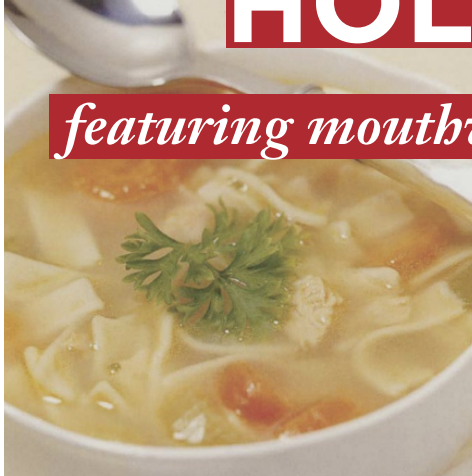




# THE DELECTABLE HISTORY BEHIND YOUR FAVORITE HIGH HOLIDAY FOODS

*featuring mouthwatering recipes for your holiday table*



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# POMEGRANATE'S RICH AND HOLY HISTORY



## It was about 20 years ago that

I saw a pomegranate blessed as the first fruit of the New Year at a Rosh Hashanah table. I was a guest of Rabbi Yosef Zadok, the head of Jerusalem's Yemenite community. A master silversmith from a long line of craftsmen—his grandfather made coins for the king of Yemen—Zadok continued to practice the craft until he was in his 90s. We were gathered in the living room of the rabbi's apartment above his workshop near Mea Shearim. The centerpiece of the table was a huge bowl filled with pomegranates and dotted with a few grapes and dates—three of the holy fruits in the land of Canaan, as mentioned in the Book of Deuteronomy. As the rabbi lifted the pomegranate high over his head, he told me that it is a sign of fertility, peace and prosperity for the New Year.

After saying the opening prayers, we nibbled from a bowl of *g a'le*, a fruit-and-nut

combination of grapes, pomegranates, pecans, walnuts, roasted peanuts and beans as the first course. When the meal was over, the rabbi sat back to rest a little and said, "Blessed be His Name. We have always eaten little, but well, of what God has given us." Then we each savored a few seeds of a fresh pomegranate, enjoying the beautiful bright color and sweet, yet tangy, flavor.

One of the oldest and most beloved fruits known to mankind, the red pomegranate, native to southwestern Asia around the Caspian Sea, has been grown in countries such as Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Armenia and Israel for more than 3,500 years. The word pomegranate comes from the Latin *pomum* and *granatus*, or "seedy apple." The Hebrew word *rimon*, which comes from the Egyptian *rmn*, has become a source of confusion in recent years, as the round shape of the fruit lends itself to a less sweet purpose—a hand grenade in the Israeli army is called

a *rimon yad*, or hand pomegranate.

Biblically, it is significant as the first fruit of the season, but also because it appears often throughout texts as a symbol of abundance, knowledge, fertility and peace. It also may have made a very early appearance in Genesis: Scholars differ on the actual fruit species of the "apple" of the Garden of Eden—some say that it might have been a fig or grapes or an apricot or a quince, or the "seedy apple," the pomegranate. The perfect pomegranate is mentioned as one with 613 seeds—the same number as the *mitzvot* of the Torah.

Pomegranate designs were embroidered on the hems of the robes of the high priests of the Temple and adorned the capitals of the two pillars of King Solomon's temple (Bangs 7:13-22). Coins from Ancient Judea dating from the second century BCE depicted a pomegranate on one side—perhaps in



# The perfect pomegranate is mentioned as one with 613 seeds—the same number as the mitzvot of the Torah.

reference to the pomegranate being a symbol of wealth and plenty—and in 2007, the Israeli two-shekel coin was graced with the same image.

Of course, pomegranates are best loved as a drink and as food. Their arils (the fleshy, tasty covering of the seed) are a special treat, eaten raw or dried like raisins, pressed to produce juice, mixed into wine or sprinkled on roasted meats. Over time, pomegranates made their way into cooking. Their juices were boiled down to make syrup or pomegranate honey, and the seeds were used to stuff meat cutlets or dot rice dishes. One of my favorites is the Persian dish *fesenjan*, a stew with poultry, pomegranates and walnuts, that I tasted in Jerusalem and then at the home of Persian Jewish immigrants in Los Angeles.

Another classic Persian treatment of the pomegranate is to turn the hard-shelled fruit into a natural juice box. I remember my children's delight when a Persian family taught us the technique of drinking the juice straight from the hard shell. They rolled a pomegranate along a countertop until all the crunchy sounds stopped, then pierced it with a skewer, inserted a straw into the hole and drank. Now sold as a drink in fruit stands in cities from Tehran to Berlin to Jerusalem, this reminds me of the verse from Song of Songs 8:2: "I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranates...."

Since the fruit can stay fresh for months with no refrigeration, the pomegranate was a perfect item for trade. Merchants traveling from the Middle East to Europe as early as the eighth century probably brought the fruit with them. My mother-in-law would talk about the pomegranates her family would get from Iran for Rosh Hashanah when she was a little girl growing up in Poland. They would eat them raw, savoring each precious seed, since, at best, they would see

the fruit only once a year.

For centuries the pomegranate was quietly revered by those who lived in places where the fruit grew plentifully. Jews of the Middle East, Ashkenazi and Sephardic alike, mainly used it to make syrup. But about the time of the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, the pomegranate was rediscovered in the West.

When immigrants fleeing the Iranian Revolution came to the U.S., they brought with them a longing for the foods of their homeland. Jewish entrepreneurs, like the Soofer family who came from Tehran to Los Angeles, carried seeds with them, helping the pomegranate gain a foothold here. Today Soofer Co. Inc., with its Sadaf brand, has become a large importer and distributor of kosher Iranian foods, including pomegranate syrup.

