What Makes Food Jewish?

For thousands of years Jews have been studying in pairs or in groups, respectfully debating each other, learning the stories and legal texts of Judaism, and investigating their past as a means for enriching their present. Tonight, we continue to engage in the millennia-old practice of exploring the written word as a means to connect with our tradition, open ourselves up to our inner selves, make sense of the world around us, and inspire us to action. Thank you for joining us on this journey.

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Food in Jewish Religion and Culture

"There is no way you can practice Judaism religiously or culturally without food. Food has been intrinsic to Jewish ritual, life and culture from the outset. What is the very first act that the Israelites in Egypt are commanded to do? It's to have a communal meal—roast lamb and herbs, some nice *shwarma*. And with that, the beginning of the Jewish people is through a meal. The famous joke—"They tried to kill us, we won, now let's eat"—is not really that far from the truth. Within the Jewish legal framework is an understanding that various rituals are accompanied by a *seudat mitzvah*, or celebratory meal, whether a *bris* or a baby naming or a bar mitzvah or a wedding. Any sort of life cycle event is accompanied by a *seudat mitzvah*. Some foods are almost sanctified by their use in these meals or holidays and rituals. So food that may have not been Jewish at one point can become Jewish. Chicken soup, for example, became very popular after a meat shortage after the Black Death, leading Europe to become a chicken-raising culture. Simultaneously, Italian Jews introduced noodles to the Franco-German Jews, and chicken soup with *frimzel*, or egg noodles, became standard. But then what do you do on Pesach when you can't have egg noodles—the matzoh ball or *knaidel* emerges. You can see the continuing adaptation that created the cultural Jewish gastronomy." – Gil Marks

Gil Marks is a rabbi, author of Encyclopedia of Jewish Food *and founding editor of* Kosher Gourmet *magazine.*

Selection is from Moment Magazine's July-August 2013 issue.

Discussion Questions:

*What is your most powerful Jewish food memory?

*What do you think it is that makes food Jewish?

Understanding Jewish Food Traditions

courtesy of Interfaithfamily.com

There are four main reasons why Jewish food seems distinctive.

The first is kosher laws, a set of food dos and don'ts, first recorded in the Hebrew Bible in the book of Leviticus and later elaborated by the rabbis in the Talmud. Most Jews today do not follow these rules about what animals to eat, how they should be slaughtered and prepared, and which foods may be eaten together. Still, for many Jews who were raised observant, the kosher rules help form a sense of what is taboo to eat, and what is normal. Some, for example, won't eat meat from non-kosher animals, even though they'll eat meat that's not ritually slaughtered. Keeping kosher provides Jewish culture with a sense that there is a right way and a wrong way to eat and that food is important.

A second reason that Jewish food evolved the way it did was the customs around Shabbat (the Sabbath), a day when observant Jews do not cook but are supposed to eat hot food. There is a whole set of dishes that can be cooked or kept warm overnight.

A third religious factor in Jewish cuisine was the Passover holiday, with its special food rules that also stimulated Jewish culinary creativity.

The fourth reason that Jewish food seems different is an historical pattern of migration and cultural adaptation. Jews have a history of adapting the food of the surrounding culture to Jewish food rules, and then bringing those dishes to new countries.

Discussion Questions:

*Are you surprised at the article's selection of the factors that led to the creation of "Jewish" foods?

*With less than 20% of Jews today keeping kosher or adhering to traditional Sabbath restrictions, and with relative comfort knowing they're not going to be thrown out of their countries (bringing their food traditions with them), what do you think will make new Jewish food creations distinctive, if anything, in the 21st century?

Numbers 11:4-9

ד וְהָאסַפְסֻף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבּוֹ, הִתְאַוּוּ תַּאֲוָה; וַיָּשֻׁבוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ, גַּם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיֹּאמְרוּ, מִי יַאֲכִלֵנוּ בָּשָׂר.

4 And the mixed multitude that was among them had a strong craving; and the children of Israel wept again and said: 'Who shall give us meat to eat!

