Traditional Jewish foods are seeing a revival at eateries across the country

Earlier this year, chef Anthony Rose transformed Rose and Sons, his popular midtown Toronto diner, into a Jewish deli.

Overnight, traditional Ashkenazic dishes like varenky, corned beef, hot pastrami, knishes, chopped liver and other Jewish delicacies replaced a menu that a reviewer once dubbed “glorified stoner food.”

Rose said that he prefers to think of Rose and Sons as a Jewish diner. “A deli is a lunch and brunch thing. I want to serve Rose and Sons as a Jewish diner. “ A deli is a lunch and brunch thing. I want to serve Rose and Sons as a Jewish diner. “

The reinvention of Rose and Sons points to a resurgence of interest in Ashkenazic or eastern European-style food, according to food-trend maven and author David Sax.

In his book, Save the Deli, Sax points out that the popularity of the traditional delicatessen had been waning since the 1970s, in part because younger Jews were less interested in deli food.

However, a new generation of Jewish foodies and chefs are embracing the old-world staples of their grandparents. “Everything old is new again,” Sax said. “Anthony (Rose) is taking (Ashkenazic food) seriously because he has a cultural interest in this culinary legacy.”

A growing number of Jewish restaurateurs and chefs are modernizing Ashkenazic dishes and demonstrating that the food “can be as interesting and delicious as any other cuisine out there,” Sax said.

In fact, several Ashkenazic-style restaurants have opened in a number of Canadian cities in recent years, but not all of them have survived.

The Jewish food scene also varies from one city to the next. Some new restaurants typify old-fashioned delis, while others are serving up artisanal versions of the Ashkenazic dishes their grandmothers and great-grandmothers once made.

For instance, Rose said he’s been testing recipes for chicken giblet fricassee, a dish comprised of meatballs stewed in a spicy tomato sauce with chicken giblets, wings and necks.

But Rose is not about to use any sauce from a bottle. “I want to take these recipes from where they came from. I’m not revolutionizing these dishes. I’m going back to the wheel to see what it was originally,” he said.

“We’re trying to skip two or three generations, to see where this food came from. I’m cooking like my bubbe, but better. Our technique is better.”

Chef Anthony Rose and special guest Bonnie Stern.

“Anthony could have done anything, but he’s chosen to make simple food really well. I’m so proud of him,” she said.

In Montreal, two younger chefs are having great success with their innovative approaches to Ashkenazic fare, even though the city is home to several iconic Jewish restaurants like Schwartz’s, the legendary smoked meat emporium, and Beauty’s, the famed breakfast and lunch eatery.

Hof Kelsten, a Jewish bakery and café on St. Laurent Boulevard, is known for its challah, babka, borscht and brisket sandwiches.

Restaurant reviewers also mention daily lineups at Arthurs Nosh Bar, a popular St. Henri-area brunch spot that’s serving up house-smoked salmon, grilled cheese on challah and latkes with horseradish, sour cream and apple sauce.

Like Rose, Jeffrey Finkelstein, the owner of Hof Kelsten, has had serious culinary training. He attended the New York-based International Culinary Center and apprenticed at the French Laundry in California. Finkelstein then spent several years honing his cooking and baking skills in England, Spain and Denmark.

“I came back from Europe broke,” he recounted. “I started a bakery in my mother’s kitchen.”

He started a wholesale business, supplying many upscale local cafés and restaurants with bread. Five years ago, he was able to open his “Jewish-inspired sandwich shop” on St. Laurent Boulevard.

“We’re doing babkas and chopped liver—the fine-dining way. That was my training,” said Finkelstein. “My dream was to recreate the experience of going to my grandmother’s house. That was my dream restaurant.”

Finkelstein cures and smokes his beef brisket and makes his own pickles and mustard. “We go to my grandmother’s house. That was my dream restaurant.”

“I pride myself that everything is made from scratch. I think that’s what makes us unique.”

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