



# When Food Betrayed the Jews

TRACING MODERN  
FOODCULTURES  
TO THE INQUISITION,  
AND BEFORE

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Today, when we eat a *sopapilla* in a Mexican restaurant, enjoy a slice of sponge cake or an almond cookie, or share Spanish tapas with friends, we don't recognize that these and other dishes can be traced back through centuries to Spain's medieval Jews and the recipes that Spanish Jewish women carried when they fled religious persecution, scattering over much of the known world.

Like generations and generations of women before and since, we know very few of their names. Still, we prepare and eat food we can trace to the dishes these women in medieval Spain made either daily or for Shabbat and for holiday celebrations. Via mothers and daughters, mistresses and maids, the foods of the original Sephardim have endured for hundreds of years, and have influenced cuisines around the world.

This knowledge has special meaning to me. I am descended from these Jewish women of Spain, and I think of them often, especially when I'm cooking. Now it's time our culinary precursors get the recognition their foods warrant—even if the cooks themselves must remain unavoidably anonymous.

For me, when I first got interested in knowing more about Sephardic food, it wasn't at all a women's story. For me, the knowledge came through my father, and the foods he brought to our family from his parents.

Growing up in Denver in the 1950s and '60s, the only Sephardic food I knew was what my father cooked at home. (See *Lilith*, spring 2017, for my early cooking experiences.) There were no Sephardic cookbooks around, and my mother's food was strictly Ashkenazic. But from my Poppi, whose parents emigrated from places in the Ottoman Empire that are now part of Turkey and Macedonia, I learned to cook lentils, *fassoulya*, *yaprakas* (also known as *dolmas*, stuffed grape leaves), and his favorite sponge cake. I learned to love cooking not just with the garlic my father grew, but also with onions, leeks and eggplants.

I don't remember even *seeing* a leek or eggplant in my friends' homes back then, much less seeing any other father who cooked. Food at home was the realm of women. Yet, outside of our homes, all the real chefs I knew were

male—from Chef Boyardee with his picture on those labels to every restaurant chef my dad befriended in pursuit of his not-so-secret desire to own a restaurant someday. The important cooking, the cooking that mattered beyond survival, seemed to be done by men.

When I moved to New York in the late 1980s, I started to explore my Sephardic heritage and to learn more about the history, culture and the wonderful variety of Sephardic cuisines. I read books and took classes in Ladino. I became active in Sephardic organizations and met women who cooked all kinds of Sephardic foods, women from Turkey, Greece, Italy, Syria, Morocco, Mexico, Yemen, Israel, Argentina and more.

I found cookbooks with written recipes for Sephardic dishes, compiled, I was surprised to see, starting in the 1970s by sisterhoods of synagogues in Atlanta (*The Sephardic Cooks*, Congregation Or VeShalom, 1971), Los Angeles (*Cooking the Sephardic Way*, Temple Tifereth Israel, 1971) and elsewhere. I sometimes attended Manhattan's Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, where I heard my father's Ladino being spoken and met Gilda Angel, whose 1986 *Sephardic Holiday Cooking: Recipes and Traditions* has become a classic.

Through the foods of these contemporary American women, I started to find my way to the Jewish women and food of medieval Spain. It was obvious in the synagogue cookbooks that there were recipes for similar foods submitted by women from many different countries: *buevos haminados*, the long-cooked hard boiled eggs, and *quajado* (*sfongato*) a baked dish usually with leeks, eggplants, Swiss chard and/or spinach bound together with eggs. There were rings of shortbread-like cookies called *biscochos* by Jews of Turkey, Greece and Mexico, and crispy fried *bimuelos* or *lou-*

*komades* drizzled with honey syrup, or with rose or orange water. Even with different names and some variations, the dishes were clearly connected by ingredients, process and even by the occasions on which they were served, if the recipe authors provided the foods' social history.

The more I found out, the more it seemed to me that no Jews were ever more marked by the food they grew, cooked, served and ate than the Jews of Spain. This was food closely related to a history that twisted and turned from persecution to prosperity and back again many times, according to who ruled Spain—in simplest terms, whether rulers were Christians or Muslims.

Jews first settled in the Iberian Peninsula around 250 B.C.E., where they lived under the control of the Visigoths and the Holy Roman Empire. The early Catholic Church ostracized Jews from the larger Spanish community through decrees that included refusing communion to any cleric or layperson who ate with a Jew. Worse yet, in 613 C.E., nearly 900 years before the well-known expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal, the Church ordered Jews to convert to Christianity or face expulsion. Some managed to survive as Jews, but many did leave or became Spain's first "secret Jews."

