

The Elusive Kreplach

By Linda Parker Horowitz

I hate to cook, but I do so to prevent my family from being supersized from nightly fast-food. The cuisine in our home is generally eatable – no one has died (not yet), though I am subject to a nightly critique. However, just the other night, my husband actually barbecued the steaks and, like me, tried to multi-task resulting in the meat served over-done and dry. After oh, about 10 seconds of chewing, the complaints began, directed at me. “Speak to your father. I had nothing to do with it,” I declared. Still not convinced, my sons continued. “Nope. I didn’t touch that steak. Don’t talk to me about it.” As they left the dinner table heading for the kitchen searching for snacks, I turned to my husband and noted in a somewhat condescending tone, “See? See how it feels? Not so good, eh?” His silence spoke volumes. Worse, I came to the realization immediately, that I’d continue to be the chef for years to come.

I detest my fate. I feel like a Russian propagandist poster. “Women of the world, unite! End the tyranny! Turn in the towel!” I have, in fact, gone on strike. Didn’t help. My pay did not increase and I was back at the stove the next week.

Once each year, however, I do cook for several days and serve the culinary challenges I have mastered – brisket, stuffed cabbage, and chopped liver (with schmaltz I rendered myself since store bought is tasteless) at the annual Horowitz Hanukkah Holiday Happening that I host here at the casa. Every year it is a huge success, and I am thoroughly exhausted by the emotional intensity of spending that much time in a place I dread -- the kitchen.

However, there is still one culinary challenge left to master – kreplach – not just any kreplach but the elusive kreplach from my childhood. Grammy (whose name was Josephine and never referred to as such) served her kreplach browned (fried, in schmaltz no doubt) which I picked up with my hands right off of the paper towels, unable to wait to sit at the table. I recall now with total sense memory the moist, thick, chewy dough and tasty, flavorful meat filling.

I loathe cooking. I would rather be doing anything else, even laundry, than be in the kitchen. BUT, I do love a challenge. And my grandmother’s kreplach (NOT EVER EATEN IN SOUP) was my personal culinary challenge. Don’t need to run a marathon or ski...kreplach has been my quest (hear strains of “Man of La Mancha” now ... this is my quest, to follow that star ... no matter how hopeful, no matter how far...)

While living in New York City, I went to the famous Second Avenue Deli, and I noted an oddity on the menu, kreplach soup. Huh? I was perplexed to say the least. Soup? Like a matzoh ball? No, no, no! Out of intense curiosity, I had to order it. The kreplach was weird, slimey and rubbery. Never again.

Grammy had been gone many years, and I yearned to find that elusive kreplach, the one that was so much fun to pick-up and eat with my fingers and tasted heavenly. I called my Aunt Eck, the oldest child. The brilliant one who also loved cooking and had replicated Grammy’s beloved recipes for matzo ball soup and charoset. Despite her graduate degree from Columbia and

culinary success, she claimed total ignorance of kreplach. By this time, Aunt Eck was in her 80's; she'd mastered all of her personal goals, but Grammy's kreplach was sadly not on her list of accomplishments, and she was not accepting the challenge now. It was up to me. Oy vey.

For my first attempt at conquering keplach, I went digging through the multiple Jewish cookbook volumes given to me by my mother with dreams of her youngest daughter becoming a "ballah bustah," unlike her. She hated to cook too, so she had our housekeeper do it and left all of holidays to Aunt Eck. I chose the recipe by the acclaimed Joan Nathan, who interestingly comes from Providence, Rhode Island, where my in-laws reside. I followed the insane (at least to me) recipe, simmering a pot of cubed beef and vegetables for hours. Using the blessed Cuisinart to grind the beef (my poor Grammy ground it by hand). I then made the dough and tried valiantly to work the dough correctly, wrapping it around the cooked beef which subsequently dissolved into a mass of dough and meat. Determined, I boiled them, then fried them in schmaltz. The results were meat-filled projectiles. Because they took five or 6 hours to create, I served them anyway and hoped no one complained or worse, died.

This went on yearly at Hanukkah, and every time, though I varied the recipes using ones I pulled from the Internet, the results were the same. Projectiles. Yes. I am crazy, expecting a different outcome.

Year five I made a discovery. At a family event, I proclaimed this Kreplach Culinary Challenge to the table of my relatives, including my Aunt Eck. To my utter surprise, Aunt Eck's daughter, Nanci, chimed-in cheerfully (not recognizing my anguish), "Oh Grammy stopped grinding the meat for her kreplach. She bought hamburger and fried it." Shocked, I shot back (probably with too much hostility for the occasion), "HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT??" Realizing my aggressive attack, I prayed she hadn't noted my tone. Prayers answered, Nanci responded nonchalantly, "I used to watch her cook kreplach when I slept over." Aunt Eck added, "I think she browned them in the oven." Ah HA! I considered these tidbits to be culinary clues and tried them Year Six. Improved, but not great or in my view, eatable. Certainly easier. Let me qualify that. In terms of kreplach, easier but hardly easy and definitely not quick.

I kept searching for the solution on my culinary quest. More recipes from the Internet. Digging online for advice. Nothing. Next year, my seventh attempt, the meat was still tasteless, the dough not thick, and the kreplach were too small.

Unrelenting, I made an eighth attempt. Before pulling out one more recipe, I contemplated this entire process, beginning in year-one, reviewing my yearly attempts, trying to discover the secret. I'd mastered schmaltz, though the local butcher shop thought I was a lunatic to request 5 pounds of chicken skin. "Chopped liver," I explained and though VERY white bread, the guy behind the counter seemed to comprehend it was a weird Jewish dish and vaguely uttered an unconvincing, "Oh yea. Sure. Here you go," handing me the tightly wrapped white package.

In a quandary...I knew I had to boil the kreplach or the dough would not cook. I tried that around year 6 with results so disastrous, I didn't serve them. Then it struck me. Chicken soup! They belong in chicken soup. Maybe if I boil them in the soup, they will taste good AND the dough will be cooked!

I have mastered Grammy's kreplach. Oy gevault. Heaven. Thick, chewy dough, flavorful large meat in the middle, slightly crispy on the outside. Boil 10 minutes in doctored Swanson's or Kroger's or no-name chicken broth since I DO NOT MAKE CHICKEN SOUP! Then quickly brown them in the home-rendered schmaltz. The final and critical step to success in the kreplach arena of the non-soup variety was how to get the meat to stick together and not ooze into the dough making something unrecognizable. The culinary epiphany occurred by total happenstance because I'd left the dough mess on my only cooking/baking surface and it was covered in flour. A bit of flour with the meat and it forms into a nice ball, easily wrapped in the dough. This permits kreplach to be big, like the ones I remember, with lots of meat.

10 annual attempts to mastery. It would have been so, so much easier if Aunt Eck, the brilliant eldest of my mother's generation, had replicated this one after Grammy died, but alas, it was not to be. However, we got the matzah ball soup and charoset from her. Grammy's kreplach will be my legacy.

WARNING: do not attempt kreplach without access to a heavy duty Kitchen Aid mixer or you'll be kneading until your arms collapse. 3 minutes and GAI GAZUNT! DOUGH!

Modern technology. Now that, I DO love.