In 1986 another Iranian immigrant, Najmieh Batmanglij, published her first cookbook, *The Food of Life*, which featured a large pomegranate on the cover. This book is filled with recipes for pomegranate syrups, sauces and stews. It is a staple text in Iranian and Iranian Jewish communities in the United States, demonstrating traditional cooking techniques that current generations have forgotten or never learned.

Pomegranates are also now plentiful in most American supermarkets, generally from October to the beginning of January. Much of that is thanks to Lynda and Stewart Resnick, the owners of Pom Wonderful and the largest growers of pomegranates in the United States. In the late 1980s the Resnicks acquired land in southern California's San Joaquin Valley that had a few pomegranate trees on it. As they learned more about the mythology and the health benefits of the red plump fruit, their interest grew. They have sponsored studies that have found that the juice of the pomegranate, a rich source of vitamins C and B, helps



prevent heart disease and atherosclerosis and is thought to reduce dental plaque and lower the risk of prostate cancer.

These findings, and the public relations campaign that came with them, coincided with a new emphasis on the benefits of healthy eating and natural remedies. Lynda Resnick, who eats a bowl of pomegranate arils every day for breakfast, told me, "We're doing God's work. And we're helping people clean out their arteries."

Every year at Rosh Hashanah, I keep a large bowl of plump, red pomegranates at the center of my holiday table, just as the late Rabbi Zadok once did. We eat them raw and drink their juice. For me, they're both a remembrance of the Yemenite meal I had so long ago and a hope for peace, fruitfulness and prosperity for the New Year. As we relish each aril, I think of the Rosh Hashanah prayer, "In the coming year may we be rich and replete with acts inspired by religion and piety as the pomegranate is rich and replete with seeds."—Joan Nathan

## *Khoreshteh Fesenjan*

Sweet and sour chicken, pomegranate and walnut stew  
Adapted from *The New American Cooking*, by Joan Nathan

1 medium onion, chopped  
1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil  
10 chicken thighs, with the bone, skin and fat removed  
1 pound walnuts, finely chopped in a food processor  
1 teaspoon salt  
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice  
1/2 cup sugar  
2 tablespoons ketchup  
1/3 cup pomegranate juice concentrate or syrup  
Small pinch of saffron  
4 cups water

1. Saute the onions in the olive oil in a medium pot until light golden brown. Add the chicken, walnuts, salt, lemon juice, sugar, ketchup, pomegranate concentrate, saffron and water. The chicken pieces do not have to be in one layer just as long as they are covered with sauce.

2. Bring everything to a boil, then reduce the heat and cover the pot loosely. Cook for an hour at a slow and constant simmer, stirring occasionally. Serve over white rice. 6-8 servings





# THE SATISFYING SWEETNESS OF DATES



**When I need a sweet, satisfying** nibble, I often pick up a date. These wonderful little packages of luscious and nutritious fruit are boundlessly versatile. They pair with stews, sweets, meat and dairy. They transform into appetizers, entrées or desserts. They can be added to breads and puddings, infused into smoothies, made into honey or syrup, or used to liven up anything as a substitute for sugar.

Dates have a rich flavor, and an even richer history: Evidence found in Lower Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq, confirms that dates are one of the world's oldest cultivated fruits, domesticated over 6,000 years ago. The word “date” is derived from the Greek *daktulos* (“finger”), describing the way the oval-shaped dates dangle from their trees in hanging bunches. The Hebrew word for date is *tamar*, from the root meaning “to be lofty,” and for millennia slender date

palm trees up to 75 feet tall have provided shade and nourishment from North Africa and the Middle East into India.

According to the Greek historian Strabo, the ancient Persians sang of 360 uses for the date palm. Wine made from tapping the palms quenched travelers’ thirst at ancient desert oases. Twigs and fibers were woven into baskets, sieves, mats and ropes, while tree trunks provided beams and other materials for building. The dates themselves were a daily staple, eaten plain or pressed into cakes along with figs. And because they were long-lasting, nourishing and easy to carry, they were favored by nomads, traders and explorers.

Dates also play a particularly important role in Jewish tradition. In the story of the biblical exodus, dates are one of the “seven species,” the fruits and grains the Israelites discover growing in the Promised Land. And when the Torah says the

land is “flowing with milk and honey,” it is actually referring to date honey, not bee honey—which was rarer to find and dangerous to collect. This honey, called *dvash temarim*, is made by boiling dates for many hours, and it is mentioned in the Torah no fewer than 55 times.

Eventually dates made their way to Europe, growing especially well in Spain’s arid climate. In the 1700s, Spanish missionaries were the first to bring dates to the New World. But it wasn’t until the early 1900s that the commercial date industry began in the United States, when an intrepid explorer from the U.S. Department of Agriculture brought date cuttings from Iraq back to California.

Today, Southern California produces nearly 90 percent of all dates grown in the United States. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran are typically the top producers worldwide, with the United States (and Israel) falling much lower on the list.

## Dates continue to hold an important place in Jewish tradition—particularly when it comes to the holidays.

With grandparents from Turkey, I grew up munching on dates for their sweetness, unaware of their health benefits. Dates are considered a superfood, packing in critical vitamins and nutrients, as well as helping to regulate the digestive system, blood sugar and cholesterol levels. When it comes to nutritional value, all dates are equal—which is surprising, considering there are more than 200 varieties, differing in color, shape and taste. Most common in the United States are medjool dates, good for snacking and stuffing, and deglet noor dates, good for pitting and chopping.

Dates can be eaten in three stages of ripeness. In the first stage, they are pale yellow and crisp like an apple. U.S. shoppers will usually find these fresh dates only in specialty Middle Eastern markets. In the second stage, dates are light brown, soft and exceptionally sweet—and also difficult to find in the United States. American markets usually sell dates only in their third stage: These dried dates have wrinkly, dark brown skin and last for 18 to 24 months unrefrigerated.