The conquest of nearly all of Iberia in 711 by the Islamic Arab and Moorish army from northern Africa ushered in what we fondly remember as the "Golden Age of Spain," for most of four centuries a time of Jewish renaissance. Spain became the center of Jewish life and religion, with more Jews—probably around half a million at the peak—living in Iberia than in any other place in the world. Synagogues and schools were built. Kosher butchers and other Jewish stores lined the streets in Toledo and other cities.

During these centuries, when Jews enjoyed freedom of movement and socialization, Jewish and Muslim women often visited in each other's homes, sharing food and recipes. Jews incorporated and adapted ingredients and spices brought to Iberia from northern Africa with the Moors. They began

cooking with seasonings like saffron, caraway and capers as well as with rose and orange waters. Rice and artichokes found their way onto Jewish tables.

Homes had gardens where women grew the leeks, eggplant and chard favored by Jews, along with lettuce, lavender, purslane, edible flowers, radishes, parsley, cilantro, fennel, garlic, citron leaves, mint, thyme and the bitter herb called rue. Vinegar made from leftover wine was combined with olive oil for dressings. Often *verduras*, cooked green vegetables, were sprinkled with the wine vinegar. Honey, almonds and pine nuts were favorite ingredients along with spices like cinnamon, cloves, cumin, ginger and nutmeg.

The chickpeas, garlic and onions that are so important in Sephardic dishes were considered lower-class foods and were not found in many Christian or Muslim recipes. Yet chickpeas, grown in Iberia since the days of the Romans, were an important source of protein, especially when there were problems getting kosher meat.

What differentiated Jewish cuisine from that of their neighbors in medieval Spain was much the same for Jews throughout history: how meat was prepared so that it was kosher; how unkosher foods were avoided, including fish without scales and the pork so beloved by Christian Spaniards; the separation of meat and milk; and special foods for the observance of the Sabbath and festivals.

These special food traditions included snacking on cold appetizers and small dishes called “mezé” during Jewish family gatherings for Shabbat and holidays. Some common Sephardic hors d’oeuvres were cheese dumplings, yogurt soup, fried pumpkin, simple salads with fresh ingredients from home gardens, olives, pickled and preserved fish such as anchovies in vinegar. Many of these are still popular today. This Sephardic tradition influenced the famous Spanish custom of tapas, dining on small appetizers, that became particularly popular on Sunday afternoons after Mass when Spaniards gathered in homes and bars. With the Inquisition, hosts would sometimes test to see if any of their guests were secret Jews by serving slices of cold ham, still a popular tapa today.

I was surprised to discover, on my intellectual and sentimental journey to recover as much as I could of the cuisine of my distant ancestors, that there are no cookbooks from Spain’s medieval Jewish community. However, cookbooks from the Christian and Islamic communities of the time reveal as much through occasional references

in Portugal—and from vivid testimony against accused individuals over the ensuing years.

There are detailed decrees related to food and customs around food as a way of revealing if someone was Jewish, even if the person had converted and was living as a secret Jew. These telltale decrees about what to suspect in your



Telltale food practices revealed who might be a secret Jew: cooking food on Friday to be eaten on Saturday; avoiding eel and other scaleless fish; even eating hard-boiled eggs after the death of a parent.

to “Jewish” methods of preparation as they do by what’s left out, including recipes with those leeks, onions and garlic considered low-class and Jewish food.

Life for Sephardim started to become very difficult in the 11th century with the advance of the Christian Reconquista, literally the reconquering of Iberia. There were anti-Jewish riots and mass killings of Jews, mostly in the 14th and 15th centuries, in Toledo, Granada and many other cities. In some places, Jews were forced to live as separate political and social entities in Juderias, Jewish ghettos.

In the end, most of what we know about the food of Spain’s medieval Jews comes from the tragedy of the Inquisition, both the decrees of the Edict of Expulsion—1492 in Spain, 1496

neighbor or employer included keeping the Sabbath by slow-cooking food on Fridays to be eaten on Saturday; cleaning meat of fat, nerves and sinew or soaking it in water to remove the blood; avoiding pork, rabbit, cuttlefish, eel or other scaleless fish popular among the Christians; and even eating hard-boiled eggs and olives after the death of a parent.

