

For the New Year: Old World Tastes and Modern Methods

By Paula Shoyer



Modern Borscht — Beet and Parsnip puree.

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Everyone has a food story, an alternative telling of their life story through their food memories. For some Jewish people the journey began during childhood; for others, the story began when they first tasted or prepared traditional Jewish dishes. We are all very attached to these recipes as they connect us to our heritage.

As we learn more about how food affects our bodies, many classic dishes need to be re-examined, though no one wants to give up cherished family recipes. This Rosh Hashanah, why not take calories out of your favorite recipes, while maintaining the flavors you have grown to love and the connection to your own culinary past?

My own food story began in Brooklyn, New York, watching my grandmother drown rugelach in confectioners' sugar and fry super-thin crepes for her blintzes. Those dishes will forever remind me of her and take me back to a 1970's fuchsia and marigold kitchen and warm smiles and smells. I cannot imagine ever giving up those favorite treats.

No matter where you grew up, if your family celebrated Shabbat or major holidays, even occasionally, certain classic Jewish dishes appeared on your menu year after year. When I started my own home in 1992, I wanted to be a modern cook and wow my guests with the latest food trends. As my family grew, I realized that my children were growing up without many traditional dishes, and I started re-introducing them: matzoh balls every Passover, brisket every Rosh Hashanah, rugelach every Sukkot, doughnuts on Chanukah and chocolate babka, well, every Shabbat and holiday.

How to Lighten up Your Jewish Favorites

- Reduce sugar, especially in savory dishes
- Prepare a dish with natural, rather than jarred or processed ingredients
- Bake rather than fry components of a dish
- Substitute 25 percent whole grain flour for white flour in your challah or dessert
- Avoid kugel — serve sides with vegetables that still look like themselves, or try to substitute healthier ingredients such as ground almonds and egg whites to lighten up your favorite kugel

Rosh Hashanah Menu

1. Chicken Soup with Chicken Meatballs and Zucchini Spaghetti
2. Brisket Osso Buco
3. Tzimmis Purée
4. Spelt Chocolate Babka

Today, however, our food proclivities gravitate toward more plant-based dishes and natural food. More people have developed food allergies and diabetes, and it is clear that lightening up food is good for our hearts and our gut. So where does that leave our bubbe's food, full of carbs, fat and sugar?

While traveling around the United States giving cooking classes, I meet many kinds of Jewish cooks. I have met people who, like me, try to include both traditional and modern food in family meals. Yet, in some Jewish communities people are still eating as we did back in the 1960s — sugar in every salad dressing and stew, kugels at every meal, a heavy emphasis on jarred sauces and the permanent status of the deli roll on Shabbat tables. When I have encouraged some to update their family recipes, I have been met with resistance as “everyone loves them.”

If we change the recipes, will they still taste like our grandmother's versions? Is there a point at which a recipe has veered too far from its original that it's no longer authentic, or must we embrace all the new forms of a traditional dish?

At the same time, I also wonder about those unhealthy recipes, many of which were American adaptations, as it is unlikely that there was ketchup and brown sugar in the shtetl. Maybe what

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I'm trying to do is connect us further back, so cooks skip over the results of efforts to make immigrant food more American.

Leah Koenig, author of "Modern Jewish Cooking" and the "Little Book of Jewish Appetizers," says that "When it comes to Jewish recipes, I think creativity and adaptations are not just acceptable, they are woven into the fabric of Jewish cuisine." Essentially, we have always had to adapt recipes where we lived to the ingredients and tools available. She adds, "As our world has gotten more global and interconnected, this evolution has sped up."

That evolution is most evident on Instagram and Facebook, where every Jewish holiday, if not every week, we are exposed to a multitude of variations of iconic Jewish dishes. Hamantaschen have appeared in so many outrageous forms: brisket taco hamantaschen, sushi hamantaschen and my own matcha green tea ones. It seems that no matter how you vary the dough or what you place inside, it can still be called "hamantaschen," so long as it is triangular.