Date honey, *dvash*, popular in the Middle East for thousands of years, used to be hard to find in the United States—I would stock up during trips to Israel—but because of the swell of interest in Israeli food over the past decade or so, it can now easily be found in many shops and markets. Today, *dvash* is most commonly marketed as *silan*. Also known as date molasses or date syrup, *silan* has a texture similar to molasses, but it's easier to drizzle. It has less sugar than honey and a deeper, more complex taste. Mixing equal parts with tahini produces a topping for toast that is overwhelmingly popular in Israel—and gaining on PB&J in the United States. *Silan* can be drizzled over ice cream or pancakes, stirred into sauces and salad dressings, or used to sweeten tea and soothe sore throats. Mixed with olive oil, salt and pepper, it

becomes a tasty glaze for roasted veggies, fish and fowl.

Dates are a staple of Sephardic, North African and Middle Eastern cuisines. Many Moroccan and Persian stews and tagines with chicken, beef and lamb feature dates, while *dafina*, the Moroccan long-cooked Shabbat stew, is served with dates as an ingredient or garnish. Certain recipes for Persian rice, a feature of some Shabbat dinners, call for dates and pistachios, along with other dried fruits. And when it comes to sweets, there are seemingly endless uses. Stella Hanan Cohen, a descendant of Sephardic Jews from Rhodes and author of *Stella's Sephardic Table*, loves to make Rhodian Jewish shortbread “stuffed with succulent dates and chopped almonds, fragrant with cloves, cinnamon and orange blossom water,” she says. “We call them *menenas*, much like the cookies in the East Mediterranean known as *ma'moul*.”

Served on their own, dates are traditionally stuffed with almond paste, almonds or walnuts. The Persian cake *ranginak* uses walnut-stuffed dates covered with a sweet roux and a layer of chopped pistachios. I often serve dates stuffed with creamy goat cheese or whipped feta with a sprinkling of chopped nuts or sesame seeds, pomegranate seeds and a drizzle of *silan*.

Dates continue to hold an important place in Jewish tradition—particularly when it comes to the holidays. They are one of the foods celebrated during *Tu B'Shevat*, and a key component of the Sephardic Rosh Hashanah seder. Traditionally, they symbolize the hope that our enemies will not harm us—or these days, the hope of finding love in the new year.

Dates and date syrup are also a leading ingredient in Passover charoset: Iraqi charoset, for example, is simply chopped nuts stirred into *silan*. Some Turkish charosets feature dates and oranges ground together raw or cooked into



a paste. Each Passover, I make several charosets, but for more than 20 years, the crowd favorite has been my Moroccan charoset balls. Every family has its own way to prepare this special treat. Mine is mostly dates ground in the food processor together with dried figs, apricots and walnuts or almonds, then formed into small balls that I roll in finely chopped almond meal.

One of my favorite memories connected to those date-laden charoset balls is preparing them (along with other Sephardic foods) as the guest chef for White House seders with President Obama in the last few years of his term. When I make them now, I think about that special honor for this granddaughter of immigrants. I think about the date-and-orange charoset of my Sephardic ancestors in the Ottoman Empire, and about the pressed date-fig cakes of my biblical ancestors. Just as dates have sustained people for thousands of years, I am sustained by the connection to this rich heritage.  
—Susan Barocas

