

Going beyond the latke

Tradition lives in 4 Hanukkah fritters

By PEGGY WOLFF
 Chicago Tribune

Right before the January flood of diets and exercise bracelets hits, those of us who celebrate Hanukkah get eight days to unabashedly indulge in platters of latkes — deliciously crispy, fried potato pancakes.

As you probably remember, Hanukkah, which begins at sundown Saturday this year, is all about the oil. The holiday commemorates the miracle in 164 B.C. when Judah Maccabee and his followers found a small amount of pure olive oil in the Temple of Jerusalem after it had been devastated by the Syrians. Intended to burn for one day, it lasted eight.

I learned by looking into recipes from many countries that it was the Ashkenazic, or Eastern European Jews, who brought the potato latke to America.

"Because their daily diet consisted of potatoes and bread," Joan Nathan explained in her book "The Jewish Holiday Kitchen," "they wanted to include a special dish cooked in oil to symbolize the main meal of Hanukkah. This potato pancake, already used by Ukrainians with goose for Christmas, seemed a good and relatively inexpensive choice. Because Hanukkah falls at the season when geese are plentiful, goose fat was an obvious and inexpensive substitute for the original olive oil."

Today, most potato latkes are fried in vegetable oil, not schmaltz (rendered animal fat).

I use my Polish-born mother-in-law's recipe, but in the spirit of reinvention, I change out her chicken fat for olive oil. It's a reminder of



Mizrahi

the miracle that happened after that vial of pure oil was found.

But in countries farther south, such as Israel, Iran or India, no Hanukkah dish is more traditional, or for that matter more

predictable, than fried pastries, often dipped in sweet syrup. Fried pancakes make an appearance, but they play second fiddle. Even if it's only for eight days, I'd like to live in a country like Israel where the jelly-filled doughnut, soufganiyot, is king. But I found a satisfactory substitute nearby at Mizrahi Grill in Highland Park, which claims to be authentic kosher Mediterranean.

Eli Mizrahi, the Israeli-born Sephardic owner, picked up the tradition of frying doughnuts from his childhood home in Haifa, where his mother and grandmother made soufganiyot. For the past eight years, he has been frying thousands of yeasted and jelly-filled doughnuts for customers, making them every morning and afternoon during Hanukkah.

Yet for a couple of nights during the holiday, his Israeli mother fried cauliflower patties, and fritters of ground chicken breast and leeks. I haven't met an Israeli who calls them latkes; that's a Yiddish word. They are fritters, or levivot in Hebrew, meaning any fried pancake.

Ayelet Danino, an Israeli-born caterer living in Chicago, also remembers the popularity of deep-fried doughnuts. "There are 20 different kinds in Israel now," she says. But, like Mizrahi, her family also had levivot, some with sweet potato and some with mixed vegetables. "We'd open the fridge and see what's there. Zucchini? Broccoli?" They used what they had, then served them with a side of baba ghanoush, an Israeli salad or a spicy sauce. There was never a plate of applause on the table.

For the Jewish people who were expelled from Spain in 1492 and scattered to many places — Turkey, Italy, North Africa, India and elsewhere throughout Europe and the Arab world — the tie between country and condiment is strong. These are the Sephardic Jews; Sefarad meaning Spain.

The ones who arrived by boat at the shores of East India made onion and cilantro fritters, seasoned with turmeric, cumin and paprika, all bound together with chickpea flour. — In "The New Persian Cookbook," author Louisa Shafia includes Hanukkah fritters made with winter squash, cumin and chickpea flour. The most traditional Hanukkah treat for Sephardic Jews in Greece and Turkey is a fried honey puff, called loukoumades in Greece and lokma in Turkey. They're crisp, round fritters drizzled with honey-scented syrup.

When I think back to Passover and that bite of horseradish we have to taste, how lucky are we that something so delicious we're required to eat can also reflect a story in our religious faith.

Pass the powdered sugar, please.

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From left: Chicken and leek and East Indian onion Hanukkah fritters.

MICHAEL TERCHA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS; MARK GRAHAM/FOOD STYLING



Mixed vegetable levivot (fritters) are made with shredded potatoes, zucchini, squash and onion. Ayelet Danino and her father, Rafael Masok, use the fritters at their kosher catering business, Bites of Pleasure.



Cauliflower levivot or fritters puff up while they fry, boosted by a little baking powder in the batter.

Cauliflower levivot

Prep: 20 minutes
Cook: 6 minutes per batch
Makes: 12 fritters

Eli Mizrahi, owner of Mizrahi Grill, likes to prepare the fritters with the cauliflower on the coarse side. "We like chunks. We like to know what we're eating."

- 1 head cauliflower, broken into florets
- 1 egg, beaten
- 4 tablespoons flour
- 1/2 to 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon pepper
- Vegetable oil

1 Place the cauliflower in a large saucepan with enough well-salted water to cover. Heat the water to a boil; cook cauliflower until soft; drain.

2 Put florets in a food processor or blender; pulse or process until chopped and the vegetable still retains some pieces, or lumps.

3 Transfer cauliflower to a bowl, add the egg, flour, baking powder, and salt and pepper to taste.

4 Form mixture into patties about 1/4 inch thick and 3 to 3 1/2 inches wide, letting the liquid run out. Pour oil to a depth of 1/2 inch in a large skillet. Heat to 350 degrees over medium-high heat. Working in batches, fry patties on both sides until golden brown, 3 minutes per side.

