

A JEWISH CULINARY LECTURE AND PASSOVER COOKING CLASS BY TINA WASSERMAN

On Friday, March 15, 2013, as sunset was approaching, I made my way to Temple Bnai Sholom. This synagogue is the third oldest “continually running” Reform Judaism synagogue in the United States, founded in 1876. My purpose was twofold: 1. To worship with my Jewish brethren, and; 2. To listen to Tina Wasserman’s lecture on how the Jewish Diaspora influenced Jewish cooking.



TEMPLE BANAI SHOLOM AT SUNSET ON MARCH 15, 2013

Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar started the service. She shared an inspiring quote by the great Hasidic Rabbi Baal Shem Tov. It is as follows: “The world is new to us each morning. This is God’s gift, and every man (woman) should believe he (she) is reborn each day.” A year or two ago I would have never considered blogging or hosting a website. “Computer Klutz” was a moniker I called myself. I changed my mind after presentations by my Registered Dietitian colleagues, Carolyn O’Neill and Regan Miller Jones. They sparked within me the belief that I can be a successful blogger. Today is a new day, and I have been reborn as “The Storytelling Nutritionist.” I like that name so much better than “Computer Klutz!”

How fortuitous that I begin my blog with stories from Tina Wasserman. As she says, “Jewish cooking depends on storytelling.” Ms. Wasserman’s areas of expertise are food and cooking techniques and how the Jewish Diaspora influenced their cuisine. She holds a Master’s degree in food and fashion merchandising. Once upon a time, she was also a junior high home economics teacher. Currently, she resides in Dallas, Texas. Ms. Wasserman was elected to Les Dames d’Escoffier, an international culinary society that honors women. She is the author of the book, “ENTRÉE TO JUDAISM: A CULINARY EXPLORATION OF THE DIASPORA.” Tina’s purpose in writing her book is summed up as follows: “It is my sincerest wish that this book will transport you back in time to better understand the culinary roots and heritage of the Jewish people and propel you forward to comprehend the culturally diverse world that we live in today and our children and grandchildren will live in tomorrow.” (1)

THE JEWISH DIASPORA

What does *Jewish Diaspora* mean? It is the dispersion of Jews outside of Israel from the 6th century B.C.E, when they were exiled to Babylonia, until the present time. According to Ms. Wasserman, “Whether seeking economic freedom, fleeing persecution, or simply searching for a better life, Jewish communities spread to the four corners of the world. Wherever Jews settled, they adapted to customs, tastes, and ingredients available in their new environment, creating our culinary heritage.” As Jewish women settled in different parts of the world, Jewish cuisine changed simply because they did not have the ingredients that they had in the place where they formerly resided. “So they did what cooks have always done when they did not have a particular food or spice for a dish: they substituted another ingredient!” proclaimed Ms. Wasserman.

The coastline of the Mediterranean in North Africa and southern Spain were places where Jews thrived in communities after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. Jews were traders, craftsmen, and agrarians. Positive economic growth occurred in the communities where they lived. In 711 the Moors moved to Spain. For the next 700 years, they lived side by side with Jews. On 1/2/1492, Moors were defeated and surrendered to Alhambra in Granada. At the same time, the two thousand years of Jewish life in Spain came to an end. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled Jews from their land with the stroke of a pen. Christopher Columbus left for his famous journey to find sea routes to China and India on 8/3/1492...the day after Jews were officially no longer could live in Spain.

WAS CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS A JEW?

Ms. Wasserman also informed the audience that lately historians have been positing that Christopher Columbus may have been Jewish. I was taught Christopher Columbus was from Genoa, Italy. However, the records from his youth are sketchy. The Spanish Inquisition was in full force at this time Columbus left on his journey. Jews had the choice to convert or die. Many Jews who remained in Spain pretended to convert to Roman Catholicism and changed their names and identities. They practiced their Judaism in secret and were known as *Marranos* (swine or pigs). Christopher Columbus may have been a *Marrano*. The day he left on 8/3/1492 was the anniversary of the destruction of the two Temples in Israel. In personal correspondence, Columbus wrote, “Bet Hei”, which means “With God’s Help” in Hebrew. It is also written from right to left. His journey was not funded by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, but by wealthy Jewish *Marranos*. These Jewish *Marranos* hoped Columbus would find new lands in which Jews could settle and practice their religion in peace. Many Jews traveled with Columbus on his four voyages and settled in Cuba, Jamaica, Hispanola (Haiti and Dominican Republic), Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and Caribbean Islands. Christopher Columbus is buried in the Dominican Republic. Throwing her hands up in the air, Ms. Wasserman said, “But who knows for sure whether Columbus was Jewish!?!”