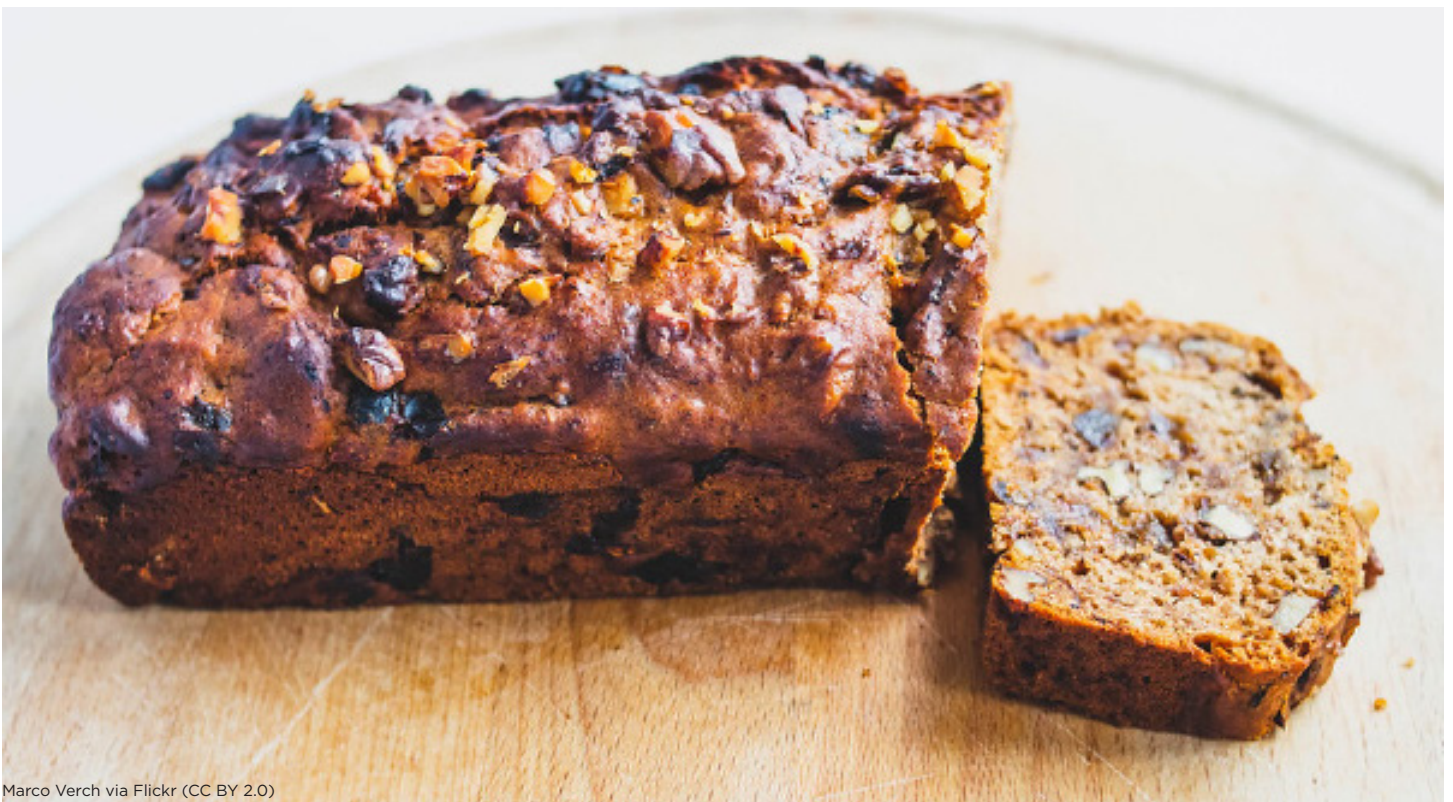


## *Triple Date Bread*

by Susan Barocas

1 cup chopped dates, lightly packed, or 10-12 medjool dates  
1 cup very hot water  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
1/4 teaspoon sea salt  
1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour  
1/2 cup date sugar (or granulated cane sugar if needed)  
1 tablespoon vegetable oil  
1/4 cup silan (date syrup)  
1 large egg, beaten  
1 cup coarsely chopped walnuts or pecans plus more for garnishing (optional)

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease or spray with oil a standard loaf pan.
2. Measure the dates after they are chopped. If working with whole dates, pit them if needed. Cut in half lengthwise, then cut each half into three or four pieces. Pour the boiling water over the dates, baking soda and salt in a large heat-proof cup or bowl. Set aside to soften and cool while preparing the rest of the ingredients.
3. In a mixing bowl, blend the flour and sugar. Add in the remaining ingredients along with the date mixture and stir until well blended, being sure to incorporate all of the flour.
4. Pour into the prepared loaf pan, level the top and bake for about 45 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean. Let cool in the pan for 10-15 minutes before taking out and letting cool on a wire rack.



Marco Verch via Flickr (CC BY 2.0)

# HONEY: HOW SWEET (AND HOLY) IT IS

**Honey is potent stuff in the Jewish world.** Since ancient times, it has been a powerful trope for love, hope and promise, and it is the key ingredient of the iconic honey cake, which retains its High Holiday status to this day.

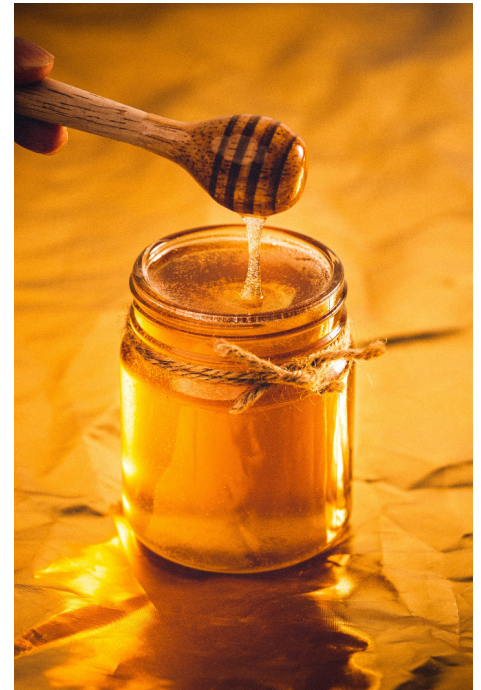
Honey serves as a metaphor throughout the Torah, in passages such as Song of Songs 4:11, which says, “The sweetness of Torah drips from your lips, like honey and milk it lies under your tongue.” Indeed, consuming honey was often used to symbolize consuming Torah knowledge, says Jordan D. Rosenblum, professor of classical Judaism at the University of Wisconsin and author of *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*. That’s true in Ezekiel 3:2–4, which says, “Feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you. Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.”

Use of bee’s honey by humans dates to at least the Mesolithic period. In Valencia, Spain, cave paintings of men climbing ladders to beehives were created between 9000 and 4000 BCE. In ancient Egypt, the earliest known evidence of beekeeping dates to approximately 2600 BCE. But bee’s honey wasn’t common in ancient Israel—in fact, “the land of milk and honey” of the Torah is a bit of a misnomer. The reason for the lack of honey is simple: The bees of the region were a particularly aggressive strain. Their ferocity made raiding hives for honey a risky task, so bee’s honey was a delicious, if rare, happenstance. (King Saul’s son Jonathan found honey on the ground

during the battle of Mikhmash and “his eyes brightened.”)

Honey was frequently made from sources other than bees, such as dates, figs and even pomegranates. The “land of milk and honey” refers to molasses from dates, sources say. Archaeological findings at Beit She’an in Israel indicate that around the 9th century BCE, people started keeping tame, non-native Anatolian bees. By Talmudic times, according to the late food historian Gil Marks’s *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, the Hebrew word *devash*, which once referred to all kinds of syrup, generally meant bee’s honey.

Scholars granted honey a unique status as the only kosher product of a non-kosher creature. The bee, it was ruled, was a carrier, not a creator. Rosenblum believes that the rationale was a type of reverse engineering, necessary since honey was “a common, readily available sweetener that is very shelf-stable. It lasts a long time and does not require refrigeration. Also, I would argue, the fact that it is discussed so positively in biblical texts and many others surely influenced the rabbis to look for wiggle room to declare it permissible.” Furthermore, honey was sometimes viewed as having medicinal value. Maimonides, the 12th-century philosopher and physician, suggested that honey was a curative elixir for some, particularly for the elderly, to whom he suggested mixing honey with warm water to ease digestive woes. Still, he was concerned that possible overuse might lead



to gluttony and health repercussions. He writes, “Honey and wine are bad for children and good for the elderly, certainly in the rainy season.”