ה זָכַרְנוּ, אֶת-הַדָּגָה, אֲשֶׁר-נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם, חִנָּם; אֵת הַקִּשֻּׁאִים, וְאֵת הָאֲבַטִּחִים, וְאֶת-הֶחָצִיר וְאֶת-הַבְּצָלִים, וְאֶת-הַשּׁוּמִים.

5 We remember the fish, which we ate in Egypt for nothing; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic;

ו וְעַתָּה נַפְשֵׁנוּ יְבֵשָׁה, אֵין כֹּל--בִּלְתִּי, אֶל-הַמָּן עֵינֵינוּ.

6 but now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all, besides this manna before our eyes.’

Discussion Questions:

The Israelites are frustrated that they are eating only this (miraculous) dew-like substance called manna while wandering in the desert and seem to remember a past in Egypt – while enslaved – that somehow was better. Basically, the epitome of *chutzpah*!

*Is eating meat an inherently Jewish thing to do? Why or why not?

*If you had to eat the same thing every day for 40 years, what would it be?

What Makes A Deli Jewish?

The delicatessen has long been part of Jewish life in America. Deli scholar Ted Merwin, whose book "Pastrami on Rye: An Overstuffed History of the Jewish Deli" traces the rise of the delicatessen in the U.S., said Katz's, which opened on New York's Lower East Side in 1888, was the first Jewish delicatessen. Katz's soon became the "prime gathering place for the Jewish community, on par with the synagogue," Merwin said.

The Jewish identity of the delicatessen began to emerge, he said, and different social classes in various geographic regions began to associate the delicatessen as a place for Jews to gather and relax. In 1899 there were 10 Jewish delicatessens on New York's Lower East Side. However, the delicatessen did not come into its own until the 1920s and 30s, Merwin said. There were 1,550 kosher delicatessens in New York in the 1930s, he said.

Most delicatessens were not restaurants but takeout stores, Merwin said. "You didn't have a sandwich. You bought a platter of meat." And that meat was corned beef, pastrami and tongue. People ate meat and "celebrated being American," he said. Delicatessens opened outside of New York, in cities like Miami Beach, Chicago, Baltimore and Los Angeles, Merwin said. "By the 1950s, huge, over-stuffed sandwiches showed that Jews had made it in America." The number of delis declined with the Jewish migration to the suburbs, he said. The decline of the deli continued in the 1970s when there were "major health concerns" about meat and Jews turned against deli food. Yet, "as the deli has declined, the food itself has become more main stream," Merwin said, citing bagels and pastrami, in particular.

-*selections from* Tracing History of American Jewish Deli *by David A. Schwartz, Florida Sun-Sentinal, 3/19/13*

Discussion Questions:

*What's your favorite deli sandwich and why?

*What do you think eating meat has to do with "celebrating being American"?

*Given the decline of the deli due to the Jewish community's shift to the suburbs and given that we know synagogue affiliation rates are dropping across the country, where is the current place for Jews to "gather and relax"? Where should it be?

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, De'ot 5:1

"A Torah Sage should not be a glutton. Rather, he should eat food which will keep his body healthy, without overeating. He should not seek to fill his stomach, like those who stuff themselves with food and drink until their bellies burst… Our Sages explain: These are the people who eat and drink and make all their days like feast days. They say, "Eat and drink, for tomorrow, we will die."

In contrast, a wise person eats only one dish or two, eating only enough to sustain him. That is sufficient for him. This is alluded to by Solomon's statement: "The righteous man eats to satisfy his soul" (Proverbs 13:25)."

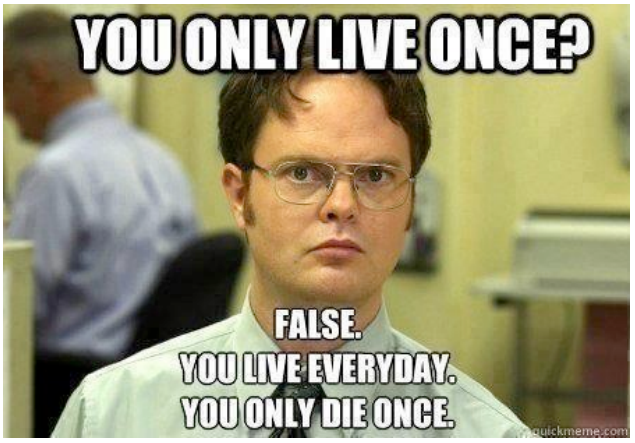
Discussion Questions:

The great rabbinic sage and physician Maimonides (1135-1204) cautions against excessive eating and eating for hedonistic purposes.

