



MICHAEL TERCHA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE; LISA SCHUMACHER/FOOD STYLING

This gefilte fish dish from "The Gefilte Manifesto" by Liz Alpern and Jeffrey Yoskowitz bridges the divide between sweet and savory, offering a bit of sweetness and a slight pepperness.

# Crossing gefilte divide

History, geography drew line separating savory, sweet versions of fish dish. Can we find unity at Seder table?

By PEGGY WOLFF  
Chicago Tribune

At sundown April 10, Jews will sit together at the Seder table for the most observed Jewish holiday of the year — Passover — which celebrates spring and the rebirth of the tribe as a free people after slavery in Egypt.

Everyone has favorite Seder foods, but it's probably not the unappetizing, ready-to-serve gefilte fish balls from a jar.

In the old country, I bet, it tasted pretty good. Housewives chopped the flesh of fresh fish with onions, matzo and seasonings, and stuffed the mixture back into fish skin, which had been pulled off from head to tail, down from the neck. The fish was sewn or tied shut, then baked in an oven or simmered in fish stock. The subtle taxidermic result of presenting a sewn-up fish disappeared long ago. Now, we're poaching the stuffing or, thanks to a rising interest, baking the stuffing in a terrine. Yet, Jews kept the name gefilte, meaning stuffed in Yiddish.

My mother, who wasn't exactly focused on flavor, probably thought those darling little fish torpedoes suspended in gelled broth were the Cadillac of gefilte fish, made barely palatable with horseradish.

That's all I ever knew until my husband and I hosted a Seder, and I could pull out the 24-karat-gold-rimmed plates my maternal grand-

parents toted from Czechoslovakia.

Didn't such precious Bohemian dinnerware deserve more than the flavorless dumplings from a jar?

Those plates hold memories of relatives who loved me and, in some way, brought their lives from the long steamship crossing to Ellis Island into my own.

Fortunately, a guest insisted on bringing gefilte fish made from scratch; it was lighter, fluffier and awakened an appreciation of what was surely good about gefilte fish in the first place — it had taste!

But this one was sweet, a travesty to a couple of guests from Belarus who mumbled something like, what's the sugar doing in the fish?

And therein lies the gefilte fish divide, a kind of Mason-Dixon Line between sweet and savory, running north to south through central Europe.

In 1965, linguist Marvin Herzog identified this border in "The Yiddish Language in Northern Poland: Its Geography and History": "Sweetened fish, also called poljise fish (Polish fish), is generally unpalatable to those east of the indicated border who prefer their fish seasoned only with pepper."

West of the line is Galicia, modern-day southern Poland, where sugar beets grew well. Gil Marks wrote in the "Encyclopedia of Jewish Food" that once the techniques were developed to produce sucrose from its roots, the first sugar beet-refining

factory was established in Silesia, Germany (now southwestern Poland). Other factories followed, many owned by Jews.

East of the line, sugar was too expensive, either because the beet grew poorly or local authorities refused to build sugar beet factories. So, Lithuanians, Latvians and Russians loved their gefilte with a peppery passion, with a side of khreyfn, pungent horseradish root.

At the turn of the 20th century, a huge wave of immigrants to America settled in urban centers. Jews could not ignore the tastes they knew. Russians thought sugar was a corruption of the beloved dish; yet west of the pressed fish divide, sugar made a decisive impact on cooking.

After a century of marriages between Jews, many recipes now reveal both sugar and a kick of pepper. Yet there's a more contemporary approach that avoids the labor-intensive method of poaching gefilte in a home-made stock: bake the dish in a terrine. It slices beautifully.

Peggy Wolff is a freelance writer.

food@chicagotribune.com

## More recipes

Find recipes for a salmon gefilte fish mold and a smoked whitefish gefilte terrine online at [chicagotribune.com/gefiltefish](http://chicagotribune.com/gefiltefish)

## Baked terrine

**Prep:** 25 minutes, plus cooling time

**Cook:** 40-45 minutes **Makes:** 8-10 servings

Adapted from "The Gefilte Manifesto: New Recipes for Old World Jewish Foods" (Flatiron, \$35) by Jeffrey Yoskowitz and Liz Alpern. Bridging the divide, this recipe brings in both sides; it is not nearly as sweet as most sweet gefilte fish recipes, and it has a slight pepperness. Cook your fish the same day you buy it to ensure freshness. Forget about small bones; they'll be pulverized in the food processor. Serve with horseradish.

- 1 small onion, coarsely chopped
- 12 ounces whitefish fillet, skin and bones removed, flesh coarsely chopped
- 4 1/2 teaspoons vegetable or grapeseed oil
- 1 large egg
- 2 tablespoons each, chopped: watercress, dill
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground white pepper

**1** Position a rack in the middle of the oven; heat to 350 degrees.

**2** In a food processor, process the onion until finely ground and mostly liquefied. Add fish fillets and remaining ingredients; pulse until mixture is light-colored and evenly textured throughout. Put into a bowl; stir to combine thoroughly.

**3** Grease an 8-by-3-inch loaf pan; fill with the fish mixture. Smooth top with a spatula.

**4** Place the loaf pan on a baking sheet; bake in center of oven until corners and ends begin to brown, 40-45 minutes. Remove the loaf from oven; cool to room temperature before inverting onto a plate and slicing.

**Nutrition information per serving (for 10 servings):** 80 calories, 5 g fat, 1 g saturated fat, 40 mg cholesterol, 2 g carbohydrates, 2 g sugar, 7 g protein, 217 mg sodium, 0 g fiber