

A Twist on the Traditional Challah

By **Julia Moskin**

Dec. 1, 2015

Bread — shaping it, baking it, blessing it and sharing it — is part of almost every Jewish holiday.

The bond among Jews, God and bread goes back to the first five books of the Bible: As the Israelites are about to end their exile, God commands them to show gratitude by setting aside a portion, or “challah,” of all the bread they make after entering the Holy Land.

But nowhere in Jewish scripture is it written that challah is a braided, sweet, yellow, deliciously squishy bread of the kind familiar to most American Jews, which comes from the rich tradition of Eastern European baking.

There is another world of challah that evolved from the Middle East and North Africa, where the Sabbath breads were sometimes plain (the better to eat with the region’s tangy, fiery and salty dishes) and sometimes sweet and spicy, with honey, dried fruit, caraway, sesame and — especially significant for Hanukkah — olive oil.

“That this could be challah was a revelation to me,” said Jessamyn Waldman Rodriguez, the founder of Hot Bread Kitchen in Manhattan, who grew up in Toronto and learned about “alternative” challahs in a Jewish baking class.

Now, one of the breads turned out by her East Harlem bakery is a Sephardic challah: a round, golden coil, eggless and unsweetened but crunchy with sesame, caraway and cumin seeds. “When I developed the recipe, I was thinking about the bread I’d like to eat with a Moroccan tagine,” she said, “and I also love it just dipped in honey — the spicy and the sweet together.”

In most of the modern Jewish world, the term “challah” now refers to a soft yeasted bread with an even, airy crumb. But that consensus didn’t happen overnight.



Sephardic challah is eggless and unsweetened but crunchy with sesame, caraway and cumin seeds. Sabra Krock for The New York Times

Traditionally, challah is defined as any bread that is made for use in Jewish ritual. During the first few thousand years of Jewish life, challah included everything from rich layered breads baked overnight in Yemen, pita pockets in Syria and lepeszka flatbreads in the Caucasus. Later on, as challah traveled with the Jews, the bread took on a Hungarian costume of poppy seeds, soaked up orange blossom water in Libya, and mixed with pumpkin in Spain.

In the Ashkenazi world — that of the Jews who made their way over time to Central and Eastern Europe — challah evolved into the fluffy, egg-enriched, sugar-laced, six-stranded braid that we recognize.

Among the Sephardic Jews of North Africa and the Middle East, who trace their ancestry and traditions back to Spain before the Inquisition and often to the Roman Empire before that, challah evolved in different directions.

Eggs and sugar were relatively scarce, but spices, honey and oils from olives, nuts and seeds were plentiful.

“You often find olive oil used in challah recipes from that part of the world, used to enrich the dough instead of egg,” said Maggie Glezer, the author of “A Blessing of Bread,” a compendium of Jewish breads, with dozens of recipes for challah.

And so special regional challahs evolved: doughs liberally sprinkled with sesame or poppy seeds, scented with aniseed or cardamom or coriander, and enriched with almond or olive oil. Spices like saffron and za’atar, orange flower and rose water all found their way into these elaborate challahs, as did candied fruit and nuts. Unlike smooth Ashkenazi challahs, these loaves are often studded with whole nuts, streaked with sweet fillings, or bumpy with whole spices.

Linda Capeloto Sendowski, a cooking teacher in Los Angeles, had two Sephardic grandmothers — one from the island of Rhodes in Greece, the other from Gallipoli in Turkey — and the family’s round, coiled challah is laced with aniseed and raisins, then liberally sprinkled with sesame seeds. “It was perfect with our Shabbat meal,” she said: chicken with vegetables deeply braised in tomatoes and onions, typical of Turkish and Greek cooking.

Across the same region, the Mizrahi Jews, whose ancestors have lived continuously in North Africa and the Middle East since ancient times, also have a distinct challah style.

Most Mizrahi challahs are plain and simple, with only a touch of sugar and no fat. In some bakeries, the lean loaf is referred to as “water challah.” Some are spiced but not sweetened, making them better for swiping up the huge spreads of dips and mezes that are served as the Sabbath meal in the Mizrahi tradition.

Water challah is the style on Djerba, an island off the east coast of Tunisia that is home to one of the few remaining Jewish communities in North Africa. Uri Scheft, who is head baker at Breads Bakery in New York, and who is writing a book about the breads of the Middle East, recently visited Djerba’s communal Jewish oven, or kusha. As in most ancient towns around the Mediterranean, Djerba’s kusha knits the community together: Bringing the challah to the oven for baking is a weekly ritual.

“Every woman has to make her challah a little different from the others, so that she can identify it when it comes out of the oven,” Mr. Scheft said. The loaves are expertly shaped into fish and flowers, braids and hands.

In bakeries in the United States and Israel, all three traditions are being synthesized into new variations. The typical Israeli challah is leaner than Ashkenazi challah, richer than Mizrahi and often seeded like a Sephardic. And many modern challahs develop according to the taste and training of the baker. Although it’s not traditional, Ms. Glezer devised an olive-oil-rich challah recipe especially for Hanukkah when writing her book; the oil gives a moist crumb and, if the oil is very fresh and cold-pressed, a green-gold tint to the dough.

Mr. Scheft, who was raised in Israel, has created a “festive challah” that reflects the favorite seeds and spices of the Middle East: nigella, sunflower, poppy, sesame, pumpkin and flax. His newly invented “holiday” challah tastes quite American. It is as salty as a pretzel, and savory with carrots, parsley and celery.

And the next frontier? It may be in the Jewish bakeries of Buenos Aires, he said, where the Sabbath bread is called jalá. “They are already making challah with chocolate chips,” he said.

Recipes: **Sephardic Challah With Whole Spices** | **More Hanukkah Dishes**

Correction: Dec. 9, 2015

An article on Dec. 2 about challah breads from various traditions referred incorrectly to the Jewish community in Djerba, a Tunisian island. It is one of the few remaining in North Africa, not Africa’s last thriving one. The article also misstated Djerba’s location; it is off the east coast of Tunisia, not the north coast.