Chow Mein, Cholent and Cream Cheese Menorahs: Cookbooks and the Culture of Jewish Eating

By Lisa Kogen

Throughout 2004, as Jewish women's organizations (including Women's League) continue to write and propound about how women have stood shoulder to shoulder with men creating a new world in North America, it might appear an act of self parody to write about cookbooks. It seems to underscore the prevailing historical (by now negative) stereotype of Jewish women solely as purveyors of cake and *lokshen kugel*. To some it might be reminiscent of the scene in the Portnoy kitchen of Sophie standing over her son, Alex, menacing him with a knife until he cleans his plate.

But this dim view undermines the value of cookbooks as a rich source of cultural history. Thanks to new emphases on social history, cookbooks are mined for all kinds of information, both eccentric and significant. Far beyond the gastronomic realm of recipes for *gefilte* fish and *mandelbrot*, cookbooks yield important information about Jewish identity and social and cultural norms.

For those who still might need convincing that an analysis of cookbooks is a worthy exercise, it remains an undeniable reality that for the most part, women's history centered around hearth and kitchen.

Jewish cookbooks include all manner of information, from recipes of unusual ethnic cuisine to modern fusions of traditional and contemporary fare; homemaking advice; medicinal remedies; and curious observations about Jewish practice and ritual. They are the products of both individual and commercial enterprises. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of cookbooks representing a wide spectrum of ideological agendas, from those reflecting precise adherence to *kashrut* to those with only marginal religious identities.

Each cookbook can offer invaluable insights into the social and cultural lives of women as they negotiated the complexities and seductions of modernity, navigating the thorny terrain between tradition and acculturation.

In *The Jewish Cookery Book* (1871), Esther Levy admonishes her readers that Jewish dietary prohibitions need not inhibit the creation of "a sumptuous repast." As a product of her German Jewish background, Levy's cookbook reflects the culinary tastes of Jews from central Europe. Unlike later cookbooks, it is devoid of the Russian-Jewish cuisine that arrived with the waves of East European immigrants after 1881.

Levy also provides medicinal cures for numerous ailments, from the common cold to diphtheria. It is clear from her prescriptions that the curative powers of forbidden foodstuffs trump any religious prohibition against their ingestion, such as in her remedy for scarlet fever: "As soon as the disease appears, rub the patient with bacon fat, night and morning, over every part of the body but the head; do it carefully."

Undoubtedly, one of the best known of all Jewish cookbooks is *The Settlement Cookbook*, compiled by Elizabeth Kander in 1901 in Milwaukee. The settlement house movement had been established to support generally impoverished Eastern European Jewish immigrants through educational, social and cultural programs. This early book reflects a specific genre of cookbooks that offered helpful hints and skills that, if properly followed, would accelerate the socialization process (read: *civilize*) for the immigrant homemaker.

These include such mundane advice as how to wash dishes (don't leave a wheel egg beater to soak in water), how to remove grease from the floor (immediately pour ice water on it to harden it) and the best window exposure for keeping food cold (northern).

At the same time, *The Settlement Cookbook* offers guidance for serving an improbably formal meal, including the proper placement of cutlery, the correct way to remove crumbs between courses, and the maximum number of guests that should be assigned to each server. It also provides nutritional advice such as the fact that niacin is found in liver, kidney, muscle meats, and fish; information about wheat, egg and milk-free diets; and recommended feeding schedules for infants and children.

According to the cultural historian Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Settlement Cookbook* was Jewish by association only. Its contents, she suggests, had "more in common with *Miss Parloa's Kitchen Companion* than the Old Testament." Yet it remained one of the most popular cookbooks for Jewish women, and at one point, an edition was published in Yiddish.

The Settlement Cookbook, in its patent disregard for food regulations, offered its Jewish readers recipes for borsht, chopped herring and paprika *schnitzel* alongside those for oyster bisque and scalloped ham and potatoes. By the mid-twentieth century, as American cooking ventured into cross-cultural experimentation, it included chicken chow mein, corn fritters, and "smorgasbord." But the cook looking for specific holiday foods could only find them dispersed under categories such as soups, puddings and cakes.

With the increased allure of non-Jewish holiday fare and creativity, Betty Greenberg and Althea Silverman wrote *The Jewish Home Beautiful* for National Women's League for Conservative Judaism in 1941. Modest in size, but confident in its agenda, the book demonstrated how (and why) the Jewish homemaker should not accept the notion that *kashrut* and Jewish home ritual were undermined by aesthetics and contemporary living. In addition to recipes, the authors present details for setting the holiday table. The intricately choreographed narrative of *The Jewish Home Beautiful* (from floral centerpieces to music) was presented at the National Convention of Women's League at the Ritz-Carlton in Atlantic City in May 1940.

