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# Iconic JEWISH AMERICAN FOODS:

A collection of American  
Jewish recipes from  
*Moment's* award-winning  
Talk of the Table section!



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# The Babka Boom

By Tami Ganeles-Weiser



**W**hat is babka? The iconic Jewish treat is similar to—but not exactly synonymous with—coffee cake (which is lighter, fluffier and sweeter), and it's not quite rugelach (which has a flaky cream cheese dough and is made without yeast). Somewhere in between bread and cake, the (ideally rich and gooey) babka is often layered with cinnamon or chocolate and baked in a loaf pan.

Most evidence suggests that babka is simply a Jewish variation of gentile holiday sweets. It originated from *baba*, a centuries-old, several-feet-tall Eastern European yeasty bread-cake that was studded with fruits or nuts and served on holidays. According to popular theory, the word “babka” is the diminutive of *baba*, which means “grandmother” in many Eastern European tongues; as the cake became smaller, “babka” became a more accurate description. Baba-like bread-cakes are still served on holidays throughout Europe. In Italy, they

are known as *pan-ettone* and *pan d'oro*, and in Germany they're *stollen* and *gugelhupf*.

Although Eastern European immigrants brought their babka recipes with them to America, it took some time for babka to establish itself in the American Jewish culinary scene. Most Jewish immigrants around the turn of the 20th century were poor, and the bakers among them had little time for anything but the essentials. “In America the evidence suggests that the first Jewish bakeries baked only bread,” wrote Stanley Ginsberg and Norman Berg in *Inside the Jewish Bakery: Recipes and Memories from the Golden Age of Jewish Baking*. No cake or cookies, and certainly not babkas. That changed with the postwar economic boom and the abundance of wheat, sugar, butter, eggs and chocolate, which transformed bakeries into pastry shops—and babka into an after-dinner mainstay.

American Jewish bakers changed babka in at least one major way: They made it

pareve, both so that it could be eaten after meat dinners and to make it easier to mass produce. Butter was replaced with Crisco or margarine, which was touted as healthier, less expensive and longer-lasting than butter—part of a baking revolution. Non-dairy babkas also meant leaving out milk—a significant departure from the baking techniques that define a babka, according to most experts. Traditional babka recipes called for scalded or powdered milk (or both), which gave it a distinctive flavor and a mild sweetness. Milk's proteins also created babka's trademark texture, with its many soft layers and resilient, almost stretchy, flakiness. “Simply put,” says Maggie Glezer, author of *A Blessing of Bread: Recipes and Rituals, Memories and Mitzvahs*, “real babka was always *milchik* [dairy].”

For the past 50 years, babkas produced for large-scale distribution have been non-dairy, and for a long time, most came from a single company, Green's. Today, Green's,

founded in 1980 and based in Brooklyn, produces some 2,000 babkas a day and is touted by many as the ur-babka: In 2010, the popular website Serious Eats named Green's the best traditional babka in New York City, saying, "It's everything you'd want babka to be: moist, yeasty, swirly goodness. Never a bad bite."

The modern babka generally comes in two flavors: chocolate and cinnamon. Chocolate wasn't common for European Jewish-style babkas—which tended to be flavored with jam, cinnamon or raisins—but it exploded in popularity in the United States. Despite chocolate and cinnamon's traditional hold, babka bakers in the 21st century have added new flavors. "In addition to the traditional fillings—cocoa and cinnamon—there are babkas with ricotta and raisins, honey and almonds, halvah," says Janna Gur, author of *Jewish Soul Food*. Other versions are savory: Jewish food expert and writer Joan Nathan tracked down a recipe from two-star Michelin chef Thierry Marx of Château Cordeillan-Bages in Pauillac, France, filled with olive tapenade. Some bakeries have even veered into treif, stuffing babka with ham and cheese or sausage and eggs.

In a 1994 episode, the popular sitcom *Seinfeld* played up the purported rivalry between chocolate lovers and cinnamon devotees. The characters Jerry and Elaine stop at a Manhattan bakery to pick up a babka. Elaine wants a chocolate one and declares cinnamon "a lesser babka." Jerry's retort? "Cinnamon takes a back seat to no babka." The feud rages on. Regardless, whether chocolate or cinnamon, as Elaine says, "you can't beat a babka."

## Raspberry and Almond Babka

Recipe by Tami Ganeles-Weiser

This delicate, feathery dough is easy to work with and even better to eat. You can add finely chopped dark chocolate to the filling, or use any top-quality preserves to make this recipe your own.

Makes 3 babkas

### BABKA DOUGH

¾ cup plus 3 tablespoons milk, divided  
2 packages (14 grams) instant yeast  
½ cup granulated sugar, divided  
4 cups bread flour, plus more for dusting, divided  
½ cup nonfat dry milk  
1 teaspoon salt  
4 eggs  
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract  
5 tablespoons unsalted butter, room temperature

### RASPBERRY ALMOND FILLING

1 egg white, lightly beaten  
¼ cup Turbinado (raw) sugar  
1 cup strained raspberry preserves  
1 cup toasted blanched almonds, finely chopped

### DIRECTIONS

1. Make the dough: Pour all but 1 tablespoon of the milk into a saucepan set over medium heat and bring just to a boil, watching it carefully to ensure that it does not spill over the sides. Remove from the heat and let cool to room temperature.
2. Pour milk into the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, and add the yeast, 2 tablespoons of sugar, and ½ cup of the flour. Mix gently to combine and let stand for 7 to 8 minutes; it will be foamy.
3. Add the remaining sugar, the dry milk and salt and mix well. Add 2 of the eggs, the egg yolks and vanilla extract and mix well. Switch to a dough hook and add the remaining flour, 1 cup at a time, while mixing gently. Knead for 5 minutes. Then add the butter and continue to knead for another 3 minutes. It will be a sticky, wet dough at first, but it will become a smooth elastic ball that still sticks to the sides of the bowl a bit.
4. Scrape the dough out of the bowl into a clean, large mixing bowl, cover with a floured kitchen towel, and set aside at room temperature for 2 to 2½ hours until it has doubled in size. (This can also be done by covering the bowl with plastic and a kitchen towel and refrigerating overnight, but you'll need to allow time for the dough to come back to room temperature.)
5. Spray 3 loaf pans with nonstick vegetable oil spray and line each with 2 pieces of parchment paper, one placed lengthwise and one crosswise, with a 3-inch overhang of parchment on each side to allow for easy removal. Place the dough, seam side down, into the pan.
6. Lightly flour a work surface. Divide the dough into 3 pieces. Working with one piece at a time, roll each into an 8- by 14-inch rectangle. Brush lightly with the beaten egg white. Sprinkle with one-third of the sugar. Then sprinkle one-third of the almonds and one-third of the preserves over the top, making sure to leave a border of about ½-inch bare around the edges.
7. Starting from the long side, roll up the dough tightly. Pinch the seam at the end, pressing gently. Lift and bend the roll in half; then twist from one end to the other and place in the prepared pan. Cover with greased plastic and let rise for about 1½ hours, until doubled in size. Repeat with the remaining rectangles of dough and the filling.
8. Preheat oven to 325°F. Make an egg wash by beating the remaining 2 eggs with the remaining 1 tablespoon milk. Using a pastry brush, brush the egg wash over the top. Bake for about 45 minutes, until the tops are firm, the babkas are golden brown, and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out without any dough (there will be filling on it—it's fine!). Cool in the pan for about 5 to 10 minutes. Then, using the paper overhangs, lift out and continue to cool on a cooling rack.



# The Bundt Is Born

By Sarah Breger



In 1950, Rose Joshua and Fannie Schanfeld met with H. David Dalquist, owner of the Scandinavian cookware manufacturing company Nordic Ware, to discuss a proposal. At a Minneapolis Hadassah chapter luncheon, Joshua had told Schanfeld how she missed the heavy, dense cakes of her youth in Germany as opposed to the lighter, fluffier cakes so popular in America.

