

The Dishes of the Jews of Italy: A Historical Survey

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Every cuisine tells a story—usually it is the story of a country. Jewish cooking tells the history of a people and its vanished worlds. It is about ancestral memories and holding on to an ancient culture and a very old identity. The Jewish food of Italy is an integral part of the history and culture of the Jews in Italy. Where there is a fresco with a menorah, a tombstone with Hebrew lettering, a *via della Sinagoga*, or a *piazza Giudea*, there is also a dish from that place. And behind every dish there is a story. This largely untold story has generally been ignored by the large number of writers of Jewish cultural history, who usually consider the subject as a relatively minor aspect—only of interest to women—of Jewish life. So what follows is an attempt at explaining how the subject of Italian Jewish food is closely connected with the history of the Jewish communities in Italy.

Most Italian Jews live now in large cities such as Rome, Milan, and Turin. Many of the old historic communities that were once scattered throughout Italy have disappeared or have lost their identity, but the old Jewish recipes remain as a testimony to their existence. Looking at the alphabetical index of recipes in a book titled *La cucina nella tradizione ebraica*, a collection of recipes from members of the Jewish women's ADEI WIZO organization, there are arancini canditi di Padova, baccald e spinaci all'uso fiorentino, biscotti di Ancona, biscotti senza burro (Pavia); brassadel di Purim (Trieste); buricchi di pasta frolla (Ferrara), budino di zucca gialla Veneto; cacciucco alla livornese and cuscuzzi livornese (Leghorn); cefali in umido di Modena. Such recipes are a witness to once famous and thriving communities that have declined or disappeared altogether.

What was it that made a dish Jewish? Adaptations of local produce and recipes to comply with dietary laws meant that oil or goose fat were used instead of butter or pork fat for cooking. For the same reason many dairy and vegetable dishes were developed to provide substantial meatless meals. The need to find substitutes for forbidden foods like pork and seafood resulted in the creation of specialties like goose prosciutto and salami in Ancona, and a whitefish soup in Livorno.

In the days when cooking revolved around the Sabbath and religious holidays, dishes that were chosen to celebrate these occasions acquired embellishments such as coloring with saffron or sprinkling with raisins and pine nuts. The laws of the Sabbath, which prohibit any work, gave rise to complex meals-in-one-pot to be prepared on Friday afternoon and

left to cook overnight for Saturday. An example is the *hamin toscano* or *polpettone difagioli*—a veal loaf cooked with white beans, beef sausages, hard boiled eggs, and tomatoes. Another result of the prohibition is a large repertoire of dishes to be eaten cold on Saturday. Centuries before Americans popularized pasta salads Jews were the only Italians to eat cold pasta.

At Pesach ground almonds, potato flour, matzo meal, and matzos were used to make all kinds of pizzas, cakes, pies, dumplings, pancakes, and fritters. There is no end of little Pesach cakes like amaretti, marzapane, moscardini, mucchietti, scodelline, zuccherini, ciambellette, mustaccioni—to name a few. Certain foods became symbolic dishes to celebrate festivals, like pollo fritto, chicken dipped in batter and fried in oil, at Hanukkah.

Most importantly it was their mobility and the impact of Jewish immigrants from abroad that made Jewish food distinctive. Jews were often expelled from their countries, but, as Italy was a patchwork of independent states, they could escape from one to the other. Since each state was entirely ignorant of the cooking of its neighbors, the foods Jews brought from one state to another remained forever linked with them. Vegetables like aubergines, artichokes, and spinach, for instance, were thought of as Jewish—although it is the Arabs who brought them to Sicily—as it was the Jews who introduced them in the north of Italy.

The earliest and largest settlements of Jews had been in Rome and southern Italy, and especially in Sicily, until their expulsion in the late 15th century. The Jewish communities in Sicily had been at one time the richest in culture and tradition among the Jews of the diaspora. They benefited from their position at the heart of the Mediterranean traffic and from the cultural and economic impact of foreign occupiers, who included Arabs, Normans, Angevins, and Aragonese. Under Muslim rule from 831 to 1061 the Jewish population increased greatly with new immigrants from Muslim lands. The communities traded with the East and became Arabized in their tastes.

In 1492, on the orders of Ferdinand of Spain, Jews were banished from Sicily and Sardinia and, a few years later, from the whole of southern Italy. Around thirty-five thousand Jews left Sicily alone. There has been little or no Jewish population in those parts since, but the foods they took with them when they fled to the central and northern cities are still associated with them. Many of the dishes labelled “alla giudia” or “all’ebraica,” such as pasta with anchovies and garlic, concia di zucchini, fried courgettes marinated in vinegar, caponata, a sweet and sour aubergine dish, are the dishes of Sicily, Puglia, Basilicata, and Naples. Some, like the ricotta pancake cassola, are an archaic version of modern cheese cakes. (Among their activities in Sicily Jews made ricotta cheese. They also grew oranges.)