*How does this teaching from our tradition synch with overstuffed deli sandwiches?

*Is it possible that one of the things that makes food Jewish is not only how we go about preparing the food, but also how we go about eating it? Reflect.

*How do we balance the concept of *carpe diem* -- or in contemporary terms "YOLO" -- with a tradition that makes pretty clear that while we're meant to appreciate every day as a gift, we're not meant to literally live each day as if it's our last?



Some tasty classic humor:

A Jewish man and a Chinese man were conversing. The Jewish man commented upon what a wise people the Chinese are. "Yes," replied the Chinese man, "Our culture is over 4,000 years old. But, you Jews are a very wise people, too." The Jewish man replied, "Yes, our culture is over 5,000 years old." The Chinese man was incredulous. "That's impossible," he replied. "Where did your people eat for a thousand years?"

Jews and Chinese Food: A Love Story

Selections from an Interview with food writer Andrew Coe, Moment Magazine, Nov-Dec 2009

When did large numbers of American Jews begin eating Chinese food?

When Jews first came to the United States, they kept close to their Jewish Eastern European traditions. The tenement districts of the Lower East Side were their world. They did not leave that world either physically or culturally. Observant East European Jews did not go out to restaurants because they did not know if the restaurant owners who claimed they kept kosher *really* kept kosher. But the sons and daughters of those immigrants, the first generation to be born in the United States, were a different story. They decided to become Americans and began to do things that Americans did. And one of the things that Americans did at that time was eat Chinese food. Eating Chinese in the 1920s and the 1930s was a very urban, sophisticated thing to do. It was cool, but it was also cheap, so they could afford it.

Were there other reasons why Jews preferred Chinese restaurants to, let's say, American or Italian restaurants?

Chinese restaurant owners, unlike any other restaurant owners, did not discriminate. They did not care whether they served blacks, Jews or space aliens. They treated all their customers the same. This was unique at a time when a Jewish person could be turned away at the door of a restaurant. Imagine Groucho Marx showing up at Delmonico's! But the Chinese restaurant owners didn't care, and they were open 365 days a year. This included Christmas and Easter and all the Christian holidays and on Sundays, so you could get the food any time you wanted.

Discussion Questions:

*How does it make you feel knowing that less than 100 years ago, Jews were being turned away from restaurants in the USA?

*Many of our ancestors wanted to "become American," which for some meant adopting the country's food culture. Generations later, what does "being American" mean to you? How does it play out in your food choices?

End note:
What's So Jewish About Bagels?

Ask the average American to name a Jewish bread and there's a 50% chance they'll say bagels. But what is it that has made bagels a poster-child for Jewish baking? There is more than one answer to this question, the most popular attributing the creation of bagels to a Jewish baker living in 1683 Vienna. According to folklore, this unnamed man invented the bagel as a tribute to King John III Sobieski of Poland, who had saved the city from Turkish invaders with a daring cavalry charge. This story has led some to believe that bagels were originally U shaped like stirrups.

However, other historians dispute this claim, arguing that the Yiddish word 'beygal' has been traced to 17th century Crackow, Poland. It is here that an official document of 'Jewish Community Regulations' – dated to 1610 – listed 'beygals' among the approved gifts for women in childbirth or midwives. These beygals were circular like our modern bagels, and the shape was thought to symbolize the eternal cycle of life, with no beginning and no end.

Whatever their origin, what we do know for certain is that bagels were brought to North America by Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants in the late 1800's where they quickly gained popularity in New York City. Yet the bagel appreciation that is so much a part of American culture today didn't begin to take shape until the 1950's, when Lender's began selling them to supermarkets. Hard to believe America's love affair with bagels & cream cheese is only fifty odd years old, but there it is!

-Ariela Pelaia, jcarrot.org