To make those cakes, in particular the breadlike *kugelbopf*, a tall pan with a hole in the center was required to allow the heat to penetrate the cake's middle and ensure that the dough cooked evenly. These tube pans were also fluted, letting more dough touch the pan's surface to brown. Usually made of fragile ceramics or heavy cast iron, these pans were popular in Europe but hard to find in America.

Schanfeld, "a community organizer at heart" according to her granddaughter Abby, figured there must be a solution.

Through Joshua's husband, who worked in the local food industry, the two women set up the meeting with Dalquist and asked him to create a similar pan. The pans, the women suggested, would find an audience among Hadassah women hankering for a taste of home. Using Joshua's mother's *kugelbopf* pan as a model, Dalquist created an aluminum version—making it lighter and more economical—and added ridges on the base, guaranteeing an even slice. Thus the Bundt pan was born.

The origins of the name "Bundt" remain something of a mystery. Similar cakes in Germany were called Bundkuchen—party or "gathering" cakes. The German word "bund" is related to the word for "bundle" and likely refers to how the fluted pan resembled a bundle of straw or twigs, says Gil Marks in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*. In a history of Nordic Ware, Dalquist writes how he added the "t" for trademarking purposes and to distance the pan from the

pro-Nazi, German-American Bund. However, the word "Bundt" had appeared almost 50 years before Dalquist entered the scene. Three recipes for "Bundt Kuchen" were in the original 1901 edition of *The Settlement Cookbook*, where there are directions to "Grease Bundt form

(a heavy round fluted pan with tube in center) well, and flour lightly." The *Settlement Cookbook*, developed by Jewish women at a Milwaukee settlement house, was a staple in Jewish homes, including those in Minneapolis.

Dalquist sold his new pans to department stores but donated the "seconds" (pans that came off the line with slight imperfections) to Hadassah, which in turn sold them in a successful fundraiser. But aside from Hadassah women, the Bundt pan was not a big seller for the company, and Dalquist considered discontinuing the pan.

Fortunately he didn't, and in 1966, Bundt had its big break. Ella Helfrich of Hous-



The original Bundt pan created by David Dalquist, cofounder of Nordic Ware, in 1950.

ton, Texas, entered her Tunnel of Fudge cake in the 1966 Pillsbury Bake-Off Contest. Her cake, baked in a Bundt pan, came in second and thrust Bundt into the public eye. The Bake-Off fielded more than 200,000 requests for where to buy the pan, and Dalquist began producing Bundt pans around the clock to fill demand. Soon it seemed every household had one. “That’s when it became part of American culture,” says Jessica Reed, a baker and host of the podcast “The Cake Historian.”

Although a Bundt cake is not a specific recipe—almost any cake can be made in the pan and be called a Bundt cake—the most successful Bundts are firm and moist. They should be “halfway between a pound cake and American butter cake,” according to Marks.

There are many reasons why Americans went bananas for the Bundt. While the hole in the middle is functional, it’s also attractive. “Bundts always look very finished,” says Reed. The cake comes out of the pan already decorated, and there is no need for frosting or other embellishments.

Bundt cakes are also very accessible, says Paula Shoyer, author of *The Kosher Baker*. “It’s something a new baker can master easily.” Even non-bakers can fill the pan with a cake mix and be guaranteed a polished result. In 1972, Pillsbury—another Minnesota-based company—partnered with Nordic Ware and launched a line of Bundt cake mixes. For \$1.98, you could buy the mix and the pan. At one point Nordic Ware was producing 30,000 pans a day.

It wasn’t just the ease of baking that made the Bundt so popular but also its versatility. “Bundt cakes have staying power,” says Reed, explaining that the high quantity of sugar in most Bundts means they stay fresher longer than other cakes. It’s a cake

that could be kept on the counter to serve if a neighbor stops by for a surprise visit and that is durable enough to bring to parties in one piece. “In some ways they are an ideal everyday cake,” says Reed. Over time Nordic Ware developed variations on the classic Bundt pan, including the Rose Bundt, which makes the entire cake look like a flower, and the Heritage Bundt, which has sweeping, dramatic folds.

And while the Bundt carries a patina of 1950s WASP (as depicted in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*), Bundt is a very Jewish cake, says Shoyer. “If you look at the overall goal of Jewish food it’s to feed a lot of people,” she says, citing kugel and chicken soup as examples of classic Jewish foods that can stretch no matter how many dinner guests are in attendance. “The Bundt has that ability as well.” Perhaps most important, she adds, “it freezes well.” With so many celebratory meals to prepare for holidays and Shabbat, that comes in handy. “Jewish people love to cook in advance,” she says.

While Bundt cakes never disappeared—to date more than 60 million pans have been sold, according to Nordic Ware—Shoyer says she has seen a recent surge in the cake’s popularity. One reason Bundt cakes are so in vogue, she explains, is their social-media appeal: “They photograph beautifully.”

After Fannie Schanfeld died, her granddaughter Abby found a necklace with a Bundt pan charm in her jewelry box. Abby wears the necklace regularly and is always surprised that wherever she goes people of all ages and backgrounds immediately recognize the shape. “It’s a joke in our family that my bubbe was not a strong cook,” says Abby, “but she did view food as a way to build community and bring people together. She’d be pleased the Bundt has done just that.”

## Orange Tea Cake

Reprinted with permission from Paula Shoyer from *The Kosher Baker*.

*Makes 12-15 servings*

### INGREDIENTS

1/2 cup boiling water  
2 Earl Gray tea bags  
2 cups plus 2 teaspoons sugar  
4 eggs  
1 cup canola oil  
2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour  
2 teaspoons baking powder  
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract  
1 tablespoon orange zest  
1/4 cup fresh orange juice  
1 cup confectioner’s sugar  
1/2 cup boiling water  
pinch salt

### DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Fill a measuring cup with 1/2 cup boiling water. Add 1 tea bag and 2 teaspoons of the sugar. Mix in the sugar and let steep.
2. Grease and flour a large Bundt pan. In the bowl of an electric mixer, place the sugar, eggs, oil, flour, baking powder, salt, vanilla, orange zest and orange juice and mix. Before you remove the tea bag from the tea, squeeze the tea bag into the tea and then discard the tea bag. Place the tea into the batter and mix for 2 minutes on medium speed until all the ingredients are combined and the batter is creamy.
3. Pour into the prepared Bundt pan and bake for 1 hour. Remove from oven and let cool for 10 minutes. Turn the cake onto a rack and let cool.
4. For the glaze, take the second tea bag and place in 1/2 cup boiling water. Sift 1 cup confectioner’s sugar into a bowl. Add 2 tablespoons of the tea and whisk until the sugar has dissolved and you have a white glaze you can pour. Let sit 5 minutes and then pour over the cake, drizzling to cover as much of the cake as possible. To freeze, wrap in plastic when cool.



# Cheesecake: A Dairy Tale

By Eileen Lavine



**W**hile cheesecake has long been popular among Jews with a sweet tooth, the creamy, rich indulgence is now as American as apple pie, a symbol of how thoroughly Jews have integrated into American life. As cookbook author Joan Nathan says, “Jews like cheesecake because they like to eat good rich dishes, even if they shouldn’t”—but then again, who doesn’t?

What’s Jewish about the storied cake? “Cheesecake became a tradition for Jews because of the cycle of the year, when Shavuot welcomes the plentiful milk of springtime with dairy dishes,” says Nathan. Explanations abound for serving cheesecake—and other dairy dishes—at Shavuot,

the holiday commemorating the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Among them are that Abraham served cottage cheese and milk to the angels at the first meal in Genesis, and that King Solomon’s Song of Songs compares the Torah to milk and honey.

The tradition of cakes sweetened with cheese didn’t start with the Jews, but with another group famous for their monumental contributions, from philosophy to dessert: the ancient Greeks. Athletes at the first Olympic games in 776 BCE were fed cheesecake made with curd cheese to boost their energy, says Gil Marks, author of *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*. (This was pre-steroids.) Jews likely picked up the recipe from the Greeks who occupied Pales-

tine in the third century BCE, or from the Romans, who offered up a baked cheesecake called *libum* to their household gods.