The mass migration of Jews from the south to cities of central and northern Italy coincided with the arrival there of refugees from German lands at the same time as refugees from Spain and Portugal. After the institution of the ghettos (decreed by Pope

Paul IV in 1559) the Jews were segregated in special quarters, which were walled in, and severe restrictions were imposed on them. In almost all the major cities the Jews were confined in ghettos for up to three hundred years.

It is in the ghettos that the various Jewish styles of cooking developed. They were different in every ghetto and reflected the local regional styles as well as those of the foreign refugees who joined the communities. The economic situation also had a bearing on food. Some communities were very poor while others were close to the courts and the nobility.

The ghetto of Rome was the most desperately cramped one and its inhabitants, who were the poorest in Italy, were forbidden to own property and were excluded from most professions except money-lending, dealing in old clothes and bric-a-brac, and selling food in the street. Many of them became friggitori— vendors of deep-frying morsels, mainly of fish and vegetables—for which they became famous.

Several of the old dishes, like the chickpea dish ceci coipennerelli and the aliciotti con l'indivia (anchovies with chicory), reflect the poverty of the community (anchovies being the cheapest fish). Many other dishes also reflect

the diversity of the Roman community, which included refugees from Sicily and the south.

In the Venice ghetto, on the other hand, Jewish cooking was exotic and cosmopolitan. The first Jews allowed in the city were loan bankers from Germany. In the 15th and 16th centuries waves of Jews came from Provence and from around the Veneto area, as well as Posen. They separated the communities into three ghettos linked to each other. Despite the squalid conditions, the ever-decreasing space, the vulnerable city authorities dealt with the newcomers by position of its dwellers, and the restrictions imposed on their professional activities, the ghetto knew an extraordinary intensity of artistic and intellectual life and commercial prosperity. It became an intellectual capital and center for travelling Jews. The coming together of Jews of different backgrounds was also reflected in their style of cooking. The Levantini brought risotto pilaf and risotto colle uvette (rice with raisins eaten cold, as in Istanbul). The Ponentini introduced salt cod dishes, frittate (vegetable omelettes) and almond sweets, orange cakes and flans, and chocolate cakes. The Levantini and Ponentini, who controlled the spice trade and the commerce in fruit and nuts, introduced a range of spices and flavorings. The Arab combination of pine nuts and raisins came with the Sicilians and the Levantini.

The Tedeschi introduced goose and duck, beef sausages and goose salami, pesce in gelatina (jellied fish) and polpettine di pesce (gefilte fish), penini de vedelo in gelatina (calf's foot jelly) and kneidlach, which became cugoli. An example of this mixture of cultures is pastizzo dipolenta with raisins and pine nuts. Another is the boricche— small pies half way between Portuguese empanadas and Turkish boreks but with fillings unique

to Italy, such as fish with hard-boiled egg, anchovies, and capers, with fried aubergines and courgettes or pumpkin with crushed amaretti and chopped crystallized citrus peel.

In his book *La cucina veneziana* Giuseppe Maffioli writes that Jewish cooking had a great impact on the local cuisine and that, despite their forbidden foods, the Jews had a more varied diet than the Christians. Among the Jewish dishes adopted by Venice, he cites many vegetables ‘alla giudia,’ salt cod dishes, almond pastries, and puff pastry. There is the famous pesce in saor—fried fish marinated in vinegar with raisins, pine nuts, and aubergines, which the Venetians at first feared would drive them mad, and the tradition of making risotti with every possible type of vegetable. The famous Milanese riso giallo is the Sabbath riso col zafran.

Persecutions in Germany and the Rhineland sent waves of refugees across the Alps from as early as the 11th century. They represent the origin of the majority of communities of northern Italy and they brought with them stuffed goose, potato cakes, cabbage, apple fritters, and other specialities from those parts.

In Piedmont, in the old Kingdom of Savoy, a large part of the communities there can be traced back to an influx of Jews from Provence and the Comtat Venaissin, which began in the 15th century. One of the French-style dishes is apolpettone di tacchino—a galantine of turkey or chicken with minced veal and pistachios. Other Provençal dishes that have been adapted to the Jewish tradition are the patate epomodori of Ferrara, which is like ratatouille with baked layers of potatoes and tomatoes, and the curious Tuscan sweet spinach tart, torta di mandorle e spinaci, which is only to be found in the South of France.

