

# Food and Cultural Change

By Hasia Diner

Questions about revolutionary changes in the ways communities transmit culture pose particular challenges for those concerned about the Jewish future, given that Jews have historically understood themselves as a people shaped by tradition and continuity. Even when Jews have chosen to renegotiate tradition, whether in the realm of practice, identity, or texts, they took cognizance of the impact of the past. In essence, even to change tradition, Jewish history shows, requires knowledge of the tradition.

Given the gravity of the issues at hand, it may be particularly problematic for an historian to try to imagine a future, be it of communal organization or of cultural transmission more generally. Indeed, an historian – trained to look at the past and to avoid speculation about the future -- may be the very worst person to attempt such a thing. What is especially troubling to the historian is that such a task usually involves assessments of the past (and the present). And looking closely at the fullest range of historical data available reveals that projecting forward based upon those assessments seems too simplistic and unilinear.

Nevertheless, I will try to bring my historian's skepticism productively to bear on thinking about the course which Jewish culture might take in decades to come. I will suggest some non-linear ways in which the past has intruded upon the present. Identities, practices, and communal forms have, after all, always been invented, reinvented, recycled and reformed when and where no one (including, or perhaps especially, the learned) might have speculated they would.

A subject I have written about, namely food and migration, offers us a wonderful case in point. Human beings are omnivorous and demonstrate at one and the same time both conservatism and inventiveness in matters of food. They can, at the same meal, satisfy yearnings for familiar tastes, with their deep mnemonic powers of calling up childhood and the past (foods understood to be traditional and free of outside influence) and, at the same time, experiment with novel ingredients and forms of presentation and consumption.

Wherever Jews have lived they have borrowed from, and have picked and chosen from the foodstuffs around them. Whatever the local ingredients and styles, Jews have adopted them. Jews in Morocco developed Moroccan styles, while those who settled in Russia and other parts of eastern Europe made food that differed little in format (and even in name) from the foods of the gentiles among whom they lived. Blintzes, stuffed cabbage, and *kasha* (buckwheat groats), for example, show up in Russian cookbooks and in the food memories of Christians of the same region. *Kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws, clearly limited

the degree to which Jews could assimilate the foods around them, but their inventiveness in “kosherizing” the tastes and smells of many diasporic settings offer us a way of seeing Jews as having always been affected by their host settings – never were they fully isolated.

What migration has done vis-a-vis Jewish food is not so much change it -- although it did do that—but it has made women and men conscious of what they ate. What people consumed regularly and automatically in the pre-migration setting, they redefined in the new setting as that which they – and they alone — ate because of who they were. Migration, like other forms of radical change, forces people to make new choices, although in this case we should keep in mind that even the places immigrants left underwent changes. That is, East European Jewish immigrants encountered novelties and culinary challenges, particularly in terms of *kashrut*, in America. They, and subsequent scholars, identified those changes with the new setting. But, in fact, the places these Jews were leaving – Poland, Russia, Hungary, Romania — were also experiencing changes. The new, the tempting, the forbidden foods immigrants were encountering for the first time in America were becoming available in Europe as well. Nevertheless, in the minds of the immigrants, the communities they left were remembered as the places where they ate “traditional” or “Jewish” food. America offered them a place of choice.

In the wake of migration, women and men not only encountered new foods. They also came to define familiar ones differently. What had once, for example, been considered holiday food now came to be everyday food. What had once been food only for the well off now emerged as the ordinary fare of the masses. What had once been food for home came to be food for the street. Some kinds of public events – communal banquets, for example—demanded certain kinds of foods, like *gefilte fish*, while other kinds of public events made it possible to innovate. The best example of this is the immigrant Jewish encounter with Chinese food which can be dated to the late nineteenth century.

None of these transitions would have been predictable to migrants or cultural commentators beforehand. Each culinary negotiation involved the specifics of time, place, and the desire of the immigrants to be both “Jewish” and American (or Irish or Italian and American) at the same time.

What does all this portend for the future of food and for culture more generally? Technology can and will, I believe, accentuate both parts of the process of cultural change. Technological innovations will make the retention of something imagined to be traditional more likely to persist. A newspaper story of a grandmother in the Dominican Republic preparing a favorite dish, freezing it, and then giving it to a relative flying off to New York, who then presented it to the cook’s daughter who served it at a family celebration, provides a case in point. Technology made it possible for continuity to be maintained.

On the other hand, the technologies of the new century and the proximities of cultures will make new formats and new combinations possible. Exotic ingredients brought from distant points can be added to dishes thought to have a fixed recipe. The appearance on the market of, for example, jalapeno pepper *rugelach* – an East European Jewish cookie — defies long held ideas about what should go into the treat, usually baked with cinnamon and raisins. But indeed jalapeno peppers are no less appropriate to *rugelach* than the more conventional items.

Those who participate in these cultural shifts will probably not be conscious that a Janus-faced process is going on. To them it will likely seem, as it so often has, automatic, natural, and given.

The historian's contribution to this kind of speculation on the future might be, in the end, to offer the proposition that forms of social organization and culture change all the time. Tradition is always under siege. People have continuously negotiated between the old and the new — among all the available possibilities. What we can count on is that cultural changes – like those that appeared on the dinner tables of Jewish immigrants to America — will never be total. They will never bear out the dire predictions that many cultural analysts thrive on.