

A chef blends the strong flavors of Morocco with the usual Passover dishes and, in the process, helps bring two families together



Holiday meals at the Danino table in Glenview include such Moroccan ingredients as cilantro, eggplant, red snapper, turmeric, garlic, tomatoes and lemons.



Ayelet Danino, at top, reprises her traditional Moroccan fish for holiday meals, during which the family's seder plate holds center attention at the table.

# Sharing traditions

By Peggy Wolff | Special to the Tribune

**O**n the eve of Passover this year, the Glenview home of Ayelet Danino and her husband, Yoram, will fill up fast with men, women and children—mostly Israelis, and a Russian friend or two. "When our guests arrive, everybody's lifting the lids off the pots, even tasting the dishes," said Danino, a professional chef who hosts the Jewish holiday each year (beginning Monday evening this year). It is no surprise that guests will steal a taste of the simmering seder meal.

As anyone who has tasted her food knows, the woman was born to cook.

The situation that will leave Danino and her sis-

ter-in-law Shoshy (Yoram's sister) in the kitchen cooking day and night in a frantic effort to produce a single four-hour meal that could, in any other home, turn family and friends into enemies. But it won't in this home. Their house appears always to be in a state of animation, with a party being planned either a few weeks or a few hours away.

Every year, the time-honored ceremonies begin when Aviva Masok, Danino's mother and a teacher at Solomon Schechter Day School, reads through the Haggadah, a collection of narratives, prayers and blessings recalling the Exodus of the ancient Jews from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the

PLEASE SEE **PASSOVER**, ON THE CENTERSPREAD

## INSIDE GOOD EATING



### WOLFGANG PUCK'S KITCHEN Appetizing duo

'Not-so-kosher' homemade matzo teams with a rich fish mousse. **PAGE 3**

### CHEAP EATS Traveling for Thai

Freshly prepared classics bring diners to the far North Side. **PAGE 3**

# Sharing traditions

Ayelet Danino's kitchen has two influences at work: the mild Ashkenazic foods—to honor Danino's parents—and the fiery and aggressive Sephardic foods, to honor the Moroccan heritage of her husband.



Ayelet Danino (left) and her sister-in-law, Shoshy, prepare salads for a family meal. The pair cook together on a professional basis too.

## Moroccan-style fish

Preparation time: 25 minutes  
Cooking time: 1 hour, 5 minutes  
Yield: 6 appetizer servings

■ Ayelet Danino serves this stew as an appetizer, but it also could be a main course for four.

- 3 guajillo or other dried chilies, soaked in hot water until soft, stemmed, seeded, thinly sliced
- 1 red bell pepper, seeded, finely chopped
- 2 large tomatoes, 1 sliced, 1 seeded and chopped
- 10 cloves garlic, each sliced into 5 slices
- 8 fillets (about 4 ounces each) red snapper or tilapia
- 1 bunch cilantro, chopped
- 2 cups water
- ½ cup olive oil
- 2 tablespoons each: lemon juice, tomato paste, sweet paprika
- 1 teaspoon each: turmeric, salt
- ¼ teaspoon hot paprika, optional

1. Layer guajillos, bell pepper, chopped tomatoes, garlic, fish, sliced tomatoes and cilantro in that order in a Dutch oven or large skillet wide enough to accommodate the fish in one layer.

2. Mix water, oil, lemon juice, tomato paste, sweet paprika, turmeric, salt and hot paprika in a medium bowl; pour liquid evenly over the layered fish and vegetables; cover.

3. Heat to a boil; cook 5 minutes. Reduce heat to a simmer; cook 1 hour, spooning liquid over the fish every 10 minutes, adding water if necessary. Serve warm.

### Nutrition information per serving:

267 calories, 53% of calories from fat, 16 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 40 mg cholesterol, 8 g carbohydrates, 24 g protein, 381 mg sodium, 2 g fiber

## Carrot and cilantro salad

■ Adapted from a recipe from Ayelet Danino.

Preparation time: 15 minutes  
Cooking time: 20 minutes  
Yield: 6 servings

- 8 carrots, peeled, thinly sliced
- ½ bunch cilantro, finely chopped
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ teaspoon each: ground cumin, sweet paprika
- 1 teaspoon each: salt, freshly ground pepper

1. Cover carrots with water in a large saucepan. Heat to a boil over medium-high heat; reduce heat to simmer. Cook until fork-tender, about 20 minutes. Drain; set aside.