Honey’s symbolism has given it a significant place in Jewish customs. Among Ashkenazi Jews, the sticky nectar has been tied to learning. The deliciousness of knowledge was emphasized the day boys entered cheder and were handed a slate with Hebrew letters smeared with honey, which they were instructed to lick off, a palpable and tasty lesson in the delectability of consuming wisdom.

Holidays were also historically marked

**Honey serves as a metaphor throughout the Torah, in passages such as Song of Songs 4:11, which says, “The sweetness of Torah drips from your lips, like honey and milk it lies under your tongue.”**



with honey. Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews have long served luscious desserts topped with a honey syrup: Baklava was and is popular at Sukkot and other holidays, and tishpishti, a cake of Turkish origin made with nuts, was a popular Passover confection because it could be made unleavened. Honey was often associated with Shavuot, to represent accepting the Torah. Eating dairy, also traditional on Shavuot, harkened back to “the land of milk and honey.” Serving sweets—including honey—to welcome and celebrate the New Year or for special occasions has been common since antiquity. Today, on Rosh Hashanah, when bee’s honey is de rigueur, the hope is for a good and sweet new year.

Honey cake on Rosh Hashanah is now sealed into the Jewish culinary canon.

“Honey cakes were made in antiquity,” says Darra Goldstein, professor at Williams College and editor of *The Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets*. They are “so ubiquitous that they can’t be traced to a single source.” Gil Marks notes that the honey cake traditions were spread by Arabs into Sicily and Moorish Spain. Although Arab cultures soon developed a taste for sugar, honey continued to be popular in Europe, Marks says, making its use in cakes an inevitability. In Europe, honey cake was known as *lekach*, from the German word for “to lick,” and it was remarkably similar to the honey cake still eaten today.

“Both Eastern European and German Jews brought their own versions of honey cake when they immigrated

to the U.S.,” says Goldstein, “and you’ll find variations ranging from dense and chewy to the extraordinarily light and multi-layered cake [pastry chef] Michelle Polzine makes at 20th Century Cafe in San Francisco.” Even today, when it’s sometimes hard to find a honey cake recipe in a contemporary cookbook, the old standard remains beloved. “All Jewish families I know still make honey cake at Rosh Hashanah, and for me, it remains symbolically important,” says Goldstein. “I don’t see it as a relic, because people either make their family’s own recipe to carry on a meaningful tradition or else they play around with more modernized recipes to adapt to changing tastes.” —  
*Tami Ganeles-Weiser*



# *Ginger and Spice Honey Cake*

by Tami Ganeles-Weiser

2 cups unbleached, all-purpose flour  
1 cup whole-wheat flour  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1 tablespoon roasted ground cinnamon (can be purchased at grocery store)  
1/2 teaspoon whole green cardamom seeds  
1/4 teaspoon whole anise seeds  
1/8 teaspoon whole coriander seeds  
1/4 teaspoon lavender  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1 cup unsalted butter, room temperature  
2 cups dark brown sugar, packed  
5 large eggs  
1 cup plain yogurt or sour cream  
1-inch piece fresh ginger root, peeled and finely grated  
1 cup honey, any floral variety, from mild to medium, lavender preferred  
Seeds of one vanilla bean (split a vanilla bean in half lengthwise and scrape out seeds)

1. Heat a medium cast-iron skillet or saute pan over medium heat until the pan is hot. Add the cardamom seeds, anise seeds and coriander seeds and stir, toasting for ten to 20 seconds or until fragrant. Remove from heat and place the seeds in a spice grinder or a coffee grinder dedicated to spice grinding. Add the lavender and grind the mixture until fine. Remove and set aside.

2. Preheat the oven to 325°F. Spray a 9- or 10-inch tube or bundt pan with nonstick vegetable oil spray and dust it with flour. Set aside.

3. Sift together the flours, baking soda, baking powder, cinnamon, cardamom, anise, coriander, lavender, if using, and salt onto a large sheet of parchment or wax paper and set aside.

4. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, combine the butter and brown sugar and mix at medium speed for about 5 minutes, until light in color and light and fluffy in texture.

5. In a separate bowl, whisk together the eggs, sour cream or yogurt, ginger, seeds of vanilla bean, and honey until completely combined. Set aside.

6. With the mixer set at low speed, add the flour alternately with the wet mixture, scraping down the sides and bottom with each addition, beginning and ending with the flour mixture and mixing until just combined.

7. Pour the mixture into the prepared pan and bake for 1 hour 20 minutes, or until a thin knife inserted into the center comes out clean.

8. Cool completely before serving. Leftover cake can be wrapped well with plastic and stored at room temperature for up to 2 days. It is actually better the second day.

Makes 1 (9- or 10-inch) cake, about 16 servings.



# A TALE OF TWO BRISKETS



**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,

**If you grew up in an Ashkenazi Jewish home, you might remember the delicious oven-baked brisket your mom served up for holidays**



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 cookbook 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 start-



ed 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.”—*Dan Freedman*



## *Grandma's Brisket*

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

1 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 (10 or 15 ounces)  
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  
1 salt and pepper to taste

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.



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# THE POWER OF COUSCOUS



**Einat Admony is an Israeli chef** known for her modern and irreverent interpretations of Middle Eastern cuisine. Her “everyday cauliflower,” for example, is made with the popular Israeli snack Bamba and peanut tahini. Admony’s new restaurant in Manhattan’s West Village, Kish-Kash, however, is a change of tone, dedicated to traditional Jewish North African cuisine. Why the change? Behold the power of couscous.

You may be familiar with the five-minute couscous that’s available in supermarkets, but hand-rolled couscous, the kind Admony makes fresh every day in what she calls “New York’s first couscous bar,” requires a lot of patience, practice and time-consuming labor. First made by Berber tribes of North Africa, and to this day a staple in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and western Libya, couscous goes by many different names: The Berber called it sekruo or seksu, in Algeria it’s kisku or ta’am, and in Tunisia it can be kiskisi, kiskiss, kuskusi or kuskisi.