Inquisitors were especially attuned to the preparation of Shabbat and holiday foods and also ordinary foods that were eaten or displayed in some ritual observance or as part of keeping kosher. One of the most common dishes used to identify Jewish observance was *adafina*, still a popular dish in Spain and North Africa. Similar to *hamim* and *cholent*, adafina is a traditional Sabbath stew of meat, chickpeas or fava beans, onions, garlic, cumin and other spices,



often with eggs hard-cooked in their shells in the stew. The ingredients weren't as important as the method of slow cooking in banked coals, starting before sundown on Friday and eaten for lunch on Saturday. In one case, in 1570, Inquisitors recorded a maid testifying that she witnessed her mistress cooking "mutton with oil and onions, which she understands is the Jewish dish *adafina*."

The more I learned the more I realized that the testimony of the Inquisition often turned woman against woman; it was hard for a Jewish woman to hide food preparation from a maid. In another well-known testimony of a maid, a simple salad of lettuce and radish was used against Juana Nuñez at her trial in the early 1500s, because she would serve it to her women friends who came to visit nearly every Saturday afternoon. Not only was Doña Nuñez serving only uncooked food, but all the women were relaxing and not working to take care of households at that time, as was customary when observing the Sabbath.

In the spring, a woman making any kind of flat bread with small holes poked in it was damning evidence of Passover preparations. More fatal evidence, mentioned often in Inquisition testimony, was *quajado*, a vegetable-egg casserole, often prepared with Spanish white cheese for a dairy meal. Other names for the dish are *spongato* (sponge) and *asquajado*, meaning "coagulated" in Ladino. The long history of these vegetable casseroles that started in Spain became an element of Sephardic cuisines throughout the Ottoman Empire where *quajado* continued to be made. A version with spinach, onions and matza, called *anchusa*, became part of Passover menus.

I've often thought that had things stayed favorable and comfortable for the Sephardim, we likely would not have so much knowledge of their food, and certainly its influence on other cuisines would be diminished. But with the Inquisition, about half of Spain's Jews chose to leave rather than convert or become secret Jews. The largest number of Sephardic refugees, an estimated 120,000, were welcomed into the Ottoman Empire, primarily in what is now

## Prasa (Sephardic Leeks with Tomato)

Leeks are one of the seven symbolic foods blessed and served at a Sephardic Rosh Hashana seder. I also make this dish for Passover every year. In a fascinating example of enduring Sephardic food culture, *prasa* was introduced to my family by a cousin from Cuba in the early 1960s. When she made the *prasa* (Spanish for leek), my father said it tasted exactly the same as his mother's! And like his mother, our cousin had no written recipe. I've done my best to re-create the dish over the years, but feel free to use more or less of any ingredient to your taste. Prepare this adaptable dish in advance so the flavors can blend, then serve it hot, cold or at room temperature. Good as part of a *mezze* (assortment of appetizers) or a side dish on its own or over rice, quinoa or pasta.

1 TO 2 TABLESPOONS OLIVE OIL

1 16-OUNCE CAN WHOLE TOMATOES OR 4–6 OVER-RIPE FRESH TOMATOES, SEEDED AND ROUGHLY CHOPPED, RESERVING JUICE

2 TO 4 CLOVES GARLIC, MINCED OR CRUSHED

4 LARGE LEEKS

JUICE OF 1 LEMON

SALT AND FRESHLY GROUND PEPPER TO TASTE

Set a colander or large strainer into a large bowl so there is at least a small space at the bottom. Clean the leeks by cutting off the dark green tops. Using the tender green and white parts, cut them in half lengthwise and then into 1" pieces. Put the pieces into the colander and run cold water over the leeks, separating the pieces and mixing them with your fingers as you fill the bowl. When the bowl is full, pull out the colander, rinse out the bowl which will have dirt settled in the bottom and then put the colander back in the bowl and repeat the filling process. Leave the leeks to soak in the water for 5–10 minutes, mixing them around a few times. Then pull out the colander and rinse the leeks a last time. Set aside.

Heat the olive oil in a saucepan. When just hot, carefully add the tomatoes without any juice, mashing them roughly. Watch out for splattering oil. Stir to blend and simmer for 3 to 5 minutes. Add the garlic and simmer for another 3 to 5 minutes. Mix in the leeks and juice from the tomatoes. Simmer the mixture, covered, for about 1 hour until the leeks are soft and the flavors have blended. Add the lemon juice, salt and pepper to taste. Stir and simmer 10 to 15 minutes more, covered to preserve the liquid or uncovered to concentrate it. The dish will keep one week refrigerated in a tightly covered container. It also freezes well. Defrost before re-heating and serving.