The Romans brought cheesecake to Europe, where every country would invent its own flourish. Central and Eastern Europeans added a new kind of cheese: quark, a form of farmer’s or pot cheese, with large curds and a tangy flavor. European immigrants to the United States brought with them a treat similar to the German *kaesekuchen*, made with quark, which had a coarse, heavy texture.

That texture became smoother with the discovery of cream cheese, the ingredient responsible for the distinctive consistency and flavor of American cheesecake. For



this, cheesecake lovers can thank William A. Lawrence, an upstate New York dairyman, who used twice the cream required to make the popular French Neufchâtel cheese. The 1872 culinary game-changer resulted in a richer and silkier cheese, which eventually became the popular Philadelphia cream cheese. In 1907, Isaac and Joseph Bregstein, who changed their name to Breakstone, began making cream cheese in Brooklyn, selling it primarily to Jews.

Cream cheese played a starring role in the advent of New York-style cheesecake, popularized by two German-Jewish restaurateurs. Arnold Reuben opened Reuben's Restaurant and Delicatessen on East 58th Street in 1928, and another restaurant, called the Turf, 14 years later. In a bit of legend perpetuated by Reuben himself, he altered the recipe for a cheese pie he tasted at a dinner party, replacing the cottage cheese with cream cheese, creating the

## Is it a cake, a torte, a custard? It is all those things and more.

classic New York cheesecake. Meanwhile, Leo "Lindy" Lindemann, a Jewish immigrant from Berlin, ran Lindy's Restaurant in midtown Manhattan—a mere block away from the Turf—where cheesecake was a best-seller. Some say that Lindy's stole Reuben's cook and cheesecake recipe, although purists maintain the two cakes were not identical.

It wasn't just cream cheese that made New York cheesecake special. At first the cake was made with a pastry crust, then crushed zwieback—the crisp, sweet biscuits perfect for teething children. The crust is another ever-changing element in the cheesecake formula; in more recent years, home bakers have favored graham cracker crumbs, like the kind used in frozen Sara Lee cheesecakes, created in 1954 by Jewish baker Charles Lubin (and named after his daughter). Junior's Cheesecakes, whipped up by Harry Rosen in 1950 for his Brooklyn diner (and now sold at Junior's restaurants and online), are made with a sponge cake bottom. Eli's Cheesecake in Chicago uses a shortbread cookie crust.

The ineffability of the cheesecake transcends mere ingredients and extends to broader questions. Is it a cake, a torte, a custard? It is all those things and more. Some bakers put their cake pan in a pot with boiling water; others prefer the texture achieved by baking the pan on a cookie sheet. Marc Schulman, the owner of Eli's Cheesecake and son of founder Eli, says that his company's cake is "almost like a soufflé, richer and creamier."

As any contemporary dessert connoisseur knows, variations abound: The modern cheesecake can be made with anything from sour cream to heavy cream and come loaded with chocolate, cherries, caramel, nuts or any number of combinations thereof. DGS Delicatessen in Washington, DC, sells what it calls a DC-style cheesecake, with orange marmalade. Pati Jinich, Jewish author of *Pati's Mexican Table*, has created a Latino-flavored guava cheesecake. The kind of cheese used varies depending on local specialties: Greek cheesecakes boast feta cheese, Italian bakers use ricotta. Global cross-pollination has had its consequences, too; in Brussels, Joan Nathan recently sampled a cake made with Philadelphia cream cheese and a base of ground speculoos, a spiced cookie that tastes like a mixture of graham crackers and gingersnaps. "There are always new ways to eat old things," says Nathan. "I'm not sure some of the new ideas are really so new. It's the old with embellishments, and that doesn't always make it better."

Cheesecake is also popular in Israel, although it has little in common with its American cousin. "Quark is predominant in Israel, so they have developed a different culinary culture that is the basis of Israeli cheesecake," explains Marks. "They use *gevina levana l'bisul*, a coagulated buttermilk cheese like drained yogurt." Israelis disdain New York-style cheesecake, says Paula Shoyer, author of *The Kosher Baker*. "They prefer a cheesecake without a crust, almost like a pudding that you eat with a spoon. And they serve it at breakfast."

Not everyone approves of this Mediterranean iteration. "It is too insubstantial," complains Marks. "I'm a fan of New York cheesecake, which should be creamy and dense, not custardy." Nor does he appreciate the jazzed-up versions topped with syrup and sweets, which he describes as "sacrilegious and paganistic." Simplicity is key to letting the texture and flavor shine through. After all, Marks says, "Cheesecake should be sensual."

# Cheesecake

## Adapted from Eli's Original Plain Cheesecake

### INGREDIENTS

4 packages cream cheese  
(8 ounces each), softened  
1 cup sugar  
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour  
2 large eggs plus 1 egg yolk  
6 tablespoons sour cream  
1/2 teaspoon vanilla  
Cookie or graham cracker crust

### CRUMB CRUST

1 1/2 cups ground vanilla wafers  
1/2 cup powdered sugar  
3/4 cup melted butter

### GRAHAM CRUST

1 1/2 cups ground graham crackers  
1/2 cup brown sugar  
3/4 cup melted butter  
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon

### DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Beat cream cheese, sugar and flour in electric mixer until light and creamy.
3. Add eggs and yolk, one at a time, scraping down sides of bowl until completely incorporated.
4. Add sour cream and vanilla. Beat mixture, scraping down sides of bowl, until smooth.

### FOR CRUST

1. Mix all ingredients in medium bowl using your fingertips until mixture is well moistened.
2. Press into the bottom and one inch up the sides of an ungreased 9-inch spring-form pan.
3. Pour filling into prepared crust in pan. Place on cookie sheet.
4. Bake until cake is firm around edge and center barely jiggles when tapped, about 45 minutes.
5. Refrigerate for at least 8 hours or overnight to completely set before serving.

# From Pickles to Salmon, the Joys of Kosher-Style

By Sala Levin



**N**o expression is more emblematic of the balancing act between Jewish tradition and American assimilation than “kosher-style.” Though mutable, kosher-style typically denotes “a certain type of cooking or preparation that’s reminiscent of Eastern European Jewish dishes but made without kosher ingredients” or the kosher supervision process, says Hasia Diner, professor of American Jewish history at New York University. “It wants to both be Jewish but it wants to be less expensive and doesn’t want all the rigmarole of the supervision.”

When it appeared in the 1920s, kosher-style satisfied the yen of assimilating Jews to feel that they were eating in a Jewish style without necessarily following Jewish dietary restrictions. “To use another food

analogy, it’s like wanting to have your cake and eat it, too,” says Diner. For American Jews, it was “good enough that it was redolent of immigrant-era food.” It is a uniquely American innovation, although the idea has roots in the 19th-century German practice of *fressfroemigkeit* (“eating religion”), which referred to Jews who displayed their religious affiliation only by partaking in traditional foods on holidays.

While there are many American Jews who practice *fressfroemigkeit*, kosher-style is a much broader term. It can encompass any food that, in theory, could be kosher, whether that means chicken noodle soup or pareve meals such as fish or vegetarian dishes, even if not kosher by Jewish legal standards. Critics point out that the term is “oxymoronic,” says Diner; it merely creates

the illusion of kashrut. “Kosher isn’t a style of cuisine; it’s a style of slaughter or supervision.” Under Jewish law, corned beef can be as kosher as sushi, foie gras or kung pao chicken—or as treif.

In post-World War II New York, Baltimore, Chicago and other cities with large Jewish populations, kosher-style was primarily used to describe restaurants that served salami, corned beef, pastrami—deli foods. These establishments functioned as “safe places for Jews to bring their non-Jewish friends,” says Sue Fishkoff, author of *Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America’s Food Answers to a Higher Authority*. Jews could eat food they liked and “be proud to show off to outsiders.” Kosher eateries of the period were “hole-in-the-wall affairs in Jewish neigh-



borhoods,” says Fishkoff, but kosher-style diners were more stylish. As some do today, these restaurants sometimes even served outright treif dishes such as pork chops or cheeseburgers.