A great deal of attention is given to the visual experience of festive foods. Thus, while potato *latkes* remain the food, *par excellence*, for the celebration of *Ḥanukkah*, family festivities could be enhanced with the Menorah Fruit Salad. In this

creation, the homemaker covers a platter with cream cheese, and then constructs a menorah of pineapple spears with cherry flames, all of which is encircled with walnut halves. Such presentations, the authors seem to imply, empower a traditionally inclined homemaker to hold the line against the incursions of red and green velveteen bows, tinsel and glow-in-the-dark reindeer.

At mid century, the popularity on television of The Goldbergs created a positive identification with a mostly romanticized past, as well as a demystification of Jews among the non-Jewish television-watching public, while many Jews themselves were running away from such stereotypes.

The Molly Goldberg Cookbook (1955), written by Gertrude Berg and Myra Waldo, aptly reflects the more cordial reception of Jews into the American mainstream, and vice versa. The cookbook, written in Molly's trademark cadence, underscores her notion of an inherent Jewish and American cultural compatibility as is readily apparent in this social commentary connected to her recipe for stuffed turkey:

> "I'm very lucky because twice a year, if I need the excuse, I can have turkey for a regular Thanksgiving meal. Once for Succoth and once for Thanksgiving. Succoth is the old Hebrew Festival of the Tabernacles and it also is a harvest celebration like Thanksgiving, where memories of the past and hope for the future mingle all together."

In a similar genre of the personality-based cookbook, Jennie Grossinger trades on her successful family business in *The Art of Jewish Cooking* (1958). The cover, adorned with a beautifully appointed table, and groaning, literally, under the culinary weight of the renowned Grossinger largess, claims the recipes have been tested, selected and prepared by "the world's leading expert on traditional delicious Jewish cookery."

And indeed, Grossinger's recipes represent the state-of-the-art notion of Jewish cooking that conforms to the standards of *kashrut* (with the exception of chicken livers that are sautéed rather than broiled), palate, and repertoire from both Western and Eastern Europe. Like her television contemporary, Molly Goldberg, Jennie Grossinger proposes an affinity between Jews and mainstream America, although that connection, naturally, is best mediated at the dinner table.

While Gertrude Berg and Jennie Grossinger were extolling the virtues of flaky *knish* dough, rolled to perfection on a well-floured tabletop, Poppy Cannon was heralding the virtues of frozen potatoes, instant pudding mixes and canned tomato soup. Born Lillian Gruskin in Capetown, South Africa, to Lithuanian Jews en route to America, in the persona of Poppy Cannon she eventually became a popular food writer for publications such as House Beautiful. Cannon clearly understood food, and she professed to understand the modern woman. Gourmet food, she maintained, could be created in a manner of minutes, not hours or days, and with a minimal amount of preparation and ingredients.

In *The Can Opener Cookbook* (1951), Poppy Cannon offered women this simple appliance, "at one time a badge of shame, a hallmark of the lazy lady and careless wife [now]... a magic wand..." Ready-to-serve foods had come to the rescue of women who wanted to play golf or study abstract art at the local museum, *and* create award-winning meals in the time it took to heat the oven. According to the author, any canned soup is immediately enhanced with a sprinkling of parsley; canned fruit cocktail, when doused in brandy and ignited at the table, will elicit cheers from the guests. Every ingredient is canned, frozen or powdered, even those for a three-course Thanksgiving meal (including the turkey).

Finally, it would be remiss to omit the *Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*. The recipes represent the author's zealous fealty to haute French cuisine [learned while living with her longtime companion, Gertrude Stein, in the American expatriate community in France], and bear no resemblance to anything Jewish. The reader is presented with a wealth of social commentary, cooking advice and decidedly non-Jewish recipes, from the extravagantly decorated bass for a luncheon with Picasso, to the roast saddle of wild boar, to Brian Gysen's infamous recipe for Hasisch Fudge.

Why do such cookbooks warrant mention if they contain no discernibly Jewish flavor? The answer, like any other having to do with cultural phenomena, is that the ambiguity is part of the American Jewish experience. From the time of Esther Levy's *Jewish Cookery Book*, to Poppy Cannon's spam and macaroni concoctions and Alice B. Toklas' Frog Legs Parisienne, the forces effecting Jewish identity had cast a wide net. In North America, Jews did not need the support of the old world communal Jewish structure for survival. Individual autonomy allowed each person to make a determination about the contours of his/her own Jewish belief, practice, and, ultimately, identity. *Kashrut* as a standard was there to be observed or discarded.

In this new open society, Jewish homemakers maintained a shelf of cookbooks with *The Settlement Cookbook, The Art of Jewish Cooking* and *The Can Opener Cookbook* side by side, each offering its own distinctive guide to culinary excellence. It was left to the reader to decide: "tonight ...is it flanken, or chicken fricassee, or (even) crab Louis?" So, what makes a cookbook Jewish? Is it the author? The contents? The cook? Like America, it's a little bit of this, and a little bit of that....□