Option: For a sweet-and-sour dish, eliminate the garlic and add 1 T. brown sugar with the lemon juice.



## Sephardic Almond Macaroons

Cooking with ground nuts and nut pastes was popular in medieval Jewish and Islamic cultures across Iberia, North Africa and the Mediterranean. At the time, beaten eggs and egg whites were the primary way to leaven baked goods. They bake up flatter than what is usually thought of as a macaroon, are crispy outside, chewy inside, and totally addictive.



MAKES ABOUT 24 COOKIES

2 CUPS ALMOND MEAL

1/3 CUP GRANULATED SUGAR

PINCH OF SALT

4 LARGE EGG WHITES

1 TEASPOON ALMOND EXTRACT

1 TEASPOON VANILLA EXTRACT

CONFECTIONERS' SUGAR FOR DUSTING (OPTIONAL)

ABOUT 24 WHOLE ALMONDS OR ALMOND SLICES (OPTIONAL)

Preheat oven to 325 degrees F. Place oven racks in the middle of the oven. Line 2 large baking sheet pans with parchment paper (preferred) or lightly grease the pans.

Use a whisk to combine almond meal, sugar and salt in a mixing bowl. Add egg whites and extracts and whisk together about 10 seconds until the mixture is smooth and well blended. Do not over-mix once the whites are added.

Alternatively, in a food processor with the metal blade, pulse a few times to combine almond meal with granulated sugar and salt. Add egg whites and extracts and pulse a few times. Stop to scrape down the side and anything stuck on the bottom. Pulse a few more times just until the mixture is well blended and a bit lighter.

Do not over-beat by hand or machine. Drop the mixture by teaspoonfuls, using another teaspoon to help drop the batter about 2 inches apart on baking sheet. Use the back of a spoon to gently round the shape and flatten it slightly. If you like, carefully place an almond or almond slice on the center of each cookie.

Bake in the middle of oven. After 10 minutes, turn the baking sheet around 180 degrees and bake another 10 minutes, or until macaroons are pale golden on the bottom. Cool on the sheets for about 10 minutes, then gently transfer macaroons to a rack and cool completely. Macaroons keep 4 days in an airtight container at room temperature with layers separated by waxed or parchment paper. The macaroons can also be frozen when packed this way. To serve, just separate the layers and defrost.

Turkey, Greece, Italy and the Balkans. They also scattered to Syria and throughout the Middle East, North Africa and the New World of Mexico, South America and eventually, in 1654, New Amsterdam, today's New York.

In addition to those savory dishes with leeks, chard and eggplant, the Sephardim also created sweets. Marzipan, almond macaroons and almond cakes all come from Sephardim. Sponge cake, first baked in Moorish Spain around 1000 C.E., became identified as a Jewish dish that eventually became popular throughout Europe. Called "pan de España," "bread of Spain," it is a *pareve* dessert, adaptable for Passover when matzah meal and potato starch stand in for flour, with excellent results.

A deep-fried treat meant to invoke the miracle of the oil at Hanukkah, *bumuelos* (*buñuelos*, *bimuelos*, *burmuelos*) were a favorite of Spanish Jews that became popular throughout the Ottoman Empire and Morocco. Sephardim carried them to the New World where they show up throughout Central and South America, in Mexican food morphing into *sopapillas*. They are sometimes called Sephardic or Turkish beignet, but instead of getting a beignet's dusting of confectioners' sugar, the Sephardic treats are drizzled with a cooked honey syrup that may be flavored with rose or orange water.

When the Jews left their Spanish homeland, they couldn't take much with them, but they could and did take their heritage, their faith, their Ladino or Judeo-Spanish language, and their foods. It is the women who carried the culture and the cuisine. Their recipes became part of the foods eaten and shared in their new homelands. Today they're a living inheritance of the Jews of Spain. When I make their foods, I gratefully remember the women of medieval Spain and so many others in the generations since. ■

*As guest chef for three seders in the Obama White House, Susan Barocas introduced and prepared several Sephardic dishes. She is a writer, caterer, speaker and teacher of cooking to all ages.*