



KATHY JOHNSON/COURIER NEWS
Above, Amy Geldzahler of Bridgewater serves up potato latkes, a Hanukkah tradition.

Left, Geldzahler displays chocolate coins, or gelt, for Hanukkah.



A taste for TRADITION

What's so 'grate' about latkes? It's all in the way they are made

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The ritual played itself out each year during Hanukkah: Grandma Miriam, with her high-blood-pressure-induced thick ankles, stood at the kitchen counter, her fluffy white head bowed, crepey hands grating potato after potato into a plastic bowl. Later, there was the sputtering oil as she fed a frying pan scoops of a mysterious starchy mixture.

What followed then was a fragrance so bewitching family members assembled seemingly instantaneously at the stove.

Each jockeyed for a sizzling potato pancake — or latke in Yiddish — as my grandmother moved the plate of golden brown fritters to the dining room table.

She passed away years ago, taking with her the recipe for her delicious turn on the Ashkenazic Jewish delicacy. Yet, I still remember that thick fatty smell in the air.

"I tried to copy it many times," said my mother, her daughter Bernice, in a phone call dedicated to figuring out just what was in the recipe. "It came out OK, but not like hers. Eggs, onions, potatoes, salt and pepper, and the rest, ich vais nit," said Mom. The latter, in Yiddish, means she doesn't have a clue.

Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, began Tuesday night and lasts eight days. It

commemorates the miracle of the one-day ration of oil Judas Maccabee found in the Temple in Jerusalem after it was desecrated by Antiochus IV, the Greek king of Syria, in 165 BC. The temple candelabrum was lit with that small bit of oil, yet the flames burned steadily for eight days instead of one.

For many, latkes play a starring role in the holiday, as do other foods prepared with oil. The Herculean act, however, of grating the potatoes with a four-sided metal box grater has been abandoned by all but the purists — and those who haven't updated their kitchen appliances.

"I remember when I used to do it with my mother and I used to grate," recalled Arlene Berg of Colts Neck. "I graduated, actually, to the food processor. You have less blood," joked Berg, referring to the age-old, appropriately morbid, Jewish axiom that latkes aren't truly authentic tasting without a little knuckle scrapings mixed in.

Berg's sweet potato variation of the latke calls for matzo meal, which she said adds just the right thickness. This year, she will be making pancakes for 18 friends and family members.

"We do a reading and say prayers, and then we open gifts," said Berg of the yearly festivities. She and her husband belong to Monmouth Reform Temple, which invites congregants to each bring their own menorah (a seven-branched candelabrum) for a communal lighting of the candles on each of the eight nights of Hanukkah.

That latter-day synagogue custom epitomizes the way the holiday is celebrated in Central Jersey and beyond, with a mix of old and new traditions. So, too, latkes have their classic, standard way of being prepared, with modern versions cropping up to inspire cooks and their guests.

Have you heard of crispy shallot latkes with sugar dusting? Or garlic-rosemary potato pancakes?

I hadn't either, until I spoke with Jayne Cohen, author of the forthcoming "Jewish Holiday Cooking: A Food Lover's Treasury of



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Hanukkah presents are wrapped at the Geldzahler home.

Classics and Improvisations," due out in February 2008.

"With Jewish food tradition, just like with food traditions from any other culture, in order to keep the excitement and passion going, you have to keep reinventing the rituals," Cohen said.

Her latest latke variant comes from the streets of Paris. Cohen stumbled upon a small stand in an organic market that featured fried treats. Its proprietor's specialty was potato pancakes.

"It's not Jewish at all, but they taste so Jewish," Cohen said, laughing. She described the Parisian version she found as half onion and half potato. After speaking with the stand's owner, Cohen learned that instead of using flour or matzo meal as do Jewish traditionalists, he uses grated cheese.

Cohen maintains that to get the correct latke texture, you need to somehow find a way to simulate the hand-grating process, without using the grater, which she considers "cruel and unusual." To that end, Cohen uses a shredding disk in the food processor, and then also purees some of her resulting onion and potato mixture for a "combination of crisp shreds on

the outside and a little bit of creamy layer on the inside."

Cohen is also fond of cheese latkes and uses farmer cheese in her recipe.

Jesse Reitner, co-owner of Lox, Stock & Deli in Milltown, was skeptical about that idea.

"Farmer cheese? I've never heard of using farmer cheese in potato pancakes."

Reitner hasn't messed with his decades-old recipe of onions, potatoes, eggs and very little flour. "I grew up in the business," he said.

"Before we had grills, we would put them in roasting pans with oil in them. I'd sit and form them and cook them with my mother."

The purists and contemporary folks may differ on what constitutes the ideal recipe. Yet, no matter what the exact configuration or consistency of the latke, one thing is certain: once the grease splattering on the stove subsides and the plate appears piled high, there are always eager takers.

"Latkes are one of those things — and you can't say this about gefilte fish or chopped liver because you do have to be Jewish to love those things — latkes are universal," Cohen said. "I've never met someone who couldn't develop an instant love for them."

Garlic-Rosemary Potato Latkes

Ingredients

About 1 1/2 lbs. Yukon gold or 3 large russet (baking) potatoes, peeled
2 tsp chopped fresh garlic
1 tsp fresh rosemary leaves
1 large egg, beaten
1 tsp matzo meal or unbleached all-purpose flour
About 3/4 tsp salt
About 1/4 tsp freshly ground black pepper
1/2 tsp baking powder
Olive oil, for frying
Coarse salt (optional)

Shred potatoes, using shredding disk in food processor, and transfer to colander or strainer. Press out as much moisture as possible.

Replace shredding disk with steel blade, and return about one third of shredded potatoes to processor. Add garlic and rosemary and process, using pulse motion, until roughly pureed. Transfer to large bowl; add remaining potatoes, egg, matzo meal, salt and pepper to taste, and baking powder. Mix until thoroughly combined. Let stand 10 minutes to mingle flavors.

In large, heavy skillet, heat about 1/4 inch oil over high heat until hot but not smoking. Drop 1/4 cup latke batter into pan and flatten with spatula. Repeat with more batter, cooking no more than 4 or 5 latkes at a time; crowding pan will give you soggy latkes.

Regulate heat carefully, reducing to medium as latkes fry until golden and crisp on bottom, about 4 minutes. Use two spatulas (or spatula and large spoon) to turn atkes carefully. Fry until crisp and golden on other side.

It's best to flip latkes only once, so they don't absorb too much oil. Before turning, lift latkes slightly with spatula to make sure underside is crisp and brown.

As latkes are done, transfer to paper towels or untreated brown paper bags to drain.

Make latkes in same manner until batter is used. If necessary, add more oil to pan, but always allow oil to get hot before frying new batch.

Serve straightaway, sprinkled with coarse salt, if you'd like. Or if necessary, keep warm in 200 degree F oven (arrange in single layer on rack placed over baking sheet) and serve when they are all ready to be brought to table.

Yield: About 4 servings

(Read more about this recipe in Jayne Cohen's Jewish Holiday Cooking: A Food Lover's Treasury of Classics and Improvisations)