Since the 14th and 15th centuries, loan banking had developed all over Italy, and as this activity was forbidden to Christians, the Jews were called upon to provide this service. They were invited into many cities where they financed economic expansion as well as the local nobility, who became their protectors. Thousands of Jews came to live in cities such as Ferrara and Modena, Mantua, Verona and Padua, Florence, Pisa, Lucca and Siena, where they prospered, and where Jewish life flourished and Jewish cooking reached a high level of sophistication. Many exquisite and refined dishes like the buriccheferraresi (little pies), the arancini canditi patiorani and the tortelli di zucca (pasta filled with pumpkin) of Mantova, are associated with these cities.

The 16th and 17th centuries were the age of great Jewish merchants. Many were Sephardim and conversos. Their wide-ranging commercial activities were centered in northern and central cities such as Ancona, Ferrara, Livorno, and Venice. They traded with their relatives and co-religionists around the Mediterranean, including their new Christian connections in Spain and Portugal and those in South America. Through these contacts they introduced New World food products such as tomatoes, pumpkin, maize, and haricot beans. (That is why red mullet cooked with tomatoes in Livorno is called triglie alla mosaica, and a tomato sauce in Venice is called alia giudia.) Pumpkin too—despised for a long time by the general population—was considered Jewish. Many

pumpkin dishes are still Jewish favorites.

Livorno is particularly important in Jewish gastronomy. In 1593 the Grand Duke Ferdinando del Medici turned the city into a free port and invited in merchants of all nations and Jews in particular. In a statute, known as the Livornina, he granted them tax exemptions, freedom of commerce, freedom of religious practice, including the opportunity to revert to Judaism if they wished, and permission to build synagogues, as well as personal protection. The great majority of Jews who came to the city were Portuguese conversos and it is they who shaped the character of the community as well as the style of cooking. They were rich and cultured and had had a century of life as Christians, mingling and marrying into the Iberian upper classes. Portuguese delicacies like uovafilate orfili d'oro (threads of egg yolk cooked in syrup), Monte Sinai, bocca di ciama, and scodellini are among their legacies. Their chocolate cakes are a result of their trade with the converso community of Amsterdam. That community had started the first chocolate industry with cocoa sent to them by New Christians in South America.

The dishes of Livorno had an impact beyond the borders of Italy, because the Livornese Jews sent relatives to various North African and Levantine cities such as Tunis, Tripoli (in Libya), Izmir, Aleppo, and Alexandria to develop interfamily commerce. And the cooking habits of these cities were influenced by these new settlers.

In the 16th century a group of Livornese Jews who went to Tunis to finance ransoms and arrange the release of converso hostages captured by pirates were invited to stay on by the local Beys as treasury officials, diplomats, and consuls. The flow of Livornese immigrants to Tunis continued until the 19th century, and they formed their own community, separate from the native Berber Jews. It was a two-way traffic and their cooking—a mixture of Tunisian, Italian and Portuguese—found its way back to Livorno. The many North African dishes including cuscuss, and an extraordinary and unusual vegetable and meatball stew called msoky, date-filled pastries and dates stuffed with marzipan, are among the foods that reflect this continuing connection with North Africa.

Another city that has an important Jewish community is Trieste. It was an important port city and its community was indeed cosmopolitan. Since the 11th century, German, Spanish, French, and Levantine Jews had settled there, and when Iberian Jews came in large numbers their synagogue rites were adopted. In the 19th century Jews came from Corfu fleeing the Greeks and, when Austria annexed the city, many came to the city from all over the Hapsburg empire. The Jews of Trieste were professionals and intellectuals. They became affluent and some became part of the Hapsburg nobility and acquired titles. Their cooking was a varied mix with dishes such as gulyas and paracincche (stuffed pancakes) of Hungarian origin, the yeast cake potizza of Austrian descent, and the Yugoslav bean soup called jota, all of which they made in their own particular way.

Unfortunately, in spite of the rich tradition of Italian Jewish cuisine going back many centuries, hardly anything is known abroad or even in Italy today of the many different

types of foods and ways of preparing them — apart from the artichokes deep-fried whole with the leaves opened out like a sunflower. In fact, with very few exceptions, you cannot find this food in any restaurant. But there is now a revival of interest in Jewish dishes in Italy, as in many other countries, and it is hoped that this precious link with the past will not be allowed to disappear.

Claudia Roden was born and raised in Cairo. In 1989 she received the two most prestigious food prizes of Italy—the Premio Orio Vergani and the Premio Maria Luigia, Duchessa di Parma—for her London Sunday Times Magazine series “The Taste of Italy.”

[Notes from Zamir](#), Spring 2003