Throughout the Maghreb, couscous

was traditionally prepared by groups of women, family and friends, who helped each other pass the long hours it took to make. First, they spread semolina wheat, bought by the men and freshly ground, onto a large round platter, sprinkling it with salted water and sometimes flour. They then rolled the grains with their hands, adding more water and flour as necessary, until the couscous granules formed. “The soothing sound of gold bangles on your mother’s hand banging again and again against the aluminum tray is the sound of home,” recalls Pascale Perez-Rubin, an Israeli food historian and journalist who grew up in a Jewish-Tunisian home. The couscous was then sifted through a special sieve to form equal-size bits. Finally it was either cooked and served or left to dry for a few days in the sun.

Before preparing, Jews moistened the dried couscous with a little salted water and oil. “Traditionally, Muslims used samneh”—clarified butter—“which the Jews avoided for kashrut reasons,” says

Perez-Rubin. “This made a big difference in the flavor and aroma between the two.” The couscous was then steamed in a special dish called a couscousière, similar to a steaming pot. It was placed in the upper perforated section called kishkash or kiskis—the origin of the name of Admony’s restaurant—and the stew that accompanied it in the lower pan. After the first steaming process, the couscous was left to cool, mixed or sifted again to keep it airy, then steamed once more—or several times more—before serving. The process is so lengthy that even Moroccans prefer ready-made couscous these days.

How couscous is served depends on where you are. While Moroccans serve their stews over the couscous in a covered earthenware pot called a tagine—with the couscous in the center, meat on top and vegetables around it—Tunisians ladle the couscous into one bowl, the broth into another and the vegetables and meat into a third, allowing guests to create their own com-



## Moroccan Jews eat a seven-vegetable couscous on Rosh Hashanah topped with tanzia, a sweet stew of dried fruit, nuts and onion. Other North African communities decorate their holiday couscous with dried fruit and saffron

binations. In Sicily, couscous is served with fish stews, and in Livorno (Italy), it is accompanied by meat, traditionally lamb. (In her book, *Cucina Ebraica*, Joyce Goldstein claims that Jews who came from North Africa in the 13th century first brought couscous to Italy.)

There are lesser-known varieties of couscous: The Palestinian maftoul and Lebanese moghrabieh are rolled into larger pellets of fine and coarse wheat before steaming. Maftoul are about the size of the Italian orzo, and moghrabieh (meaning “coming from the Maghreb”) are about the size of chickpeas, and both come topped with chicken, onions and chickpeas. American consumers may be familiar with what is marketed as Israeli couscous, which has gained popularity in recent decades. Known in Israel as ptitim, it is prepared by kneading the

dough, as opposed to rolling wheat with water, and boiled, rather than steamed, similar to pasta. A staple of many weekday family lunches in Israel, ptitim was invented in the 1950s during a time of deep austerity, when rice, which was in high demand by Mizrahi Jews, was scarce. Then-Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion asked Osem, the dried-food manufacturer, to come up with a carb substitute for rice, and Israeli couscous was born. The original recipe was modeled on farfel, Ashkenazi noodles shaped like a rice grain, which later became round. Palestinians often point to the similarity between their maftoul and Israeli couscous, arguing that Israeli couscous is neither couscous nor Israeli.

In Israel, Jewish North African families eat couscous on Tuesdays and Fridays. This tradition dates back to Tunis,

where bakeries were closed on Tuesdays. “If they have no bread, let them eat couscous,” says Admony. Tuesday couscous is served with a simple soup and Shabbat dinner couscous with mafroum (Tripolitan beef-stuffed potatoes in tomato sauce) or boulet (a Tunisian stew with vegetables but no tomato sauce). Other classic couscous stews include t’becha bil kar’a—pumpkin and chickpea with or without meat.

Although it is considered a poor man’s dish, couscous symbolizes good luck and prosperity, says Perez-Rubin, and so it is a favorite for holidays and family celebrations. Moroccan Jews eat a seven-vegetable couscous on Rosh Hashanah topped with tanzia, a sweet stew of dried fruit, nuts and onion. Other North African communities decorate their holiday couscous with dried fruit and saffron. For Shavuot, Tunisian Jews mix a coarser, unsifted couscous with milk, sugar and cinnamon, while Algerians use milk and green fava. There is even dessert couscous: Tunisian farka cake is made with layers of couscous and dates, nuts and cinnamon, all steamed together, then drizzled with sugar syrup.

“Couscous is versatile,” says Perez-Rubin. “It takes form and changes according to the occasion.” —*Vered Guttman*



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## *Butternut Squash, Chickpea and Turmeric Couscous*

### Stew Ingredients

2 quarts vegetable stock  
2 potatoes, peeled and cut into 2-inch cubes  
3 carrots, peeled and cut into 2-inch sections  
1 yellow onion, quartered  
1 cup cooked or canned chickpeas  
1 butternut squash, peeled, cut into large chunks  
2 zucchinis, cut into 2-inch sections  
3 celery stalks, cut into 2-inch slices  
1 small bunch cilantro, chopped  
1 tablespoon grated fresh turmeric root or 1 teaspoon turmeric powder  
salt to taste

### Couscous Ingredients

1 ½ cups whole wheat couscous  
1 ½ teaspoons salt

1. In a large pot over medium-high heat, bring vegetable stock to boil.
2. Add the rest of the ingredients, except for salt, bring to boil, then reduce heat to low.
3. Cover and cook for 1 hour, until all vegetables are tender. Add salt to taste.
4. Prepare couscous according to package directions.
5. In each bowl put a few tablespoons of couscous, top with vegetables and chickpeas with some of the stock and serve.