ARAB TRADE ROUTES

The Arab trade routes expanded the Jewish palate. In her research for her book, Ms. Wasserman found that lamb, rice, corn, ginger, figs, pomegranates, olives, onions and dates came from China. A love of spinach came from Persia. (And yes, a spinach, raisin, and pine nut salad is Jewish cuisine!) Almonds came from Israel. Spices, melons, cardamom, citrus, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, and eggplant came from India. Cooking practices using these ingredients were dispersed into the world wherever Spanish Jews immigrated. Two hundred thousand Jews lived in Spain before their expulsion. Today only fifteen thousand Jews live there and most of them came in the 20th century, and sadly, have no connection to the Golden Age of Jews in Spain (2).

THE SABBATH AND JUDAISM.

“More than the Jew has kept the Sabbath. Shabbat has kept the Jew.” is a proverbial quote from Ahad Ha’am. Because of the laws of kashrut, Jews cooked differently than Christians. Foods were fried in olive oil versus lard, since

pork was forbidden. Jews grew their own grapes and made their own wine to make sure it was kosher. Cattle were raised to provide milk and to make sure the meat was slaughtered properly. In Judaism, cooking is forbidden on the Sabbath. Many dishes were made in advance and preserved with vinegar. Another cooking method was to slow cook the food from Friday until the dish could be eaten on Saturday afternoon. The eggplant/tomato dish called Capanota was a Jewish Sabbath dish from the year 1600 and beyond. Many *Marrano* Jews were indicted when they observed the Sabbath in secret. Maids and neighbors turned in people who they saw setting the table nicely on Friday night. A smokeless chimney on Friday night or Saturday could also get you in trouble. Eating “flat crackers” in the Spring meant you were observing Passover and got you into trouble. Likewise, fasting in the early fall meant you were commemorating Yom Kippur, another offense. Talk about tenacity! Secretive Jews celebrated Passover, the High Holy Holidays and the Sabbath as best they could, and risked persecution for practicing their faith.

FRIED CHICKEN – JEWISH STYLE!

In 1911, Proctor and Gamble invented Crisco, which is made from vegetable oil. At last, the observant Jew could eat fried chicken and maintain the laws of kashrut! In 1930, Proctor and Gamble published a cookbook that was ½ written in English and ½ written in Yiddish. It enabled “Old World” mom and “New World” daughter to cook together. It is also a great example how Jewish cuisine was adapted here in America. When Ms. Wasserman related this story, it reminded me of the scene from the movie, “The Help”, when Minnie was teaching the beautiful, bodacious blonde character, Celia Foote to cook. Minnie sang the praises of Crisco. I’m sure the American Jewish women in the first half of the 20th century did too!

SATURDAY NIGHT – MARCH 16, 2013. A PASSOVER COOKING LESSON WITH TINA!

I had such a good time listening to Tina lecture on Friday night; I was back at Temple Bnai Sholom synagogue for a Passover cooking class by Tina the next night! Passover is the celebration of the Hebrews being redeemed from slavery in Egypt. It is always celebrated on the first full moon after the Spring Equinox. The *Seder* is the heart of Passover. The *Seder* is a 15 step ritual of the Passover dinner and is celebrated the first two nights of Passover. Another meaningful tradition is that Jews should not eat leavened bread during the entire week of Passover.

Tina divided her audience into groups, and we made and tasted YUMMY dishes that meet Passover dietary rules. I was assigned to the Passover Granola group. Ms. Wasserman has graciously given me permission to use her Passover Granola recipe that she developed. Her motivation in developing this recipe was many Jews find breakfast the hardest meal to keep Passover kosher. This yummy cereal can be eaten with milk or soy milk or Greek yogurt.