2. Combine cilantro, lemon juice, garlic, cumin, paprika, salt and pepper in a medium bowl. Add carrots to mixture; toss to evenly coat carrots. Set aside at room temperature 30 minutes or refrigerate overnight.

### Nutrition information per serving:

40 calories, 4% of calories from fat, 0.2 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 10 g carbohydrates, 1 g protein, 417 mg sodium, 3 g fiber

## Eggplant and red pepper salad

Preparation time: 20 minutes  
Standing time: 45 minutes  
Cooking time: 30 minutes  
Yield: 6 servings

■ Adapted from a recipe from Ayelet Danino.

- 4 long, slender eggplants, unpeeled, cut into thick slices
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- Juice of 1 lemon
- ¼ teaspoon each: paprika, cumin, freshly ground pepper
- 2 red bell peppers, seeded, finely chopped
- 6 dill pickles or 20 comichon pickles, chopped
- 1 cup olive oil, about

1. Place eggplant on a paper towel-lined baking sheet. Sprinkle with 1 tablespoon of the salt. Let stand 30 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, combine garlic, lemon juice, 1 teaspoon of the salt, paprika, cumin and pepper in a large bowl; stir in bell peppers and pickles. Set aside.

3. Pat eggplants dry with paper towels; dice into ½-inch cubes. Heat about ½ cup of the oil in a medium skillet over medium-high heat; cook eggplant, in batches, stirring often and adding more oil only if needed, until golden around the edges, about 5 minutes per batch. Transfer cooked eggplant to a pan lined with paper towels; cool about 5 minutes.

4. Transfer eggplant to large bowl; stir in dressing to coat. Let stand 15 minutes before serving.

### Nutrition information per serving:

281 calories, 58% of calories from fat, 18 g fat, 3 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 29 g carbohydrates, 5 g protein, 1,806 mg sodium, 11 g fiber

## Flourless chocolate pecan torte

Preparation time: 30 minutes  
Cooking time: 45 minutes  
Cooling time: 2 hours  
Chilling time: 4 hours  
Yield: 10 servings

■ This is chef Ayelet Danino's favorite Passover cake.

- 1 bag (16 ounces) semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 2 sticks (1 cup) butter
- ½ cup sweet kosher wine
- 6 eggs
- ½ cup finely chopped pecans

1. Combine chocolate chips, butter and wine in a microwave-safe container; heat at medium (50 percent power), stirring at 30-second intervals, until the chocolate melts, about 3 minutes. Set aside to cool, about 20 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, beat eggs in the bowl of an electric mixer on medium-high speed until fluffy and lemon-colored, about 20 minutes.

3. Heat oven to 300 degrees. Fold the melted chocolate into the eggs; carefully fold in nuts. Pour into a 9-inch greased cake pan. Bake until just set in center, about 45 minutes. Turn off oven; leave oven door partially open. Cool torte in oven, about 2 hours. Refrigerate 4 hours. Cut into wedges to serve.

### Nutrition information per serving:

468 calories, 70% of calories from fat, 39 g fat, 21 g saturated fat, 177 mg cholesterol, 30 g carbohydrates, 6 g protein, 228 mg sodium, 3 g fiber



A variety of Sephardic and Ashkenazic foods find their way onto the Danino table.

Tribune photos by Bob Fila



Danino family members relax over the bountiful and varied meal they have prepared, including carrot and eggplant salads and Moroccan-style fish.

## PASSOVER:

CONTINUED FROM THE COVER

### Promised Land.

Although the meals for the Sabbath and Passover at her house always include a Moroccan fish appetizer, Danino sensibly resists repetition in the rest of the meal. In fact, if there is one thing in this world the chef detests, it's the same holiday meal every year. This is probably why she starts thinking about the menu weeks in advance.

"In a million zillion years I will never understand: How can people eat the same food?" she said during a Sabbath dinner weeks before the holiday. "Like, why would you have the same turkey? The same brisket? What's the deal?"

"We cook Moroccan in this house. The only thing that repeats itself" with the Moroccan cooking is the fish. It's on the table every Friday; it's on the table every holiday. We use anything [meaning tilapia, salmon, whitefish, flounder, sea bass or red snapper], but the method of cooking stays the same," Danino said.

She speaks English as easily as she speaks the Hebrew of her native Israel, for by now she has spent half her life here and has become Americanized—gathering home decorating ideas from cable television shows, going for her yellow belt in taekwon do and, when she talks, slipping in the word "like" as often as a teenage girl.