"The New Yiddish Kitchen" cookbook by Jennifer Robins and Simone Miller addresses the need for gluten-free Jewish holiday recipes. In recent years, challah has been successfully adapted for different diets, whether gluten-free, vegan pretzel and whole-grain for better health. I have been shocked by challahs dyed to look like a rainbow to serve on the Shabbat when we read the book of Noah, and challahs filled with everything from olives and za'atar to chocolate chunks. As long it is braided, is it still challah? From a halachic standpoint, 1/8 of the recipe must be made from one of five grains (wheat, barley, spelt, rice or rye) to be used as "challah," and the motzi blessing made on Shabbat.

Shannon Sarna, author of "Modern Jewish Baker," sees her different types of challah as "a way to merge old and new, and create something comforting but also unexpected." It seems that when it comes to challah, like the hamantaschen, the shaping and texture, more than the flavor, is what is nostalgic to most people.


When it comes to savory food, I have noticed that Ashkenazi cooks are more inclined to "play" with their recipes. Limor Decter, a Sephardi whose husband is Ashkenazi, balances both cuisines: "There are staples from each cuisine that stay as classics, such chicken soup, challah and lachmagine. The rest of the meal is really based on seasonal ingredients." Decter tries out new recipes every week. This sentiment is echoed by Canadian cookbook author Norene Gilletz. "There's a place for traditional dishes at the family table," she says, "but it's fun to add a few new twists and turns to your menu."

Chef Levana Kirschenbaum believes that Sephardic food was inherently healthy so "we never grew up worrying about how to make

a dish healthier." She has spent her entire career inspiring home cooks to adapt the Sephardic approach and create healthier meals, and believes that even when you make a dish lighter "the dish keeps its integrity."

In her "Little Book of Jewish Appetizers," Leah Koenig has a recipe for borscht crostini, which takes the building blocks of borscht (roasted beets and carrots, sour cream, fresh dill, garlic and lemon) and "transforms them into a flavorful crostini," by serving a mixture on oven-toasted bread. "Flavor-wise, there is a clear through line back to what came before." In my latest cookbook "The Healthy Jewish Kitchen," my grandmother's stuffed cabbage is prepared with ground turkey and brown rice and somehow still tastes surprisingly like the original recipe, just as Leah's crostini still tastes overall like classic borscht. Clearly, there are ways to lighten up Jewish recipes to improve our health as well as market them to a new audience.

The goal is to preserve our cultural heritage by making recipes more modern with our contemporary approach to nutrition and to ensure that cooks do not abandon the iconic dishes because they are no longer good for us in their original form. I believe that we can have our babka and eat it too, keeping our food history while making the recipes more healthful and creating menus that balance old and new.

This year, try gluten-free chicken meatballs in your soup rather than matzoh balls, which look identical, and enjoy whole grain challah, babka, rugelach and strudel. The tastes will transport you back to the food influences from days and people long gone, while ensuring that you will have a healthier New Year. 

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CHICKEN SOUP WITH CHICKEN MEATBALLS AND ZUCCHINI SPAGHETTI

Meat, Passover
Serves 14–16

PREP TIME 25 minutes

COOK TIME 2 hours, 8 minutes

ADVANCE PREP Soup may be made 3 days in advance or frozen; meatballs may be made 1 day in advance

Equipment

- Measuring cups and spoons
- Large soup pot
- Cutting board
- Knives
- Vegetable peeler
- 2 medium bowls
- Large sieve or strainer
- Garlic press
- Food processor

SOUP

- 2 whole medium chickens, cut into pieces
- 2 large onions, quartered
- 6 carrots, peeled and cut in half
- 1 leek, white and light green parts only, cut lengthwise in half
- 6 stalks celery with leaves, cut crosswise in half
- 4 cloves garlic, peeled
- 2 parsnips, peeled and cut in thirds
- 1 fennel bulb, quartered
- 1 turnip, peeled and quartered
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 gallon (3.8 L) water
- 1/2 bunch parsley
- 1/2 bunch dill
- Salt and black pepper

