory tusks as early as the 10th century BC, about the time that King Solomon was said to be seeking jewels and other precious treasures from far and wide to adorn his Temple in Jerusalem.

These brave souls, waiting for favorable trade winds to propel their ancient dhow boats across the Arabian Sea and into the Indian Ocean, settled in this verdant spot. Some probably married local women, integrating customs and native foods into their diets, while others returned to ancient Israel months, and maybe even years, later with spices, jewels, and other goods. The voyage would have been difficult, but the traders knew how to sail with the winds and the seasons, a skill most probably learned from the Phoenicians. Through the centuries, especially after the 1492 expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula, more Jews came to India, establishing synagogues and small Jewish communities. At one time they numbered between 20,000 and 30,000 in all of India, until almost the entire population left for Israel in the mid 1950s.

Whenever I am in Jerusalem, I make sure to sit at a coffee shop, early in the morning, inside David’s Tower in the old city. I love to think about the early city as I watch the clergy – Greek Catholic, Armenian, Roman Catholic, and Jewish – go their separate ways.

King Solomon, whose temple was supposedly part of the Western wall, is reputed to have had a rapacious appetite for all aspects of life. He was a large exporter of wheat and olive oil, which he paid to the Phoenician king Hiram, for timber and the use of skilled workmen (I Kings v. 25 [Hebr.]). Solomon ruled for 40 years, amassing enormous wealth. He is also said to have had 700 wives (including a daughter of the Pharaoh) and 300 mistresses. A prolific writer, he supposedly penned some 3000 songs and 1005 proverbs. Solomon sought many spices like cinnamon, calamus, myrrh, and saffron. People from near and far heard of his greatness and brought gold, silver, livestock, and spices to adorn his temple.

When King Solomon's Temple was destroyed in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar's army, thousands of Jews (as many as 15,000 by some accounts) were exiled through present-day Syria and Lebanon to Iraq, as described in the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations. Ezra the Scribe brought the Torah, also known as the five books of Moses, from Babylon and reintroduced it to Jerusalem.) Babylon was a much more cosmopolitan city than Jerusalem, and, as we saw with the cuneiform tablets at Yale and others that have been found since, had a thriving developed cuisine that easily adapted to the dietary laws.

It was not surprising then that when Cyrus the Great of Persia captured Babylon in 539 BC, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem, many stayed behind in Babylon, and some left for Persia, the Spice Road and Yemen in southern Arabia. Later some may have been the first Jewish peoples to taste spinach when it came to Sassanian Persia from India and Nepal. It soon went to Greece where they called it *spinako*, from the Persian *aspanak*.

Babylon, and later Baghdad, with its industry, commerce, and rabbinical scholarship, eventually became the intellectual center of the Middle East, home to great Jewish thinkers with the Babylonian Talmud being written there between the third and fifth centuries and finished in about 700 AD.

Babylon was also a center for good food. *Sikbaja*, fried and pickled fish which would become *escabeche* in Spain, sweet and sour meat dishes. *kufta* (meatballs that Jews in Spain would later call *albondigas*), creamy rice desserts, and macaroons all started in this fertile crescent. Another custom, developed here earlier than anywhere else on earth except for India and China, was eating domesticated chicken. It was no coincidence, then, that *t'beet*, a chicken cooked overnight in the oven, became the Sabbath main dish of the Babylonian Jews.

The Jews returning to Jerusalem from Babylon brought many of these new cooking ideas like adding date dipping sauce, called *halik*, meaning "hurried" in Akkadian, to their Passover Seder. They renamed the sauce "charoset," coming from the second or third millennium BC Akkadian word *chrasu*, and meaning "to bind" or "bring together."

Benjamin of Tudela, the first census taker of the Jewish people, wrote a book of

his journeys around the then known world in 1173 AD. According to him, until the 12th century, the 40,000-strong Jewish community of Baghdad was governed by the Caliph, descended from the house of Muhammad. The community was also overseen by the princely office of the Exilarch (meaning the leader of the Jewish Diaspora in Babylon), a position inherited from generation to generation. “In Baghdad (the Jews) dwell in security, prosperity and honor under the great Caliph;” wrote Benjamin.

I am one of the lucky ones today who, as a food writer specializing in Jewish food, can travel the world, peeking into people’s soup pots, looking for the best Jewish recipes everywhere. No one can define Jewish food anymore as only Eastern European brisket, bagels, babka and kasha varnishkes. With the deluge of cookbooks coming out in the past few years, increased travel abroad, and of course with the creation of the internet and food blogs, Jewish food continues to spread anew all around the world.

Since the time of the Bible there have been Jews living in the land of Israel. But it wasn’t until the 19th century that a large immigration returned. At first, either the very religious or Zionists came, those who felt that a homeland for Jews in Israel was the only answer to the horrible conditions of Eastern European Jews and Jews left without a country. The Balfour Declaration in 1917, announcing the British government’s favorable view of establishing a new state of Israel, followed in short succession by the horror of the Nazi period, brought the bedraggled to rekindle life once again and establish a new Israel, where today there are over six million Jews.

At first, the early Zionists tried to recreate the food of Eastern Europe, but gradually, with the passing generations, the food of Israel has come to mean a great mix of food from the region.

But, whenever I visit Israel, I realize how dynamic the country has become. There, amidst newly planted vineyards, just-refurbished grain mills, and cheese boutiques, you’ll find a new generation of Israelis channeling their passion, energy and creativity towards eating and drinking.

Perhaps it’s because so many young people are discouraged by politics. Perhaps it’s part of the worldwide rediscovery of sustainable foodways. Whatever the reason for the revolution, each time I go to Israel I am surprised about the energy, creativity, and general development of Israeli cuisine. Youthful chefs are reaching back in history to the Bible for inspiration, and at the same time, reaching towards the future. As this generation of Israelis ventures out to see the world, much as the adventurers in the time of King Solomon, they are enriching the foods of others as well their own.