

FOOD

New Year, New Dumpling

By JOAN NATHAN SEPT. 20, 2006

TRADITION has it that there is a dumpling for every Jewish holiday: kreplach, the Jewish tortellini, for the meal before Yom Kippur; dough pockets filled with cottage cheese for Shavuot; and matzo balls for Passover.

But Jewish food has become so diverse, how about a taste of another kind of tradition for Rosh Hashana on Friday night? A new dumpling for the holiday.

I first found gundi, a cardamom-flavored chickpea and chicken dumpling, 15 years ago when I met Azizeh Koshki, who had just emigrated from Iran.

She plopped herself on the floor of her townhouse in Rockville, Md., where she turned on her newly acquired American food processor to grind chicken and onions. Next, she added chickpea flour and cardamom to the mixture, molding the dumplings by hand and simmering them in a soupy chicken stew spiced with turmeric. As I watched her, I wondered whether her ingredients and technique — other than the food processor — went back to the Babylonian captivity or even earlier.

Mrs. Koshki told me, through a translator, that her family ate gundi, with a sip of the spirit arrack, each Friday night after they walked home from synagogue. The gundi were always garnished with spring onions, basil, parsley, cilantro, radish and mint and served with a piece of lavash or other flat bread.

From years of living in Israel, I came to adore kubbeh, soup with dumplings made from semolina and bulgur, filled with meat. They would float in soupy stews made of chicken broth, sometimes flavored with pumpkin, dried limes, tomatoes or okra.

I would eat them in tiny restaurants run by Kurdish or Iraqi Jews and, on the Sabbath, in their homes. Most Israeli supermarkets stock frozen kubbeh — always the sign of a food becoming part of the common culture.

Kibbe, made throughout in the Middle East in places like Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Kurdistan, is bulgur and lamb served raw, baked or fried, stuffed with rice and spices. Kubbeh, the Jewish dumpling for soup, is borrowed from these cultures.

Kubbeh has become a holiday food, with the sauces or soups changing with the season. Pnina Lahav, a professor of law at Boston University and an avid cook, whose mother was considered a kubbeh queen in Tel Aviv, occasionally makes her mother's semolina dumplings in a soupy sauce of beets, plums and celery.

“In the Middle East they say that the thinner the dough of the kubbeh, the better the cook,” she said. “A good kubbeh is the sign of a good wife.” But, she added: “Kubbeh is not for working women. In our world today it is inconceivable that you would make it every Friday night.”

Matzo balls seem like a universal Jewish icon, but that wasn't true until the B. Manischewitz Company produced the first commercial matzo at the turn of the last century and then began promoting its matzo and, later, its matzo meal and matzo ball mix, said Jonathan D. Sarna, author of “American Judaism: A History” (Yale University Press, 2004).

Until then, matzo balls were strictly a Passover dish, and dumplings — called knoedel, also known as kneidlach in Yiddish or kleis in German — made with breadcrumbs, bread or flour, filled their role at others times of the year.

“Manischewitz was in the business of finding ways of making people use their machine-made matzo products all year round,” Dr. Sarna said.

In 1930, Manischewitz's “Tempting Kosher Dishes” cookbook called matzo balls made with prepared matzo meal “feather balls, Alsatian style.”

Rabbi Everett Gendler acknowledged that “feather” was not an image that came to mind in describing his first efforts to make whole wheat matzo balls. Rabbi Gendler, a retired chaplain of Phillips Academy Andover now living in Great Barrington, Mass., said that before whole-wheat matzo meal came on the market,

he would either grind whole-wheat matzos or bake his own with soft winter wheat ground with an old hand peanut grinder.

“The first couple of years I did it, it was advisable to wear steel-tipped work boots in case I dropped one of the balls on my foot,” he said. “After a few years they lightened up. Because I have gotten the feel of it, I don’t squeeze them so tightly. Now I treat them like matzo balls, not like Play-Doh.” A vegetarian, Rabbi Gendler incorporates spirituality and organic gardening into his cooking.

“I start my soup from the garden, which is 42 by 72 feet, because in Jewish mystical tradition, there is a 42- and a 72-letter name of God,” Rabbi Gendler said. “Rosh Hashana celebrates the birthday of the world. A garden well tended is a small example of perpetual reunion.”

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