The concept of kosher-style food also made it easier for Jewish families to tinker with the strict rules of kashrut at home, freeing them to pick and choose. Households, for example, could forego kosher meat because of the expense or inconvenience, but avoid ostentatiously treif foods such as shrimp or pork chops. And the term also inspired food companies, small and large, to market products as kosher-style, in particular pickles, and not always with kosher supervision. On grocery store shelves, kosher-style became indistinguishable from Jewish-style or “New York-style,” code for Jewish. Confusion arising from kosher versus kosher-style prompted some states to issue consumer-protection legislation barring use of the words “kosher-style” on food labels without proper notification that the food in question is not, in fact, kosher.

Today, one of the most common places to bump into kosher-style food is at weddings, b’nai mitvah, galas and fundraisers. A kosher-style meal can entail a vegetarian spread, a main course of the omnipresent salmon, or meat served without dairy products—depending on the venue. Charles Levine, president of Baltimore’s Charles Levine Caterers, says that for most Reform synagogues in Baltimore, “kosher-style just means no shellfish and no pork; you can mix meat and cheese.” At other synagogues, “you can’t serve a cheeseburger” or caterers are allowed to serve only dairy products. Creative caterers long ago learned to reinvent non-kosher dishes with kosher ingredients, says Levine: “You take rockfish from the [Chesapeake] Bay, and it tastes like crab imperial.”

With the tremendous growth of the kosher food industry—and its expansion into the organic, local, vegan and gluten-free arenas—kosher-style now seems less meaningful than it once was. “As kosher has become more fashionable, kosher-style as a concept has fallen out of favor,” says Fishkoff.

Still, there is plenty of nostalgia for traditional foods and kosher-style eateries such as delis. “There’s a yearning for those kinds of places,” says Diner. “There are very few kosher delis any longer. We have high-end kosher steakhouses, and that’s just not the same thing.”

# (Kosher-Style) Salmon Cakes

Adapted from Ina Garten

## INGREDIENTS

1/2 pound fresh salmon  
Olive oil  
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper  
4 tablespoons margarine  
3/4 cup small-diced red onion (1 small onion)  
1 1/2 cups small-diced celery (4 stalks)  
1/2 cup small-diced red bell pepper (1 small pepper)  
1/4 cup minced fresh flat-leaf parsley  
1 tablespoon capers, drained  
1/4 teaspoon hot sauce (recommended: Tabasco)  
1 teaspoon Old Bay seasoning  
3 slices stale bread, crusts removed  
1/2 cup mayonnaise  
2 teaspoons Dijon mustard  
2 eggs, lightly beaten

## DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Place the salmon on a sheet pan, skin side down. Brush with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper.
2. Roast for 15 to 20 minutes, until just cooked. Remove from the oven and cover tightly with aluminum foil. Allow to rest for 10 minutes and refrigerate until cold.
3. Meanwhile, place 2 tablespoons of the margarine, 2 tablespoons olive oil, the onion, celery, red bell pepper, parsley, capers, hot sauce, Old Bay seasoning, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and 1/2 teaspoon pepper in a large saute pan over medium-low heat and cook until the vegetables are soft, approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Cool to room temperature.
4. Break the bread slices into pieces and process the bread in a food processor fitted with a steel blade. You should have about 1 cup of bread crumbs.
5. Place the bread crumbs on a sheet pan and toast in the oven for 5 minutes until lightly browned, tossing occasionally.
6. Flake the chilled salmon into a large bowl. Add the bread crumbs, mayonnaise, mustard and eggs. Add the vegetable mixture and mix well. Cover and chill in the refrigerator for 30 minutes. Shape into 10 (2 1/2 to 3-ounce) cakes.
7. Heat the remaining 2 tablespoons margarine and 2 tablespoons olive oil in a large saute pan over medium heat. In batches, add the salmon cakes and fry for 3 to 4 minutes on each side, until browned. Drain on paper towels; keep them warm in a preheated 250 degree F oven and serve hot.

# Jewish Fizz: Seltzer, Egg Creams & Cel-Ray

By Joan Alpert



**T**he old joke goes like this: An elderly Jewish man falls on a New York street on a hot summer day; a doctor rushes through the gathering crowd, checks the man's pulse, and declares, "He fainted from the heat; get him water." The old man raises his head and moans, "Make that seltzer." In another version, he cries for an egg cream, and in still another, he calls for a Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray.

Carbonated water, the primary ingredient of these three Jewish champagnes, appeared first in European spas as a medicinal drink. Natural sparkling mineral water from the springs of a German village, Nieder-Selters—the linguistic origin for seltzer—was bottled and sold as early as 1728 in earthenware jugs, according to Barry

Joseph, founder of Givemeseltzer.com and author of a forthcoming book on seltzer's history. Said to cure all sorts of diseases, from the common cold to tuberculosis, seltzer was touted in an 1835 *New York Times* ad for "travelers...as the only sure preventative against the influence of a hostile climate."

Although the curative powers of carbonated water were widely accepted, the sole source was natural springs, which limited its consumption to wealthy visitors and to locals who could buy it bottled. Enter English scientist Joseph Priestly, better known for his discovery of oxygen. He explained in a 1772 paper how to impregnate water with what he called "fixed air" (carbon dioxide) to produce what Priestly described as "an exceedingly pleasant sparkling water, re-

sembling seltzer water." The next challenge was to enhance Priestly's method to produce sufficient quantities for mass consumption. German-born Johann Jacob Schweppe, having grown bored with watchmaking, invented a machine in 1783 to create bubbly water. He opened a sodawasser company in London nine years later. Although he sold the company in 1799 and the venture's ownership changed many times since, the name Schwebbes still survives.

The last major obstacle to making seltzer a practical everyday drink was its container: Once opened, an entire bottle had to be consumed quickly or its bubbles would go flat. Charles Plinth devised the siphon in 1813 in England. He called it the "portable fountain," because it could be mounted



on carts. After improvements by French inventors, Plinth's prototype evolved into the seltzer container for bottlers and soda fountains in the 19th century.

Eastern European Jews, many of whom had owned seltzer carts, entered the soda manufacturing trade in the United States as early as the 1880s, according to Joseph. Concentrated in New York, these seltzer makers used well water, not European mineral water. With Jewish immigration ris-

must be properly mixed with chocolate and milk. Aster's recipe is unknown to this day, and disagreement abounds on the appropriate quantity and order of adding each of the three ingredients.

There's no disagreement among egg cream aficionados, however, about the chocolate to be used. It must be Fox's U-bet syrup, which, says the manufacturer, was first put into an egg cream in 1904. Rock musician Lou Reed's *Egg Cream* (which was the

There's no disagreement among egg cream aficionados, however, about the chocolate to be used. It must be Fox's U-bet syrup, which, says the manufacturer, was first put into an egg cream in 1904.

ing at the turn of the century, seltzer got a New York name: "two cents plain." That nickname became the title of Harry Golden's 1958 book on growing up poor from around 1910 through the 1930s, in which the world learned how anyone could buy a plain seltzer for only two cents.

The entire Lower East Side was "addicted to seltzer," wrote Golden. At least 73 soda fountains in candy and drug stores stood in a one-third square mile area by 1900. Chocolate and lemon were the first New World flavors added to plain seltzer. According to one report, it was Schweppes, known as the father of the carbonated drink industry, who in 1798, became the first promoter of mixing his soda water with numerous enhancers like wine, spirits or milk—all of which would be adopted by sparkling water manufacturers over the next two centuries.

