

Coming home

Mimouna, a Sephardic custom, closes Passover holiday with celebratory dishes



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Muflettas are Moroccan pancakes made of layers of thin, oiled dough. They're cooked quickly and then served with butter and honey.

BY PEGGY WOLFF
Chicago Tribune

Thirteen years ago, at sundown on the last day of Passover, I took a pass on the usual uncelebratory pizza and squeezed into a rented hall in Skokie.

Loud music pounded out of speakers, and a hundred people — mostly Diaspora Jews — were throwing their arms in the air and dancing, many in caftans and henna tattoos. This was the night of the Mimouna (me-MOO-nah). For Sephardic Jews, the end of Passover is marked by a festive celebration of carbohydrates and the holiday greeting, “terbach,” an Arab word that roughly means, “May you win and be fortunate.”

If food lovers like myself gleaned anything from how Sephardic Jews break the fast, it was their labyrinthine table of yum: zaben, white almond nougat; dates rolled in sugar and stuffed with marzipan; jars of preserved fruits; sfeng, doughnuts; homemade pastries baked before Passover that had come out of someone's deep freeze; and muflettas (moo-FLEH-taz), pancakes made of layers of thin, oiled dough cooked quickly and skillfully in a pan and devoured with butter and honey.

If you eliminate flour for a week, smearing a simple hot pancake with honey and butter tastes great, but for Sephardic Jews, this crepe, this pancake, is a homecoming, a food that chronicles their culinary journey back to Israel, where 2 million people celebrate the Mimouna, or back to its North African origins.

“In Morocco, our Muslim neighbors used to bring us flour and all kinds of honey and yeast, milk and butter, all the things that were chametz because it was not kosher for us,” Moroccan-born Ruthy



Marzipan candies are made with a sweet almond paste and topped with pistachios.

Benitah said, in a phone conversation from Israel. “It was an open door, like an open house.” Thirty Jewish homes in her Moroccan neighborhood would open their doors and, as a reciprocal act, invite Muslims to enjoy the delicacies.

“That was before they were shooting at each other,” said Benitah's daughter Liat Berko, who lives in Manhattan. Two years ago, Berko and chef Einat Admony hosted a ticketed Mimouna with belly dancers, a henna station, live music and a spread of savory bites and Moroccan pastries from Admony's restaurant Taim.

Berko, and others in Paris, Brussels, Miami, San Francisco and Boston are breathing new life into a holiday that was about co-existence, characterized by home hospitality.

Last year, Rabbi Sarah Bassin of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, Calif., hosted a Mimouna for 275 young professionals. Why? “Jewish identity and culture is in an exploratory phase right now. Being members of a synagogue, traditional prayer ... people aren't being captured that way.”

“The event wasn't exactly the Mimouna of my childhood in Morocco,” commented David Suissa, publisher and editor-in-chief of the Jewish Journal in Los Angeles. “But it was the same idea of sampling from many different tables in a festive environment. I remember thinking that night: I can't believe I'm at a Mimouna party organized by an Ashkenazi Reform rabbi in Los Angeles!”

Peggy Wolff is a freelance writer.

Muflettas

Prep: 40 minutes

Rest: 20 minutes

Cook: A few minutes per batch

Makes: 30-35 muflettas

This recipe is adapted from the Hebrew version of “Moroccan Cooking” by Rivka Levi Malol. The recipe was translated by Ayelet Danino, the owner of Skokie kosher catering business Bites of Pleasure.

8 cups (2 pounds 4 ounces) unbleached all-purpose flour
1 packet (0.75 ounce) quick yeast
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon sugar
2 ½ cups water at room temperature
2 ½ cups canola oil
¼ pound unsalted butter, at room temperature
¾ cup honey

1 In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle, add the flour, yeast, salt and sugar. Pour the water in; mix on medium until the dough is smooth and elastic, 2-3 minutes, finishing on high for about 10 seconds.

2 On a lightly oiled countertop, use a sharp knife to cut the dough into quarters, then eighths, then sixteenths. Fill a small bowl with ½ cup canola oil.

3 Lightly coat the bottom of a rimmed baking sheet (or a large aluminum pan) with oil. Dipping your fingers into the small bowl of oil, pinch off enough dough to make a golf-ball-size ball; put it on the oiled tray. Continue making oily balls until there are 30-35. Cover with a clean cloth; let them rest, 10-15 minutes. Lightly depress one ball; it should come back up.

4 Heat a 12-inch skillet over medium heat. Pour a couple of tablespoons of oil on your hands. Working quickly on the oiled countertop with your fingers, “open” or flatten a ball to a very thin, translucent round about 8 inches in diameter. If it's so thin that there are some holes, you can still use it.

5 Slip the first mufletta into the hot pan; cook until it starts browning all over, about 60 seconds. While it is cooking, flatten another ball; carefully lay it on top of the first mufletta and flip both of them over. Cook until bottom one is browning, 30-50 seconds. While it's cooking, quickly flatten the third ball and proceed as before. You will be making a stack of 10 at a time. All mufletta except the first will cook on one side only.

6 To serve, separate a mufletta and using a wide knife, spread soft butter first, then drizzle about a tablespoon of honey on it. Roll it up into a cigar.

Nutrition information per mufletta: 169 calories, 5 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 7 mg cholesterol, 29 g carbohydrates, 6 g sugar, 3 g protein, 68 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

Marzipan

Prep: 20 minutes

Makes: about 24 candies, serves 12

Almond paste confections like this marzipan from Michael Solomonov and Steven Cook's “Zahav: A World of Israeli Cooking” are among the many traditional recipes at a Mimouna. Solomonov's Bulgarian Sephardic grandfather Moni made marzipan all the time, but here the chef flavors it with orange blossom water, something Moni would never do. Stuffing dates with the almond mixture bulging out, then rolling it in cane or powdered sugar would make a nice addition to anyone's table.

1 ½ cups sliced almonds (without skins)
1 ½ cups powdered sugar
6 tablespoons light corn syrup
¼ teaspoon orange blossom water
Pinch kosher salt
24 pistachios

1 In a food processor, pulse the almonds until they form a fine meal but before they become pasty, about 2 minutes. Add powdered sugar, corn syrup, orange blossom water and salt until the mixture is sandy and holds together when you pinch it between your fingers, about 2 minutes.

2 Shape the mixture into 1-inch balls or cubes; press a pistachio into each piece. Marzipan will keep well-wrapped in the refrigerator for several months. Bring to room temp before using.

Nutrition information per candy: 81 calories, 3 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 13 g carbohydrates, 12 g sugar, 1 g protein, 10 mg sodium, 1 g fiber