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Sofganiyot, a traditional fried Hanukkah treat, includes cream cheese, cheddar cheese and refrigerated biscuits.

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Tonawanda native's children's cookbook explores the biblical roots of Jewish holiday meals

Hanukkah helpings: The miracle of oil

By Janice Okun
NEWS FOOD EDITOR

What do you cook for Hanukkah? Tradition tells us you opt for food that emphasizes oil and frying. The eight-day holiday, which begins at sundown Sunday, celebrates the victory of the Jewish army, called Maccabees, over the Syrians in biblical times.

The culinary connection comes in the part of the story that is said to be a miracle: When the Maccabees recaptured the temple in Jerusalem, there was only enough oil to light the building for a day, but the supply burned for eight days — hence, the oil's role in the holiday.

Jill Colella Bloomfield, a Western New York native and author of the new children's "Jewish Holidays Cookbook," relates the age-old story well in her book. She also gives appropriate recipes.

Bloomfield now lives in Minnesota, but she grew up in Tonawanda and earned a doctorate in literature at the University at Buffalo. That's why, she said on the phone, she always approaches food as if it tells a story.

She also is an interesting story on her own. This expert in Jewish cooking, in fact, is "a nice Italian girl from Tonawanda." But Bloomfield's culinary interests developed fairly late in life.

"I had a working-class Buffalo background," she said. And when she moved to Washington, D.C., to take a job with a think tank there, she was still ordering turkey sandwiches in restaurants where her colleagues were trying the She Crab Soup.

Her boss and mentor, however, was determined to help her change, and along the way, she became more adventurous. She even learned to cook.

After 9/11, Bloomfield left her job and one day wandered into the Smithsonian. "I stood in Julia Child's kitchen there," she said, "and as cheesy as it sounds, I wondered what it would be like to go into people's homes and teach their kids how to cook. I had already taken training as a personal chef."

Mostly, she taught at birthday parties. "I gave them several choices of traditional kids' food like pizza and cake decorating," she explained. Bloomfield became "Chef Jill."

She also became a teacher in a Jewish day school in suburban Washington, where part of her job involved working with teenagers and food every morning.

"I taught them to make Hamentaschen in a 46-minute period," she said, referring to the traditional triangle-shaped pastries served during the festival of Purim. But after she and husband, Brian Bloomfield, moved to St. Paul, she began work with DK Publishing, a large global business based in London and New York City, renowned for its graphics.

Bloomfield is now known as the company's resident kids' cooking expert.

"Food is a kind of universal experience if you look at it closely," she said, describing how her mom makes Cuccidate, Italian fig cookies. "Sephardic Jews do the same thing," she said, when they wrap a fruit filling called Harroset in dough.

The Hanukkah recipes in her book include the predictable latkes, or potato pancakes, fried in oil to emerge crisp and delicious. And just as predictably, they have another story, too.

"As the latkes are frying, everyone gathers in the kitchen and tells stories, plays dreidel and gives presents to celebrate the joy of bringing the light of the Menorah (traditional eight-branched candle holder) into a dark time of year," consultant Rabbi Janet Ozur Bass says in the book.

There is another Hanukkah recipe, too — for Savory Cheese Sofganiyot, a type of doughnut popular in Israel, where it's usually filled with jelly. Bloomfield's recipe makes use of refrigerator biscuits and is stuffed with cheese.

She did that, she said, to honor the legendary heroine Judith — many Jewish people believe this story precedes the Maccabees. The brave heroine plied the enemy general Holofernes with lots of cheese to make him thirsty. He kept drinking wine and eventually fell sound asleep.

Whereupon, courageous Judith cut off his head.

“There is a wonderful tradition in honor of the heroism of Judith: Women should not do any work while the Menorah lights are burning,” says Rabbi Ozur Bass.

Certainly an interesting idea.

By the way, Bloomfield hasn't given up her Buffalo culinary roots entirely. She's coming home this month for vacation and “to eat a tremendous great treasure trove,” she said. (She's thinking of loganberry, Bocce Club pizza and Premier Gourmet.)

Savory Cheese Sofganiyot

3 ounces cream cheese

1 cup mild cheddar cheese, grated

1 teaspoon dried parsley

1 (10 count) package refrigerated biscuits

24 ounces canola oil for frying

2 teaspoons salt

In a small bowl mix together softened cream cheese, cheddar cheese and parsley. Separate biscuits and flatten each one so diameter is about four inches. Place about a tablespoon of the cheese mixture on a biscuit. Place another biscuit on top and pinch edges together so cheese is fully enclosed. Repeat until you have five sofganiyot.

Heat the oil in a saucepan to 350 degrees. While waiting for the oil to heat, line a baking sheet with paper towels.

When oil is ready, have an adult use a slotted spoon to lower sofganiyot into oil. Cook for 2 or 3 minutes on each side until dough is cooked through and golden brown on both sides.

Remove sofganiyot from oil with slotted spoon and place on baking sheet. While still hot, sprinkle with salt. Makes 5 servings.

Potato Latkes with Applesauce

Latkes

1 pound potatoes, peeled

1/2 cup onion, finely chopped

1 large egg, beaten

2 tablespoons all purpose flour

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup canola oil

Applesauce

4 apples, peeled, cored and diced

3/4 cup water

1 tablespoon brown sugar

1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

Shred potatoes with a grater. (Watch your fingers!)

Put potatoes and onion on paper towels and squeeze out the liquid.

Put dried potatoes and onion in a medium bowl, then add egg, flour and salt. Combine well.

Heat half the canola oil in skillet until very hot, then scoop mounds of potato mixture (about 2 tablespoons each) into pan. Do not crowd pan.

Press mounds down with a spatula to flatten. Reduce heat and cook until bottoms are golden, about 5 minutes. Flip latkes and cook until golden on the other side, then remove latkes to a paper towel to drain. Repeat, using remaining canola oil if needed.

Serve immediately or transfer to an oven-safe dish and keep in a warm oven until ready to serve.

For the applesauce, stir together all ingredients in a medium saucepan. Cover saucepan and cook over medium heat for 15 to 20 minutes or until apples are soft. (This will depend on the type of apples you use.) Remove from heat and allow mixture to cool.

Using a potato masher, mash mixture until your applesauce is as chunky or smooth as you like. Makes 6 servings.

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