Chocolate and milk became the most popular seltzer water mixture at the turn of the century. Legend says that Louis Aster, a candy store owner, invented the egg cream in Brooklyn in 1890. He expanded his business to five candy stores throughout New York, selling the drink to thousands who would wait hours in line for it. The key ingredient is neither egg (which may be a corruption of the Yiddish *echt*, which means genuine) nor cream (though the drink's white foamy top has a creamy appearance), but seltzer. It

first track on his 1996 album *Set the Twilight Reeling*) describes the wonders of his favorite childhood egg cream, "Becky's fearsome brew," as tasting "just like silk" with "chocolate bubbles up your nose." Other celebrities have also immortalized the egg cream: Comedian Mel Brooks described its curative powers in a 1975 *Playboy* interview. When one of his childhood friends was hurt playing ball, he would scream, "Get the mercurochrome. Put a Band-aid on...Bring an egg cream." The interviewer asked, "An egg cream has healing properties?" "An egg cream can do anything," replied Brooks, who elaborated later, "Psychologically, it is the opposite of circumcision. It pleasurably reaffirms your Jewishness."

Egg creams also shout "New York!" for they are rarely found outside its boroughs, although the Midwest's chocolate phosphate is an egg cream without milk. Also little known beyond the east coast is the third Jewish champagne (purportedly dubbed so by Walter Winchell, the renowned gossip journalist): Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray. According to legend, someone, perhaps named Dr. Brown, combined celery seeds, seltzer and sugar in 1869 to create a tonic for immigrant Jewish children. Known as celery tonic when first bottled and sold by Scholz Bottling Company in the 1880s, it has a slightly bitter effervescent taste that is said

to cut through the fat of a juicy pastrami sandwich like no other drink. After going through numerous owners, the drink became Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray soda (after the Food and Drug Administration said it was not a tonic in the early 20th century). Owned since 1982 by Canada Dry, Cel-Ray is currently consumed by those who "want to go down memory lane" to recall their parents' culture, says Rosalie Mileo, Dr. Brown's customer service manager, and is sold primarily in New York and to ex-New Yorkers who have retired to Florida. The popular Dr. Brown's flavors today are cream soda and black cherry.

Is seltzer just the stuff of nostalgia? The famous heavy siphon bottles that adorned Jewish tables are now collectors' items, most having been made in pre-World War II Yugoslavia. Even as early as the 1930s, says Joseph, marketers felt compelled to modernize the name seltzer to "club soda" (which may or may not have salt added to the water) to give it wider appeal. Since the 1970s, however, water is in vogue. Bottled mineral waters, such as Perrier, have become commonplace. Plain and flavored sparkling waters stock grocery shelves everywhere. And the moniker "seltzer" is back, too. Even Schweppes/Cadbury, which had never used the name in the U.S., created an American "seltzer" in the company's bicentennial year. It may not be the same to those with long memories, but today's seltzer can still remove stains and add air to biscuits.

## Egg Cream

Recipe by Alexandra Penfold

### INGREDIENTS

2 tablespoons Fox's U-Bet chocolate syrup  
1 1/2 ounces whole milk  
3/4 cup seltzer

### DIRECTIONS

1. In a tall glass, add chocolate syrup and milk.
2. Tilt the glass slightly and pour (or spritz) the seltzer off your stirring spoon until you have a nice foamy head that's nearing the top of the glass.
3. Stir vigorously to mix the chocolate in and serve immediately.

# Just (Deli) Desserts

By Rachel Ament



**L**ike much of the Jewish culinary canon, modern Jewish pastries were influenced by the world around them.

The familiar cookies we see now in Jewish-style delicatessens were, in many cases, riffs on the desserts of various immigrant groups comingling with Jews in America. Soon after settling in New York, Jewish bakers started “kosherizing” their neighbors’ most in-demand items, altering them to fit Jewish tastes and religious needs. Here are the stories behind some of the most beloved, nostalgia-tinged deli-style cookies.

## Black-and-White Cookies

The black-and-white—a spongy pastry frosted with black fondant on one half and white fondant on the other—isn’t really a cookie. It’s a drop cake. In adherence to the Jewish baking edict of “waste not, want not,” Jewish bakers made the pastries out of leftover cake batter mixed

with flour. Marcy Goldman, author of *A Treasury of Jewish Holiday Baking*, assumes the cookie is a Western creation, as its decorative approach wasn’t evident in European baking at the time, nor was the use of icing. The cookie may have originated at Glaser’s Bake Shop, a bakery on First Avenue in Manhattan, which has been baking black-and-whites since it first opened in 1902. Another theory: The cookie descended from a similar pastry called “half-moons,” which were invented in a bakery in Utica, New York at the turn of the 20th century.

Today, these iconic edibles continue to be Jewish staples at bakeries, delis, weddings and bar mitzvahs and have even assumed new shapes and forms. Manhattan’s The Donut Pub makes a custard-filled doughnut version, and Le Gourmet on the Upper East Side offers a miniature version of the mainstay, cut in the shape of a heart.

They’ve also become a cultural touch-

stone. In the 77th episode of *Seinfeld*, entitled “The Dinner Party,” Jerry delivers some incisive commentary on race relations: “If people would only look to the [black-and-white] cookie, all our problems would be solved!” Indeed, the black-and-white cookie has been heralded as an emblem of coexistence, a melding of opposites, the Western version of yin and yang. It was even christened the “unity cookie” by Barack Obama when he ordered one at a Florida kosher deli on the campaign trail in 2008.

But the black-and-white can be divisive, too. Over the past century, New Yorkers have argued over how best to bite into the treat. Some eat all of the black side and then all of the white, while others take a more indecisive approach, burrowing down the center. Commitment-phobes tend to alternate between sides, enjoying both flavors at once. But no matter the method, how you bite can say a lot about who you





Rainbow cookies



Almond cookies a.k.a Chinese cookies



Mandelbrot

are. As Molly O'Neill wrote in *The New York Times*, "New Yorkers...can measure a man by the tracks of his teeth imprinted in a black-and-white cookie."

### Rainbow Cookies

The Jewish rainbow cookie, a moist tri-color confection of pink, yellow and green, was inspired by another immigrant pastry: an Italian-American dessert also known as the rainbow cookie, whose original colors were pink, white and green—an homage of sorts to the Italian flag. That cookie began to morph as Jews and Italians started moving into the same neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Lower East Side and their cultures and cuisines began to mix. Culinary scholars theorize that Jewish bakers started making the cookie pareve after being inundated with requests from their Jewish customers. The Jewish and Italian versions are similar—both consist of almond-based layers, brushed with raspberry jam and encased in chocolate.

Jewish bakers did make one major change, in addition to eliminating butter from the recipe: They started coloring the white layer with yellow dye to make it look more like a rainbow and less like an Italian flag, according to Stanley Ginsberg, author of *Inside the Jewish Bakery: Recipes and Memories from the Golden Age of Jewish Baking*. In more recent years, Jewish hostesses and caterers have turned this crowd favorite into a Hanukkah treat by adding blue and white dyes to the batter. Some Jewish celebrities are rainbow-cookie devotees: Ivanka Trump orders them regularly for Shabbat meals. "Even when she's on trips, they're on the menu," says Laura Frankel, a popular kosher caterer in Chicago.

Recently, the cookies have been imbued with new symbolism. To celebrate the legalization of gay marriage this past summer, the Connecticut-based kosher catering company Challah Connection featured an image of its rainbow cookies on the front page of its website with the message "Never had these treasured cookies had such meaning." The company was shocked when they received outraged e-mails asking how Jews could support gay marriage. The company didn't back down. "We were glad we did and we'd do it again," says Ann Delaurentis, the company's director of customer service.

### Almond Cookies (Chinese Cookies)

The Jewish almond cookie, also known

as the Chinese cookie, was, as its nickname-sake implies, a Chinese invention. A century ago, Jews frequented Chinese restaurants not just because they served moo shu chicken (or "safe treif") but because they were the only dining establishments open on Sundays and, of course, Christmas. The restaurants offered almond cookies in addition to fortune cookies, and soon Jewish bakers started revising the recipe to fit Jewish dietary needs.

According to Ginsberg, the Jewish version of the cookie is less grainy than the Chinese version, which he attributes to the use of almond paste and hydrogenated vegetable shortening instead of almond flour and liquid oil. Jewish bakers also added their own decorative flourishes to the cookie, dropping a blanched almond or a big chocolate drop in the center. In Israel, bakers whip up a healthier version of the pastry, enriching the batter with tahini and honey and topping it with poppy seeds.