CHICKEN MEATBALLS

- 2 boneless chicken breasts (about 5–6 ounces each)
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) chicken stock
- 2 tablespoons ground almonds or matzoh meal
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 large egg
- 2 scallions, thinly sliced
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper

GARNISH

- 2 medium zucchini, not peeled

To make the soup

PLACE the chicken pieces in a large pot. Add the onions, carrots, leek, celery, garlic, parsnips, fennel, turnip, bay leaves, and salt. Add the water and bring to a boil. Use a large spoon to skim the scum off the top of the soup. Cover the pot, reduce the heat to low, and let the soup simmer, checking after 5 minutes and skimming off any additional scum. Add the parsley and dill, cover and simmer for 2 hours. Let cool. Strain through a large sieve, reserving the carrots to return to the soup when serving. Taste the soup and add more salt or pepper if necessary.

To make the meatballs

WHILE the soup is cooking, prepare the meatball mixture. In the bowl of a food processor with the metal blade attachment, mix together the chicken, stock, ground almonds, garlic and egg until a paste forms. Add the scallions, salt and pepper, and pulse a few times to mix. Transfer the meatball mixture to a medium bowl, cover with plastic wrap and chill for up to 1 day, until ready to shape and cook the meatballs.

USE a spoon to scoop up the meatball batter and wet hands to shape it into 1 1/2-inch (4 cm) balls. Bring the strained soup to a simmer, add the meatballs, cover and cook for 8 minutes.

To make the garnish

MEANWHILE, prepare the zucchini “spaghetti” for the garnish. Slice the zucchini lengthwise into 1/4-inch-thick (6 mm) slices. Keeping the stack together, use a vegetable peeler to shave the zucchini into long strips. Slice the reserved cooked carrots into rounds and return them to the soup. Top each serving of soup and meatballs with some of the zucchini spaghetti.

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BRISKET OSSO BUCO

Gluten-free, Meat, Passover
Serves 10

PREP TIME	25 minutes
COOK TIME	2 hours, 45 minutes
ADVANCE PREP	May be made 3 days in advance; add gremolata after brisket is reheated

Equipment

- Cutting board
- Knives, including a good carving knife
- Vegetable peeler
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Zester
- Garlic press
- Large frying pan with 2-inch (5 cm) sides or Dutch oven
- Wooden spoon or silicone spatula
- Small bowl

BRISKET

1/4 cup (60 mL) extra virgin olive oil
1/4 cup (35 g) potato starch (40 g)
1 (3 pound/1.4 kg) brisket
2 large onions, cut in half and sliced
2 carrots, peeled and thinly sliced into rounds
2 stalks celery, thinly sliced
1 bay leaf
1/2 cup (120 mL) white wine
1 can (28 ounce/795 g) whole peeled or diced tomatoes
2 tablespoons tomato paste, or 1/2 cup (120 mL) tomato sauce
Salt and black pepper

GREMOLATA

2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh parsley
4 cloves garlic, crushed
1 tablespoon lemon zest (from 1 lemon)

PREHEAT oven to 375°F (190°C).

HEAT the oil in a large frying pan with 2-inch (5 cm) sides or Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Sprinkle the potato starch on both sides of the meat, shaking off any excess, and brown both sides of the meat until crispy parts develop. Remove to a plate. Add the onions, carrots, celery and bay leaf to the pan and cook over medium heat, using a wooden spoon or silicone spatula to scrape up any pieces of meat that are stuck to the bottom of the pan. Cook until the onions are translucent, about 5 minutes.