Serves 6





# STUFFED CABBAGE: A COMFORT FOOD FOR ALL AGES



**What you call it usually depends** on where your grandmother came from. Mine, from German-speaking Bohemia, called it *gefultes kraut*. To my mother-in-law, a Romanian immigrant, it was *holishkes*. Others call it *praches*, *prahkes* or *galuptzi*. (The last stems from Slavic variants for dove, probably because the finished dish resembled little birds on a plate.) It's *golub* in Russian, *golab* in Polish and *holub* in Ukrainian, which led to *golomkes*, *goluptshes* and *holeptshes*. In Turkey, the delicacy is known by more literal names such as *sarma* for “to wrap” or *dolma* for “stuffed.” It's *kohlroulade* in Austria; *toltott kaosztá* in Hungary; *malfoof* in the Middle East and on and on. But today in America, it is just stuffed cabbage, the exemplary comfort food. The fare is served on the fall holiday of Sukkot to symbolize a bountiful harvest, and is a particular favorite on Simchat Torah because two small stuffed cabbage rolls placed side by side resemble Torah

scrolls. But it can be eaten any time, as a popular appetizer or a main course, served in Jewish delis and at home.

Cabbage entered Jewish cooking some 2,000 years ago, according to Gil Marks, author of the 2010 *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*. Although not mentioned in the Bible, it is cited in the Talmud, he says, where the rabbis praise the “cabbage for sustenance.” Though no one knows where the tradition of filling leaves with other foods originated, it shows up in cultures around the globe stretching from Europe and the Middle East to the jungles of the Amazon.

Recipes are handed down in families amid continual arguments about sweet-and-sour versus tomato sauce, cooked or raw rice, green cabbage or savoy, oven-baked or simmered. In fact, Joan Nathan, Jewish culinary history maven, claims that “there are probably as many different stuffed cabbage recipes as there are towns in Central and East Europe.”

Stop by Chowhound, the popular online food discussion board, and you'll discover dozens of stories submitted by individuals from all over the world about their family recipes. (There's even a small Transylvanian town, Praid, where the intense rivalry between Hungarian and Romanian recipes led to a “cabbage war” that inspired an annual International Stuffed Cabbage Festival.)

When meat was scarce or too costly, Jewish cooks used rice, bread or barley to stretch the filling. In our time of plenty, the filling is mostly ground beef (or chopmeat, as some grandmothers have called it), with just a small amount of rice. Ashkenazi Jews make it with uncooked meat, rice and grated onions with eggs as binding. Hungarians add sweet paprika, Romanians lots of garlic, Syrians cinnamon, Persians dill. Other common ingredients include salt, pepper, minced garlic or garlic powder, one to three eggs, onions (raw chopped or

**The fare is served on the fall holiday of Sukkot to symbolize a bountiful harvest, and is a particular favorite on Simchat Torah because two small stuffed cabbage rolls placed side by side resemble Torah scrolls.**

grated or sautéed in olive oil) and catsup (anywhere from ¼ to ¾ cup). Mark Bittman of The New York Times thinks the typical ingredients are too sweet and don't balance the sourness, and so in an unusual New World version, he uses ground lamb with grated carrots and parsnips in his stuffing, and spikes a classic tomato sauce with crushed red pepper. "The concept [of stuffed cabbage] is fantastic," he says. "Just skip the ketchup and vinegar."

The range of sauces expanded dramatically in the 19th century when tomatoes became more common; canned tomatoes and tomato sauce were added as thickeners instead of browned flour. Hungarians, Romanians and northern Poles favor a savory sauce, while Jews from Galicia and Ukraine prefer a sweet-and-sour one, with lemon juice, brown sugar and even raisins. A novel addition by Joan Nathan includes two

cans of concentrated lemonade with a tablespoon of brown sugar for the sweet-and-sour flavor. Sephardis prefer a tart tomato sauce with lemon juice and vinegar or sour salt (citric acid), which holds the flavor during the long cooking time. And the Second Avenue Deli in New York City adds chopped orange and lemon, peels included, to its sauce.

Cooking variations also apply to the cabbage wrap. The goal is to end up with soft and tender leaves that can be rolled easily. Most recipes call for cutting out the core of the cabbage, removing any tough outer leaves, placing the head in a pot filled with boiling water to cook anywhere from three to ten minutes and then cooling and peeling off the leaves. Or individual leaves can be removed from the cabbage and plunged separately into boiling water for a few minutes. Other cooks avoid boiling altogether by freezing the head of cabbage for a day or

two, then defrosting it the night before filling and cooking.

What happens next is again a source of heated culinary exchange. All agree that one or two tablespoons of the filling should be placed on each cabbage leaf, with the ends folded toward the center, then rolled up to firmly enclose the filling. Most commonly, the rolls are placed in a large casserole, smothered in sauce and baked covered for one-and-a-half to two hours, then uncovered and baked another half-hour until the sauce thickens and the cabbage rolls are lightly browned. But some cooks insist that stuffed cabbage should not be baked: They bring the rolls in the sauce to a boil in a covered pot on the stove, simmer for an hour or two, basting occasionally. Fortunately most everyone agrees it's best not to serve stuffed cabbage right away—it always tastes better the next day! —*Eileen Lavine*





## *Stuffed Cabbage*

### Filling:

2 beaten eggs  
1 pound ground beef  
½ cup cooked rice  
½ teaspoon garlic powder  
1 tablespoon grated onion  
(or 1/2 cup chopped and  
cooked in oil)  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon pepper  
1 tablespoon catsup

### Sauce:

2 cups tomato sauce  
2 tablespoons tomato paste  
½ cup sugar  
¼ cup lemon juice or cider vinegar  
Salt and pepper to taste

1. Bring a large pot of water with a little vinegar to a rapid boil.
2. Place a cabbage head in the water and cook about 5 minutes until you can remove outer leaves easily.
3. Cool and remove about 14 large leaves. Trim the center rib of each leaf. You can chop up extra leaves and put them in the bottom of your baking dish with some chopped onions.
4. Combine stuffing and put about 1-2 heaping tablespoons on each leaf, fold sides over stuffing, then fold over the rib end and roll up.
5. Arrange the cabbage rolls, seam side down, in the baking dish.
6. Combine the ingredients for the sauce, bring to a boil and pour over the cabbage rolls. Add water if necessary to cover the rolls.
7. Cover and simmer 1½-2 hours. Alternatively, bake in a 300° F oven for 2-3 hours covered, then uncover and bake another half-hour or so until the sauce is thickened and the rolls are browned lightly.