Caterer Frankel says the almond cookies have remained a hit among Jews because they are so "perfectly, wonderfully

The black-and-white cookie has been heralded as an emblem of coexistence, a melding of opposites, the western version of yin and yang. It was even christened the "unity cookie" by Barack Obama at kosher deli.

pareve.” She says that the almond paste base makes the cookie satisfying, even without milk or margarine. “There are a lot of cookies that should really never be made pareve...but the almond cookie isn’t one of them,” says Frankel.

### Mandelbrot

Mandelbrot, that twice-baked, oblong Jewish pastry, defies culinary convention. Like biscotti, its brother from an Italian mother, mandelbrot straddles the line between cookie and biscuit, its texture mealy and crunchy, its flavor earthy and sweet. Literally translated from German or Yiddish as “almond bread,” mandelbrot, or mandel bread, is baked in an almond-studded loaf and then cut into thin slices. Unlike biscotti, however, mandelbrot is soft and supple enough to be enjoyed on its own, no espresso-dunking required.

Although mandelbrot’s origin is unknown, Joan Nathan speculates in her book *Jewish Cooking in America* that the large Jewish population in the Piedmont region of Italy may have brought biscotti to Eastern Europe, where vegetable oil made its way into the recipe. Mandelbrot’s dryness made it durable, which appealed to Jewish sailors and merchants at sea. It also attracted Shabbat hostesses who needed snacks that could stay fresh through Saturday night.

In America, bakers revised the recipe for 20th-century palates. Penny Eisenberg, author of *Amazing Passover Desserts: New, Easier, and Quicker Recipes*, says that American Jews dusted cinnamon and sugar onto the dessert and glammed it up with fancy fillings: pecans, pistachios, walnuts, chocolate, dried fruit, chocolate chips, and even lavender and Earl Grey tea. Over the years, the cookie has become a traditional Tu B’Shevat sweet, its almond paste base symbolizing the almond trees of Israel, the first trees to bloom in the region.

Mandelbrot’s recent revival hasn’t helped the cookie escape its stodgier past, however. As Lenore Skenazy, author of *Who’s the Blonde That Married What’s-His-Name?: The Ultimate Tip-of-the-Tongue Test for Everything You Know You Know—But Can’t Remember Right Now*, wrote in *The Jewish Daily Forward*, “Biscotti are the world’s coolest cookies, the supermodels of sweets: tall, thin, Italian, expensive...Mandel bread is something your grandma brings over in a tin lined with paper towels.” But on some days, that might be exactly the kind of dessert you need.

# Black and White Cookies

Recipe by Shannon Sarna

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 ¼ cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp baking soda
- pinch baking powder
- ½ tsp salt
- ⅓ cup buttermilk
- ½ tsp vanilla
- ⅓ cup unsalted butter, softened
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 large egg
- 2 tsp grated lemon zest

### FOR ICING

- 2 cups confectioners sugar
- 1 tbsp light corn syrup
- ¼ tsp vanilla
- 2–3 Tbsp milk
- ¼ cup unsweetened Dutch-process cocoa powder

### DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.
2. Whisk together flour, baking soda, baking powder and salt in a bowl. Stir together buttermilk, vanilla and lemon zest in a small bowl.
3. Beat together butter and sugar in a large bowl with an electric mixer or a stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment until pale and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Add egg and mix again until well combined.
4. Alternate adding flour and buttermilk mixture on a low speed until batter is well combined and smooth.
5. Using a cookie scoop, place batter about 2 inches apart on cookie sheet.
6. Bake 15-17 minutes, until tops are puffed and golden.
7. Remove cookies from sheet and place on cooling rack. Cool completely before icing.
8. To make icing: whisk together confectioners sugar, corn syrup, vanilla, and 2 Tbsp milk in a small bowl until smooth. Transfer half of icing to another bowl and stir in cocoa, adding more milk, 1 tsp at a time, until consistency is the same as white icing.
9. Turn cookies upside down. Place icing scraper tool (or parchment paper) over half of each cookie and spread the uncovered halves with white frosting using a small offset spatula. Allow to set 10-15 minutes. When icing has set, frost the other side of the cookies with chocolate icing.



# The Lost Magic of the Wooden Pickle Barrel

By Bonnie Benwick



**B**lond and rather slender for its type, a pickle barrel stands by the takeout counter of the famous Washington, DC delicatessen Wagshal's. Lined with plastic, it may satisfy a certain nostalgia but amounts to no more than a storage unit on the bulk-bin grocery aisle—a pale iteration of the big-bellied, oak casks I remember from my childhood.

For generations in America and Europe, such wooden workhorses were where the magic happened: the lacto-fermentation of cucumbers, i.e. old-school pickles. At full strength, one barrel could house hundreds of specimens as salt, clean water, spices and time joined forces to transform raw vegetables into bacteria-free, preserved food. Pickles stored in wooden barrels were prized for their flavor and their texture.

The brine reacted with the cucumbers to kill harmful bacteria and extracted enough moisture to keep the resulting pickles crisp yet juicy. One unintentional benefit of these wooden pickle barrels was a kind of olfactory come-on. Their porous material emitted wondrous aromas science has identified as proven appetite stimulants. Folks would catch the waft—for example, along New York's Lower East Side "Pickle Alley" in the 1930s—and come running.

Of course, the salt-involved preservation of food (and pickles in particular) has gone on for thousands of years. Mesopotamians did it in 2400 BCE. Pickling was also practiced in early Asia, ancient Greece and medieval Italy, with reputable sources citing aficionados as wide-ranging as Aristotle, Napoleon and Cleopatra, who

credited pickles for her beauty. Some 350 years ago, the Dutch brought their pickling practices (including the use of salt, spices and vinegar) and old oak barrels to New York (then New Amsterdam) and planted small cucumbers where Brooklyn now thrives.

When Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe arrived in New York, they too were familiar with pickles. Their ancestors had fermented cucumbers, beets and cabbage for generations, relying on these preserved vegetables to get them through the winter and spice up their otherwise bland diets. The immigrants snapped up the cheap and plentiful cucumbers to process and sell on the streets. They peddled their pickles in pushcarts and, eventually, sold them in delis. At one time Essex Street—the heart of New



York's Jewish enclave—featured as many as 80 pickle merchants. Their most famous product was the kosher dill, a.k.a. the Jewish pickle. (A Jewish pickle is just one that includes raw garlic in the brining process.)

But food-safety regulations in the 1970s forever altered commercial pickle production in this country. The New York health department prohibited the use of wooden barrels because they could not be properly disinfected (between wooden seams) and were not airtight against outside pathogens. Ziggy Gruber, a third-generation deli man with Cordon Bleu training and co-owner of Kenny & Ziggy's New York Delicatessen in Houston, has a word for the officials' work: *narishkeit*, Yiddish for "foolishness." "I have never known anyone to get sick

from them," says Gruber, who grew up on the Lower East Side in the days of wooden barrels and stainless-steel bowls of pickles and tomatoes on deli tables.

These days, most artisan pickles are cured in plastic buckets and barrels. Some say that hasn't affected the quality of the product. Alan Kaufman of the Pickle Guys on Essex Street, a Queens native who has been fermenting pickles since 1981, says good flavor can develop in a plastic barrel, but a wooden one can yield pickles almost a week faster.

Wagshal's proprietor Bill Fuchs recalls similar regulations that were introduced in Washington, DC in the mid-1990s. "We had to get rid of our original barrels," he says. The "faux barrels," as he calls them,

don't draw the same attention as the wooden ones.

Pickles' popularity in modern-day America has waxed and waned. Fuchs sees less of an appetite for them these days. "Lots of people don't even want them anymore," he says of the one-sixth pickle spear customers receive wrapped in with their sandwich orders. One reason may be that the modern pickle universe has been populated with cucumbers that are not brined, but rather are vinegarized and pasteurized. The heat involved in the latter would kill the lactobacilli in a true fermented pickle. The process often comes at a cost—a less crunchy, less-than-stellar pickle. And certainly a far cry from what would have been drawn from a wooden barrel.