PASSOVER GRANOLA FROM TINA's BOOK

3 cups matzah farfel

¼ teaspoon nutmeg

2/3 cups slivered almonds

6 tablespoons unsalted butter or pareve kosher for

½ cup sweetened or unsweetened coconut

Passover margarine

2/3 cup pecans, broken into large pieces

1/3 cup wildflower or clover honey

¼ teaspoon salt

1 ½ cups chopped dried mixed fruit of your choice

1 ½ teaspoons cinnamon

including raisins or a 7-ounce bag of dried fruit pieces

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees Fahrenheit.
2. Combine the farfel, almonds, coconut, pecans, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg in a 3-quart mixing bowl.
3. Melt the butter and honey in a small glass bowl in a microwave for 1 minute until butter is melted and honey is more fluid
4. Stir the butter mixture into the farfel mixture until all farfel is lightly coated with the butter.
5. Spread the mixture over a large jelly roll pan with 1 inch sides and bake for 15 minutes until deep golden brown. Halfway through baking, stir to brown evenly.
6. Remove from oven. Cool completely and toss with the dried fruit.
7. When totally cooked, store in a ziplock bag or airtight storage container for all eight days of Passover---if it lasts that long!

Yield: 1 – 1 ½ quarts

VARIATION: CHOCOLATE GRANOLA TREATS

1. Melt 8 ounces of Passover chocolate chips and mix them with 1 ½ to 2 cups of the prepared granola. Stir to coat well.
2. Drop by teaspoonful onto parchment paper, and allow the mounds to firm up before you devour them!
3. These can be stored in a sealed container at room temperature or frozen. Chocolate might appear chalky after freezing, but this does not alter the taste.

Yield: 2-3 dozen pieces

TINA's TIDBITS

To prevent burning, never pre-roast nuts if they will be baked in the oven.

This recipe can be made with old-fashioned oatmeal when Passover ends.

Salt should always be added in a small quantity to a sweet mixture to bring out the flavors of the individual foods but not lend a salty taste to the dish.

If planning ahead, leave out fruit until the day you want to use it so farfel doesn't get soggy (3).



Above is a picture of the farfel to use with the recipe

Below is a close up picture of the Passover Granola



REFERENCES

1. Entrée to Judaism: A Culinary Exploration of the Jewish Diaspora. Tina Wasserman. URJ Press, New York, New York. 2010. Page xii
2. Ibid. Pages 45-46
3. Ibid. Page 327

I want to thank Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar and her congregants for their hospitality to the Gentiles, who descended upon Temple Bnai Sholom for the wonderful presentation and cooking class by Tina Wasserman. There were Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and even Turkish Muslims all having a good time together. Rabbi Bahar and congregants.... You have a magnificent gift for making everyone feel welcome!

I want to thank Ms. Wasserman from the bottom of my heart for letting me use her recipe in my blog. I urge everyone to go and purchase her book. This blog posting is only a teeny tiny sampling of the fascinating stories of Jewish history and cuisine. Her whole heart and soul was put into writing this book, and it shows. The food photography is top notch. Each recipe includes cooking tips on how to make the recipe taste better. I sampled nine recipes from this book and EVERYONE WAS MOUTH WATERING DELICIOUS! I am in awe of the hard work she put into this work so future generations will know the history of Jewish cuisine. Ms. Wasserman shared a quote by David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel. He said, "We Jews should not live in the past, but neither should we forget the past. The past must live in us" If David Ben Gurion were alive today, he would say, "Thank you, Tina Wasserman....Thanks for helping to preserve the history of Jewish cuisine. Your book is a job very well done!"



Author Tina Wasserman autographing my book.

ENTRÉE to JUDAISM

A Culinary Exploration of the Jewish Diaspora



This is the cover of Tina Wasserman's book.

For more of Tina's creative cooking tips, go to www.cookingandmore.com. Her book is available on Amazon and your local bookstore(s).