### Badge of honor

The Passover meal must be perfect, for it would be a travesty for a professional chef to serve mediocre food. Likewise, what sort of chef would she be without checking thoroughly every tomato and onion and green bean that enters her kitchen?

Danino admits to being a food snob, and apologizes for her high standards, but they come with her culinary career: an education at Kendall College, an internship at Ambria with pastry chef Judy Contino (now owner of Bittersweet bakery), four years working her way up to assistant pastry chef at the Ritz-Carlton, then three years as an owner and executive chef of Vlv Cafe, her family's former restaurant in Glenview. Now a mother of three young boys, she also runs a private catering business, Chef's A La Carte, with Shoshy.

For the past 10 years, Shoshy also has been helping to cook the family's seder foods. The Moroccan fish appetizer is an example of their teamwork; by now they have fine-tuned the ingredients to what their family says is perfection. After it is made, the smell of hot guajillo chilies often fills the kitchen.

That's right, chilies.

### Cooking with fire

When American Jews think of the seder foods, they usually refer to the cooking of Eastern European and German (Ashkenazic) Jews: chicken soup with matzo balls, brisket, kugel, roasted potatoes and gefilte fish with horseradish. But like the country of Israel itself, on Passover, the Danino kitchen has two influences at work:

the mild Ashkenazic foods—to honor Danino's parents—and the fiery and aggressive Sephardic foods (from the Jewish people of North Africa and the former Ottoman Empire), to honor the Moroccan heritage of her husband.

"It's like Ayelet grew up in my mother's kitchen," Shoshy said, referring to the full spice palette the chef uses: hot paprika, cayenne, turmeric, cinnamon, ginger, coriander and cumin.

Danino agreed: "The day I married Yoram, I married the culture. I do use a heavy hand with the seasonings." But if the menu was up to Shoshy, she added, each dish would include the hottest of hot peppers, a craving that seems to be encrypted in her North African roots.

Danino has been busy on other enterprises, baking for sweet tables and

smaller parties of 25 to 50 and, over the past two weeks, baking 600 cakes for the Passover carryout fundraiser that Congregation Beth Hillel runs every year.

But Danino and Shoshy took time to demonstrate their Passover favorites for the recent Friday dinner. Danino skinned a fish fillet by holding down one corner with a paper towel and sliding a chef's knife along the flesh to remove the bottom skin.

As she and Shoshy continued, they proceeded as chef and line cook. There was no wasted move. There were no cookbooks, either. They have performed this ritual so often they know the formula by heart, with Danino setting the brisk tempo.

Exactly in this order—and nothing is measured—the guajillo chilies were rinsed and set down in the pan, followed by cubed sweet pepper, cubed tomatoes, sliced garlic cloves and the fish, which Danino had cut into attractive long wedges, rinsed in water and draped over the vegetables; she didn't even stop to shake off any moisture or pat them dry.

She topped off the fish with the sliced tomatoes, then an arsenal of cilantro, roughly chopped.

Danino takes control of her ingredients so that whatever needs to simmer for a long time doesn't turn out muddled in a pot, but has its own distinct flavor.

Shoshy made a sauce by whisking canola oil into tomato paste, then



Oren Danino, 5, and his brother Tomer, 9, wait for the Sabbath meal to begin.

thinned the mixture with water before pouring it into the pan. It was hard for Shoshy to make the dish without the final touch of hot paprika, "but Ayelet's family [meaning her parents and children], they won't eat it like that."

For Passover, Danino makes several signature desserts. Using the brownie recipe from the Ritz-Carlton, she eliminates the flour and makes up for the quantity with equal parts potato starch and finely ground matzo cake meal. Another star dessert is her flourless chocolate pecan torte, which gets its light, airy texture from eggs that she beats for 20 minutes.

Although there are no cookbooks in sight, there is her very tattered, taped-together, handwritten book of pastry cooking methods and ingredients.

"Every chef I was with gave me what they had," Danino said. Those chefs who left the biggest mark: Sebastien Canonne, an owner of The French Pastry School; Contino, owner of Bittersweet; and Nicole Bergere, owner of Nicole's Bakery.

The Danino seder this year will probably count as a haute-fusion family affair: a brisket from Danino's father, a sweet potato soufflé and the American flourless chocolate pecan torte.

These dishes, like a mosaic, will appear with the Moroccan fish, lamb in plum sauce, stuffed vegetables, and carrot or eggplant salads mixed with paprika and cumin, Danino's No. 1 spice of choice.

It is tempting to imagine what else she might include, given the hundreds of flavors her palate has recorded from the Ashkenazic and Sephardic cuisines.