Present-day pickle aficionados can no longer pick their pickles from wooden barrels.

## Pickles

Recipe by Paul P.  
Adapted from Food.com

### INGREDIENTS

#### PICKLING LIQUID

- 1 1/2 cups water, boiled and cooled
- 1 cup white vinegar, 5% acidity

#### PROPORTIONS FOR EACH QUART JAR

- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons dill seeds
- 1/4 teaspoon celery seed
- 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 3-6 cucumbers (depending on size)

### DIRECTIONS

1. Add salt and spices to each jar. Add cucumbers sliced, whole (ends trimmed) or spears, packing them in tightly. Fill jar to within 1/2 inch of the top.
2. Add pickling liquid to cover the cucumbers. Put a lid and ring on the jar and shake for a few seconds to distribute the salt and spices evenly.
3. Refrigerate for 7 days, shaking the jar for a few seconds every day. These will last approximately 6 months in the refrigerator.



# A Tale of Two Briskets

By Dan Freedman



If you grew up in an Ashkenazi Jewish home, you might remember the delicious oven-baked brisket your mom served up for holidays. Maybe it was based on your grandmother's—or great-grandmother's—recipe, and you can picture it emerging from a low-temperature oven, steamy and bubbling, with the carrots and potatoes bobbing up and down in a sea of brownish-red gravy, the meat forming an irregular coastline of beefy tenderness.

But years later, you may have discovered another kind of brisket: Texas-style, bathed in spice rub and smoked with mesquite wood for 12 hours or more. The smoke permeated the meat, forming a thin red circle around the circumference. So juicy and moist—and smoky—you couldn't believe what you were tasting. Was this the same meat as Grandma's oven recipe? What sort of alchemy produces two such different results from the same cut?

Therein lies the enigmatic beauty of brisket.

That a slab of beef from the tougher, less-desired cattle forequarter could travel two such widely divergent paths is a true “only-in-America” parable. And with apologies to Doc Watson, you can indeed love two and still be true.

In Jewish tradition, the front half of the steer is kosher; the back half is not. Where the line of demarcation runs is open to interpretation, but the absence of Jewish steakhouses serving sirloin is not surprising. The brisket comes from the front-end chest of the bull—the animal's “six pack,” says culinary historian and knife specialist Peter Hertzmann. Steers have a brisket adjacent to each of their front legs. With no collarbones, they rely instead on their strong pectoral muscles to hold up their front ends. The predictable result: a tough, grainy piece of meat. Once separated from the sternum and rib cage, a full brisket slab

weighs 10 to 15 pounds. And here is the first of several forks in the road for Texas-style and “Grandma” briskets.

Each individual brisket typically is divided into two pieces, with a layer of fat running between them. The “first cut”—which butchers call the “flat”—is lean, with less interstitial fat. This is the basis of the traditional Ashkenazi recipe. It turns fork-tender after hours of percolating in gravy made from chili sauce, red wine or tomato puree. The “second cut”—known to butchers as the “point”—is just the opposite: lots of fat, yielding proportionally less meat. But the meat is melt-in-your-mouth tender.

In the shtetls of the Old Country, keeping cattle over the lean winter months was costly, writes Gil Marks in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*. Instead, those not needed for milk, reproduction or labor were slaughtered. The brisket fell into the category of “Gedempte Fleysch” (well-stewed meat), according to cook-

book author Joan Nathan. The recipe for that well-stewed meat survived the trip across the Atlantic intact, and brisket became a special-occasion splurge. Its succulent mass assured there would be plenty for everyone, a particularly potent symbol of abundance in the New World. And there was plenty of variety: *The Settlement Cookbook*, the circa 1901 go-to recipe source for American Jews, contained several brisket recipes. Among them: “Brisket of beef with carrots” and “Brisket of beef with celery sauce.”

New products soon entered the American brisket repertoire: After Heinz got its kosher designation in 1927, ketchup and chili sauce were thrown in for flavor. And when Atlanta-based Coca-Cola got its kosher certification in 1935, brisket with Coke became popular among Southern Jews, who called the combination “Atlanta brisket.” Its sharp sweetness offset the traditional brisket’s savory qualities, including salt, pepper and onions. Condensed mushroom soup and onion-soup mix also became popular brisket flavorings.

But down in Texas, the burgeoning cattle industry viewed brisket as an undifferentiated part of the less-desirable beef forequarter. The preferred sirloins, ribeyes and rib roasts were put on rail cars to Kansas and Chicago, while the lesser cuts became the basis for local barbecue.

There are competing barbecue origin stories. The most accepted is that German and Czech immigrants simply adapted their native-land methods for smoking pork to readily available inexpensive cuts of beef cattle. Another is that butchers smoked forequarter meats as take-out food primarily for Mexican farmworkers, who wanted beef to eat on the spot, says barbecue writer and historian Robb Walsh. But Daniel Vaughn, barbecue editor of *Texas Monthly*, has found intriguing evidence suggesting that “smoked brisket” in the early 20th century came about, in part, when Texas butchers started offering it to Jewish customers.

Whatever origin story you choose to believe, by the 1960s the once undesirable forequarter was the dish of choice at Lyndon B. Johnson’s ranch barbecues. The president’s caterer, Walter Jetton, singled out brisket as his preferred cut. Walsh’s *Legends of Texas Barbecue Cookbook* contains Jetton’s “Barbecued beef for 250,” which calls for 35 briskets, about 10 pounds each. And the meat industry got the message: They were soon boxing up individual

cuts of beef such as brisket, replacing the shipment of half-carasses in refrigerated boxcars. “Making these inexpensive cuts of beef delicious,” says Walsh, “is what made Texas barbecue famous.”

Brisket is by no means unique to U.S. culinary culture. Vietnamese pho soup has a brisket version. And brisket is a favorite in Chinese stewed or braised beef recipes. Mexican-born Pati Jinich, host of “*Pati’s Mexican Table*” on PBS, has a recipe for “beef brisket in pasilla and tomatillo sauce” in her cookbook, *Pati’s Mexican Table*. Jinich is Jewish, and she suggests trying her version “in place of your favorite brisket for the Jewish High Holidays.”

And let’s not forget that American brisket begat two other Jewish meat delicacies: pastrami and corned beef. Pastrami has Romanian and Turkish roots but became a hit among Jews on this side of the ocean. It is from the “plate”—a fattier slab underneath the steer and adjacent to the brisket. Corned beef was the Irish version of brisket, popularly paired with cabbage on St. Patrick’s Day. It, too, became part of the Jewish mainstream in melting-pot America.

But Texas-style and oven-baked Jewish-style remain the nation’s most popular brisket centerpieces. Their unlikely convergence may well be The Wandering Que, a kosher barbecue pop-up based in Hackensack, NJ.

Founder Ari White grew up in El Paso, TX, and when he moved to New York, he couldn’t stop thinking about the delicious smoked meat back home—such as the glatt kosher brisket served at his bar mitzvah reception. He and his wife became the owners of a Washington Heights deli, and White started smoking kosher Texas-style brisket in a back alley. Soon, the deli evolved into a catering business, which now serves brisket through the Northeast. In White’s opinion, traditional brisket doesn’t compare to Texas style. “It’s not even close,” he says. “They’re not even in the same league.”

But as a practical matter, the Grandma style may be a better bet if you live in the Northeast or Midwest. A home-style barrel smoker has to work twice as hard in frigid temperatures, climate change notwithstanding. Your Texas-style brisket might take much longer than 12 hours to reach perfection. I know this from bitter experience.

But whichever style you choose, it’s impossible to go wrong, insists Joan Nathan: “Nobody doesn’t love brisket.”

# Grandma’s Brisket

Recipe by Dan Freedman, adapted from grandmother Rose B. Kohl (1899-1998).

