whole lotta' love

A few simple ingredients and many years of history add up to the delectible treat we know as the LATKE

By Miriam Hospodar

Photo by Michael Baum

Among the many tantalizing treats of December, the very thought of crispy-edged, golden latkes (the Yiddish name for potato pancakes), dances rings—or is that double helixes?—around my Russian Jewish DNA as it makes my mouth water. Latkes are central to the *Ashkenazic*, or Eastern European, Jewish culinary tradition surrounding Hanukkah. The holiday commemorates the tale of Judah the Maccabee and his followers, who recaptured the temple in the village of Modi'in from Syrian King Antiochus IV. The temple, which had been desecrated, was cleansed for re-dedication. (*Hanukkah* means "dedication" in Hebrew.) There was only enough oil to light the sacred *menorah* (oil lamp) for one day, yet it miraculously burned for eight. Less well-known is that Hanukkah also honors the story of the Jewish widow Judith, who plied Holofernes, general of the enemy Assyrian army, with cheese and wine until he collapsed into a drunken stupor, and then beheaded him. Hanukkah dishes cooked in oil are symbolic of the miracle of the oil lamp, hence fried latkes. (Italian Jews serve fried chicken and Israelis savor jelly doughnuts as oil-dipped goodies.) Pancakes also symbolize the food hurriedly prepared for the Maccabees before they charged into battle. Cheese and dairy dishes are served in memory of Judith, hence the sour cream that accompanies latkes.

And yet, as Rob Eshman wrote in his witty article *Latkes Without End, Amen*: "Even a dish like latkes is not an immutable part of Jewish culture. As with so many traditional Jewish foods, its origins can be found in a blend of cultures. Bagels, challah, falafel, hummus, lox—we can say we popularized them, but we cannot with a straight face say we invented them."

According to cookbook writer Joan Nathan, buckwheat pancakes preceded latkes in Eastern Europe. Potatoes, which are Peruvian in origin, were introduced

to Europe in the sixteenth century to an underwhelming reception. It's hard to say when they were first tasted by German and Eastern European Jews, but it was probably not for another two hundred years or so. Potato pancakes became common Germanic and Baltic fare, accompanying the Christmas goose at Ukrainian tables, as well as fitting the bill for an oil-cooked Hanukkah dish. With all due respect to Judith, sour cream cuts a wide swath across Central and Eastern Europe and Russia, and does not resemble anything she served to Holofernes for his last meal. It adapted nicely to the Ashkenazic Hanukkah tradition, and tastes terrific on latkes to boot. Therefore, in essence, latkes are a Peruvian vegetable incorporated into a delicious European dish and adopted as symbolic fare by a geographical branch of an internationally practiced religion.

Praise the Lord and pass the sour cream!

Potato Latkes

(Makes 12–16)

Baking potatoes make the crispiest latkes.

1 lb. Russet (baking) potatoes
1/2 cup finely chopped onion
1 large egg, lightly beaten
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 to 3/4 cup vegetable oil
Accompaniments: sour cream and apple sauce

Preheat oven to 250°. Peel potatoes and grate coarsely. Place in a bowl of cold water for 1 to 2 minutes. Drain. Spread potatoes and onion on a kitchen towel and roll up jelly-roll style. Twist towel tightly to wring out as much moisture as possible. Transfer potato mixture to a bowl and stir in the egg and salt.

Heat 1/4 cup oil in a 12-inch nonstick skillet over a moderately high heat until hot, but not smoking. Spoon 2 tablespoons potato mixture per latke into skillet, spreading into 3-inch rounds. Reduce heat to moderate and cook until undersides are browned, about 5 minutes. Turn latkes over and cook until undersides are browned, about 5 minutes more. Drain on paper towels and sprinkle with salt. Add more oil to skillet as needed.

Keep latkes warm on a wire rack set in a baking pan in the oven. Serve with sour cream and apple sauce.

Apple Latkes

(4 servings)

4 apples
2 to 3 Tb. sugar

(continued)

(continued)

3 Tb. brandy, dark rum or fruit liqueur
2 eggs, separated
Oil, preferably light
Pinch salt
1 cup flour
7/8 cup water
Superfine or powdered sugar

Core and peel apples, then quarter each. Put sugar and brandy in shallow dish and add apple slices, turning to coat well. Let sit 2 hours, turning occasionally so apples absorb brandy evenly.

Beat egg yolks with 2 tablespoons oil and salt. Stir in flour and mix well. Gradually yet vigorously beat in water, squashing lumps. Let sit 1 hour. Beat egg whites until stiff and fold into batter after it has set 1 hour.

Heat at least 3/4- inch oil over medium heat in large skillet. Dip apple slices in batter, about 5 at a time, making sure they are well covered with batter. Lift each out carefully with slotted spatula and lower into hot oil. (Oil must be sizzling, but not too hot, or fritters will brown before apple is soft inside.) Cook in batches until medium brown on both sides, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Lift out with slotted spatula and drain on paper towels before serving. Pass superfine sugar for sprinkling. (From *The Book of Jewish Food* by Claudia Roden, Knopf.)

Buckwheat Latkes

(Serves 6)

1 pkg. dry yeast
2 cups warm water, separated
1 Tb. sugar
2 cups milk, scalded
1/2 cup flour
1 tsp. salt
3 1/4 c. buckwheat flour
2 Tb. honey
1/4 c. melted shortening
1/4 tsp. baking soda
1 egg

Soften yeast in 1/4 cup warm water. Add sugar to milk as well as remaining water. Cool to lukewarm before adding softened yeast. Mix dry ingredients in a large bowl. Make a well in the centre, and pour in liquid mixture.

Stir until smooth. Cover and let stand in a warm place to rise for 4 hours. Beat down and add honey, melted shortening, baking soda and eggs. Beat thoroughly until well mixed. Brown on both sides on greased griddle or frying pan.

Pour honey on pancakes when serving.