5 Transfer to a platter lined with paper towels; season to taste with salt.

Nutrition information per fritter: 69 calories, 5 g fat, 1 g saturated fat, 15 mg cholesterol, 5 g carbohydrates, 1 g sugar, 2 g protein, 140 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

Mixed vegetable levivot

Prep: 30 minutes **Cook:** 6 minutes per batch
Makes: 30-36 fritters

This recipe from Israeli-born Ayelet Danino is one that she and her father, Rafael Masok, use for their Chicago kosher catering business Bites of Pleasure.

- 9 Yukon Gold potatoes, unpeeled, about 3 1/2 pounds
- 1 1/2 medium zucchini, unpeeled
- 2 cups butternut squash, peeled, cut into half-inch cubes
- 1 large yellow onion
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 eggs, beaten
- 2/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- Vegetable oil

1 Using the large side of a box grater or a food processor fitted with a shredding disc, grate the potatoes, zucchini, squash and onion. Mix together in a large bowl or baking pan.

2 Add the garlic, eggs, flour, salt and pepper; mix thoroughly.

3 Pour oil to 1/2 inch deep in a large skillet; heat over medium-high heat to 350 degrees. Working in batches, slide 2-3 tablespoons of batter for each pancake into the hot oil; fry on both sides until golden brown, turning once, about 4 minutes on first side, then 2-3 minutes on second side.

4 Transfer to paper towels to drain. Repeat with remaining batter.

Nutrition information per fritter (for 36 fritters): 161 calories, 13 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 15 mg cholesterol, 11 g carbohydrates, 1 g sugar, 2 g protein, 203 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

Chicken and leek levivot

Prep: 20 minutes **Cook:** 40 minutes **Makes:** 16-18 fritters

Recipe from Eli Mizrahi, owner of Mizrahi Grill. If you don't have a meat grinder at home, purchase already ground chicken, or ask your butcher to grind the chicken breast.

- 4 large leeks, cleaned, dark green sections removed
- 1 pound chicken breast, ground
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1/2 cup breadcrumbs
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- Few grinds of pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon herbs or spices, such as dried thyme, fresh oregano, sweet paprika or cumin
- Vegetable oil

1 Cut the leeks into 3-inch lengths. Boil the leeks in a large pot of well-salted water until softened, about 9 minutes; drain.

2 Put all the ingredients (except the oil) in your meat grinder; grind into a large bowl. If you have purchased ground meat, pulse the softened leeks in a processor, then mix everything in a bowl.

3 Using your hands, make patties, each about 3 inches wide and 1/2-inch thick. Pour oil to 1/2 inch deep in a large skillet; heat over medium-high heat to 350 degrees. Working in batches so as not to crowd the skillet, fry the patties on both sides without flattening or pressing down, until browned, about 4 minutes per side.

4 Transfer to a paper towel-lined platter. Season with salt to taste.

Nutrition information per fritter (for 18 fritters): 112 calories, 7 g fat, 1 g saturated fat, 35 mg cholesterol, 5 g carbohydrates, 1 g sugar, 7 g protein, 83 mg sodium, 0 g fiber

East Indian onion patties

Prep: 20 minutes
Cook: 6 minutes per batch
Makes: 20 fritters

These fried patties (levivot bazal) from Mizrahi Grill in Highland Park offer the perfect opportunity to explore the flavors of India. Accompany the fritters with date chutney, which adds sweetness. (Or buy date chutney at an Indian market or online.) The garam masala spice blend, available at spice shops and Indian markets, gives fried onions a boost.

- 4 large onions, julienneed
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 cup chickpea flour
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1/4 teaspoon turmeric
- 1 bunch cilantro, finely chopped
- Corn oil, for frying

1 To julienne the onions, first cut each onion in half, then cut each half into thin strips. Put cut onions in a large bowl; mix in the salt thoroughly with a spoon or by hand. Let stand, 20 minutes.

2 Mix together the chickpea flour with the spices and chopped cilantro. Add the onions and their liquid; mix well, squeezing while turning the batter over by hand.

3 Pour oil to 1/2 inch deep in a large skillet; heat over medium-high heat to 350 degrees. Working in batches so that you don't crowd the pan, use a 1/4 cup measure to gently drop batter into the skillet. Do not flatten it with a spatula. Fry until golden and crispy on both sides, about 6 minutes.

4 Transfer to a platter lined with paper towels to drain. Repeat with remaining batter.

Nutrition information per fritter: 223 calories, 23 g fat, 3 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 6 g carbohydrates, 2 g sugar, 1 g protein, 197 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

Chutney

Prep: 5 minutes
Cook: 15 minutes
Makes: About 2 cups

- 3 plum tomatoes, each about 2 inches in diameter, quartered
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 small jalapeno, sliced in half lengthwise
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 4 ounces date paste or 4 fresh, large Medjool dates, pitted
- Pinch of garam masala
- Salt and pepper

1 Heat oven to 425 degrees. Put the tomatoes, garlic and pepper in a small baking pan. Drizzle with olive oil; toss to coat. Roast until unevenly browned, 25 minutes.

2 Put the roasted vegetables with seeds and skins, the dates, garam masala and salt and pepper to taste in a small processor or chopper; pulse to a smooth paste.

Nutrition information per tablespoon: 10 calories, 0 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 2 g carbohydrates, 2 g sugar, 0 g protein, 36 mg sodium, 0 g fiber