## INGREDIENTS

4-5 pound brisket  
2 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped  
1 Spanish or yellow onion, sliced  
1 cup red wine  
1 cup chili sauce  
1/2 cup chipotle ketchup (or chili sauce or regular ketchup)  
1 can of crushed tomatoes  
1 bay leaf  
1 sprig fresh rosemary (or dried)  
1 sprig fresh thyme (or dried)  
1/4 cup parsley, chopped  
2 stalks of celery, chopped  
6-8 carrots, peeled and sliced  
6-8 small potatoes, skins on  
2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
Salt and pepper to taste

## DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Sprinkle the brisket with salt and pepper and heat the oil. Put the garlic in the hot oil for a few seconds before adding the brisket. Sear for two minutes a side.
2. Spread onions in the bottom of a large casserole and place the brisket (with the garlic, if you like, on top) fat side up. Cover with crushed tomato, chili sauce, chipotle ketchup (if using), wine, celery, bay leaf, thyme and rosemary.
3. Cover and bake for three hours, basting occasionally. Add parsley, carrots and potatoes, then immerse in the gravy. Cook uncovered 30 minutes, or until the potatoes are tender.
4. Take the casserole out of the oven and put a fork in the brisket. If it feels tender and the fork comes out of the meat with a light pull, it is “fork tender,” as Joan Nathan puts it.
5. Brisket is ready to serve. It is best when you take out most of the gravy, slice the meat, put the slices back in the casserole and cover it all with the gravy.



# Lox: An American Love Story

By Eileen Lavine



**B**hen I was growing up on the Upper West Side in the 1930s, Broadway was lined with “appetizing” stores, that—unlike delicatessens, which sold smoked, cured and pickled meats—specialized in fish and dairy. These were shops where we bought pickles, fresh sauerkraut, dried fruits and candies as well as pickled, smoked and salted fish, and especially what we called lox. At the time, this now-iconic Jewish food was skyrocketing in popularity, and appetizing stores opened to meet the demand.

Most Americans, even Jews, don’t know that lox was invented in America, not Eastern Europe, explains Gil Marks, author of the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*. “Salmon was not an Eastern European fish,” although it was familiar to Scandinavians

and Germans, including German Jews, he says. While “bagels were Polish and cream cheese was Native American,” Jews began to eat salmon en masse in early 20th-century America, where the fish was plentiful.

European Jews had long smoked and salted their fish, and they did the same with salmon when the transcontinental railroad opened in 1869. Salmon from the Pacific Northwest was smoked and shipped east in barrels layered with salt, creating a brine that preserved it for months without refrigeration as it made its way cross-country. The result was what is known today as belly lox—the traditional authentic salty salmon cured in brine. It was affordable, easy to keep and pareve, so it could be eaten with dairy.

The word lox itself is evidence of the

food’s non-Eastern European roots. “The key to understanding the emergence of the term among Eastern European Jews in America is that lox is a German word,” Marks says. Lox is the Americanized spelling of the word for salmon in Yiddish (*laks*) and in German (*lachs*), and also a derivative of the Swedish gravlax, meaning cured salmon. Nova Scotia salmon, known as Nova, gained popularity after the introduction of refrigerated cases; instead of brining, which was no longer necessary, the fish could be lightly salted and then smoked. Today, we still use the term Nova to refer to the more expensive smoked salmon, although eventually, the word lox has come to encompass salmon from both coasts and even northern Europe.

The variety of Nova available at stores

today is overwhelming: There's Scottish, Norwegian, Danish, Irish, Gaspé, Baltic, and it comes smoked, cured, salted, brined, and in pink, orange or red, the color chemically enhanced to hide its natural gray. To be true to tradition and taste, lox must be hand-sliced, extra thin and almost transparent, the critical last step at the counter by expert slicers. Then it is most often served on a bagel with a *schmear* of cream cheese. And even that is a fairly new idea. In my youth, you didn't go to the appetizing store to buy a sandwich—you bought the ingredients and took them home to eat. No one knows who first brought lox, bagels and cream cheese together, although food writer Joan Nathan—who was recently shocked to discover that Nova is no longer found in Nova Scotia—suggests the sandwich might have originated in an early ad campaign for Philadelphia Cream Cheese.

Today, Manhattan's 30 or more appetizing stores have mostly vanished. But the few that remain have zealous followings. Barney Greengrass on Amsterdam Avenue at 86th Street has been an Upper West Side tradition for nearly 100 years. Russ & Daughters down on East Houston Street evolved from Joel Russ's pushcart in 1914. Zabar's on Broadway and 80th Street, which started more than 70 years ago as an appetizing counter in a market, is now a one-stop emporium, with both deli and appetizing items, plus baked goods, gadgets and even appliances. "Appetizing is quintessentially New York, but the word never made it into the lexicon," according to Niki Russ Federman of Russ & Daughters.

Today, lox is available on restaurant menus and in stores everywhere. Most retailers get their smoked fish from Acme Smoked Fish Corporation, which dates back to the early 1900s and is still located in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. It is one of the largest processors of smoked fish and herring in the country, and it is still, as is Russ & Daughters, family-owned and operated. At Acme, mostly farm-fished salmon, usually from Norway and Chile, is cured in a mild salt and brown sugar brine for up to a week, then cold smoked over fruitwood shavings for up to 24 hours. The result is a slightly smoky, salty flavor. And it is all done with automated equipment, which eliminates the smoke-filled air of the old days.

Zabar's alone sells 2,000 pounds of smoked salmon a week, up to 5,000 during the High Holiday season. Nova is

their most popular fish product, says Saul Zabar, who describes it as "the mildest, least briny lox we sell, with a smooth, silky texture and a clean and fresh taste." Like it smokier? Try their drier double-smoked salmon. Like most shops today, Zabar's also sells gravlax. Found on Scandinavian menus, gravlax is not smoked, but rather marinated in a mixture of dill, sugars and spices, often juniper berries, then weighted down to push out moisture and spread the flavor. Gravlax means "salmon from the grave" to signify the old tradition of burying the salmon in the earth before curing. It is usually served with a sweet mustard-dill sauce.

Lox has also gone nouveau. In 2004, when 80 top chefs were invited to make a creative version of bagel and lox, they came up with a wildly diverse medley of imaginative dishes, all documented in *The Great Bagel and Lox Book*. Among the sacrilegious, way-out culinary inventions were a bagel spoon dipped in smoked salmon custard, white salmon carpaccio, smoked salmon on foie gras, cannoli stuffed with smoked salmon and cream cheese, smoked salmon nicoise with chives and quail eggs. Lox has even found its way into Japanese food. Who among us hasn't tried a lox and cream cheese combo—or, as it's known on sushi menus, a Philadelphia roll?

## Want to make your own lox?

Try this recipe for gravlax, cured in a salt-sugar-dill mixture, which doesn't require smoking.

Adapted from Elisheva Margulies's recipe on [myjewishlearning.com](http://myjewishlearning.com).

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 1/2-2 pounds boneless salmon filet, skin on, pin bones removed
- 1 cup kosher salt
- 1 cup brown sugar
- Half bunch of stemmed dill leaves
- Crushed black pepper (optional)

### DIRECTIONS

1. Rinse salmon filet and cut in half to make two equal pieces. Place each piece on a shallow plate, skin side down.
2. Mix salt, sugar and pepper in a bowl. Pile half the mixture on each half of salmon. Then place dill on top. Sandwich the two pieces of fish together, skin side out, and wrap tightly with plastic wrap.
3. Place the fish in a gallon-size self-seal plastic bag, pushing out all the air, and seal. Put bag in a shallow dish. Refrigerate, with weights on top—use another heavy dish, heavy cans, anything to weigh down the fish.
4. The lox will take two to three days to cure. At the end of each day, drain any liquid that has been extracted from the salmon and turn the salmon over so that both sides are evenly weighed down.
5. After two days, you can start to taste the fish. When it is cured to your desired taste, remove fish from the plastic and rinse it well. To serve, slice thin on the bias and discard the skin. To freeze, wrap well in plastic and place in a freezer bag.