# WHICH CAME FIRST— THE CHICKEN OR THE SOUP?

**Neolithic remains suggest** humans may have supped their first soups 30,000 years ago, perhaps from meat boiled in its skin. How else to nourish the toothless elders whose skeletons emerged from Neanderthal graves? Pots would come later, as would chickens, which were bred from wild game and flourished in Egyptian farmyards around 3000 B.C.E. A knowledge of chicken husbandry passed from Egyptians and Persians to the Greeks. The Romans later gave chickens and (for their perceived machismo) roosters elevated status both cultural and culinary.

The Greeks and Romans in turn inspired much of what happens around Jewish tables today, including the very idea of ritual dinners like the seder and Shabbat, according to Ken Ovitz, culinary historian and author of *The Israel Seder Haggadah*. Chicken had largely disappeared from the Middle Eastern table, in fact, until the Romans reintroduced it. Poultry made sense for both desert and urban cultivation, given the birds' catholic food tastes, their minimal need for grazing and living space and their tolerance of hot weather. In Rome's colonies, "Jews ate them more than gentiles, who also ate pork in large quantities," Ovitz says.

After the fall of Rome, chicken remained central to the diet of Eastern Jewry but dropped off the European Jewish menu for a few hundred years. Chicken soup "first came to prominence in Ashkenazic circles after the revival of

chicken raising in Europe in the 15th century," says Gil Marks, author of *The World of Jewish Cooking*. In a nostalgic account of his Polish-Ukrainian shtetl Podhaitse, Alexander Kimel recalls that "food was cheap ... a sack of potatoes was 75 groshen and a live chicken cost 75 groshen." Wealth in the Old Country was measured by how often a man could afford a chicken for Shabbat.

Eastern Europeans are not the only connoisseurs of chicken and its soupy golden broth. Mimi Sheraton writes in her *The Whole World Loves Chicken Soup* about its many geographic variations.

While Eastern Europeans threw in egg noodles, root vegetables and matzo balls, Colombians incorporate capers, avocado and sweet corn. Moving East, traditional Korean chicken soup combines dried jujube fruit, ginger, garlic and glutinous rice with chicken stock, while evaporated milk is added to Philippine chicken soup for richness of flavor.

As for its medicinal properties, chicken soup was already touted as a curative in the writings of the 11th-century Persian physician Avicenna, and the 12th-century Jewish scholar and physician Moses Maimonides. Soup made from fowl, wrote the Rambam in his *Medical Responsa*, "has virtue in rectifying corrupted humours," and is especially effective for convalescence, emergent leprosy and asthma. He even offered some (fairly obvious) cooking tips—advising, for example, against using a scrawny bird. By 1500, chicken soup with noodles emerged not only as the first course for Friday evening Ashkenazic dinner, according to Marks, but "a tasty way of dealing with colds."

Curious to see if the soup was truly a universal panacea, modern scientists conducted a study, published in the medical journal *Chest*. They found that compared to cold water and hot water, chicken soup was most helpful in battling colds. Chicken broth, it turns out, contains an amino acid that thins mucus and unclogs stuffy noses. Other studies have shown that chicken soup acts as an anti-inflammatory providing some sinus relief.



No double-blind trial has tested the effectiveness of the so-called "Jewish penicillin." "However, we feel that sufficient observational and anecdotal evidence has accumulated over the centuries to make the requirement for such a trial superfluous," write doctors Abraham Ohry and Jenni Tsafrir of Tel Aviv University's Sackler School of Medicine. Their 1999 letter to the journal of the Canadian Medical Association contends, not entirely facetiously, that chicken soup meets World Health Organization criteria for classification as an "essential drug," based on 2,000 years of "evidence-based" results.

The elixir may never undergo a randomized clinical trial, they argue, not only because it would be too difficult for scientists to settle on a definitive recipe but chiefly because "depriving the control group of chicken soup would, in our opinion, be unethical." As to adverse effects, the physicians conclude, "while you might choke on a chicken bone, the anecdotal evidence advocating the benefits of chicken soup far outweighs that describing its shortcomings."—Mandy Katz

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for Shabbat.**



## *Quick Chicken Noodle Soup*

Courtesy, The Gluten Free Girl  
glutenfreegirl.blogspot.com

1 carrot, finely chopped  
2 stalks celery, cut in half  
lengthwise, then chopped  
1/2 onion, finely chopped  
2 cloves garlic, smashed and minced  
1/2 teaspoon rosemary, minced  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
3 cups chicken stock  
1 chicken breast, already cooked, chopped into bite-sized pieces  
1/2 cup gluten-free noodles

1. Heat a saucepan, then add the olive oil. Saute the carrot, celery stalks, onion and garlic together, on medium heat. Stir occasionally, making sure they do not burn. When the vegetables start to smell warm and autumnal, and the onion has become translucent, add the rosemary to the mix. Stir and let the flavors mingle.

2. Add the chicken stock and bring the heat to medium-high. Let the stock and vegetables simmer and dance, until the stock has come to a gentle boil. Let it continue to boil for about ten minutes, to roll the flavors in.

3. Add the cooked chicken to the pan and let the soup cook for another five minutes or so. At the end, add the gluten-free noodles. Check for a soft bite on the noodles, after about five minutes. Add your favorite salt to the soup, stir, and serve.

Serves one, over the course of a long afternoon of sniffing.



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