ADD the wine and cook until most of it has boiled off and only a little liquid is left around the vegetables. Add the canned tomatoes, including their juices, and tomato paste to the pan and bring to a boil. If you used a Dutch oven, return the meat to the pan. If you used a frying pan, transfer the vegetables and sauce to a baking pan and place the meat on top. Add salt and a generous amount of pepper. Cover tightly with aluminum foil and bake for 1 1/2 hours. **MEANWHILE**, prepare the gremolata. Combine the parsley, garlic and lemon zest in a small bowl. Cover and place in the fridge until ready to serve. Gremolata may be made 1 day in advance.

REMOVE the pan from the oven, place the meat on a cutting board, and slice against the grain into 1/3-inch-thick (8 mm) slices. Return the slices to the pan, cover and bake for another 1 1/4 hours. Sprinkle the gremolata over the meat in the pan, stirring some into the sauce. Serve in pan or transfer to a serving dish.

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TZIMMIS PURÉE

Gluten-free, Vegan, Passover
Serves 10–12

PREP TIME 8 minutes
COOK TIME 32 minutes
ADVANCE PREP May be made 2 days in advance

Equipment

- Measuring cups and spoons
- Cutting board
- Knife
- Vegetable peeler
- Microplane zester
- Medium saucepan
- Silicone spatula or wooden spoon
- Immersion blender or food processor

1 tablespoon sunflower or safflower oil
1 medium onion, cut into 1-inch (2.5 cm) pieces
2 cloves garlic, chopped
2 pounds (1 kg) sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch (2.5 cm) cubes
4 carrots, peeled and cut into 1-inch (2.5 cm) chunks
1 cup (200 g) dried apricots
1/2 teaspoon orange zest (from 1 orange)
1 cinnamon stick
2 cups (480 mL) water
Salt and black pepper to taste

HEAT the oil in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add the onions and cook them for 3 to 5 minutes, or until translucent and just starting to color. Add the garlic and cook for another 2 minutes.

ADD the sweet potatoes, carrots, apricots, orange zest, cinnamon stick and water, and bring to a boil. Stir the mixture, cover it and cook for 20 to 25 minutes, or until the carrots and sweet potatoes are soft. Let the mixture cool for 10 minutes, covered.

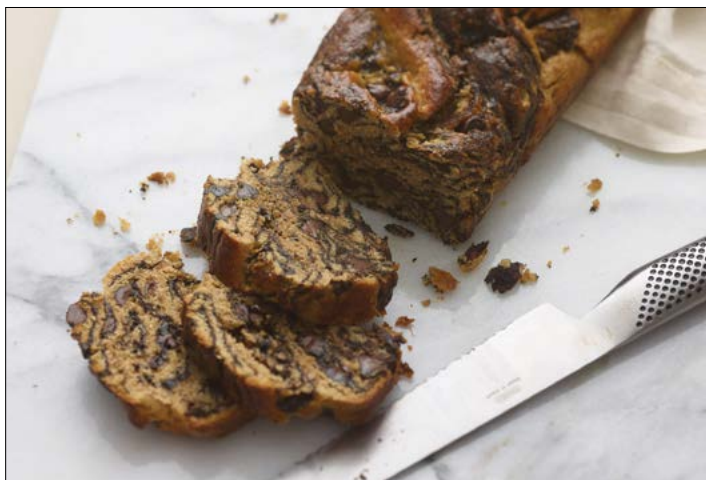
REMOVE the cinnamon stick and use either an immersion blender to purée the mixture until it is smooth, or transfer it to a food processor. Taste the tzimmes and add salt and pepper if desired.

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White Sweet Potatoes?

When I was living in Geneva, Switzerland in the 1990s, I celebrated Thanksgiving every year. The first year, I went to the Migros supermarket and bought sweet potatoes that looked just like the ones we had at home. I schlepped my groceries home and proceeded to peel the sweet potatoes only to discover that they were white inside. Confused, I went to another store and bought some more. After the second batch was also white inside, I gave up and continued with my side dish, which tasted great but was not orange, as planned. So, if you cannot find orange sweet potatoes where you live, use butternut squash instead. I have since learned that there are 6,500 varieties of sweet potatoes with flesh that might be red-orange, yellow-orange, dark orange, cream or white.

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SPELT CHOCOLATE BABKA

Parve

Makes 1 loaf

PREP TIME 13 minutes for dough; first rising 1 to 1½ hours; 10 minutes to prepare filling and assemble; second rising 30 minutes

BAKE TIME 30 minutes

ADVANCE PREP May be made 3 days in advance or frozen

Equipment

- Measuring cups and spoons
- Stand mixer
- Plastic wrap
- Medium microwave-safe bowl
- Silicone spatula
- Whisk
- 12-inch (30-cm) loaf pan
- Parchment
- Kitchen scissors
- Rolling pin
- Long flat-blade knife

DOUGH

- 1/4 cup (60 mL) water
- 2 envelopes (1/2 ounce [15 g]) active dry yeast
- 1/3 cup (65 g) plus 1 teaspoon sugar, divided
- 1 1/2 cups (165 g) spelt flour, plus extra for dusting
- 3/4 cup (95 g) all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup (65 g) whole-wheat flour
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) sunflower or other mild oil
- 6 tablespoons (90 mL) coconut oil or spread
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 2 large eggs, plus 1 egg white (reserve 1 yolk for glaze)

FILLING

- 5 ounces (140 g) bittersweet chocolate, broken into small squares
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/4 cup (20 g) dark unsweetened cocoa
- 2 tablespoons sunflower or other mild oil cooking spray
- 3/4 cup (125 g) chocolate chips

PLACE the water, yeast and 1 teaspoon of the sugar in the bowl of a stand mixer. Mix and let sit for 8 to 10 minutes, or until thick. Add the remaining 1/3 cup (65 g) sugar, spelt flour, all-purpose flour, whole-wheat flour, sunflower oil, coconut oil, vanilla, 2 eggs and 1 egg white to the mixture. Combine it by hand or use a dough hook attachment until all the ingredients are mixed together. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let the dough rise for 1 1/2 to 2 hours, or until it is spongy.

WHEN the dough is almost ready to be rolled out, place the bittersweet chocolate in a microwave-safe medium glass bowl. Heat the chocolate in the microwave oven for 1 minute and stir. Heat it for another 45 seconds and stir, and then heat for another 30 seconds, if needed, and stir until it is completely melted. Add the sugar, cocoa and oil to the chocolate, and whisk it well. Place the mixture in the freezer for 5 minutes. Whisk it again.

USE cooking spray to grease a 12-inch (30 cm) loaf pan. Trace the bottom of the loaf pan onto a piece of parchment paper and cut it out. Place the rectangle on the bottom of the pan and spray it.

PLACE a large piece of parchment paper on your counter. Sprinkle a little spelt flour on top of it. Roll out the dough until it is about 12 x 18 inches (30 x 46 cm) to 13 x 19 inches (33 x 48 cm). Spread the filling over the dough, all the way to the edges. Sprinkle the chocolate chips over the top of the filling and roll up the dough the long way.

WRAP the roll in the parchment paper and place in the freezer for 5 minutes to firm up. Remove the roll from the freezer, unwrap it with the seam on the bottom, and use a large flat-blade knife to slice it in half lengthwise. Turn each half of the roll so that the cut sides face up and drape over each other in an "X." On each side of the "X," twist the 2 strands over and under each other, keeping the cut side facing up. Tuck the ends under the loaf so that they touch or slightly overlap each other in the center.

PLACE the loaf in the prepared pan.

LET the babka rise for 30 minutes. Brush the top with the reserved egg yolk mixed with 1 teaspoon of water. Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C). Bake the babka for 30 minutes, or until it is golden brown. Let it cool for 10 minutes and then turn it out onto a wire cooling rack.

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