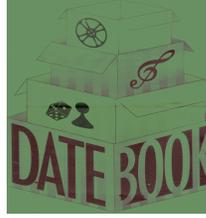


San Francisco Chronicle

DINING

TODAY'S SPECIAL: LATKES

Bonnie Wach



Like many Euromutts whose parents came here seeking a new way of live, I was raised without formal religion. When asked, I would alternately offer up “agnewish” or “jewnostic” as a way of explaining the mishmash that was my Polish/Dutch/German/Hungarian/Russian/Belgian heritage. It was a background that fell mostly on the Jewish side of the fence except, of course, when it came to Christmas.

Celebrating Christmas was a tradition passed down from the Dutch/German side of my mother’s family, but like our muddled ancestry, our holiday customs followed a very loosely interpreted protocol: Presents were opened Christmas Eve with no regard for Santa Clause or chimney; we hosted Christmas lunch, not dinner, at which the culinary highlight was a platter of homemade piroshki; and at some point during the Christmas week – whether or not it coincided with Hanukkah – we ate latkes for dinner.

Compounding the obvious irony of latkes for Christmas was the fact that my parents had lived in Israel for nearly 20 years, but this had no bearing whatsoever on our annual potato-patty ritual. *Kartoffelpuffer* (potato pancakes) were the legacy of my non-Jewish great-grandmother, Augusta, who hailed from Lüneburg, in northern Germany.

My mother – willing and able to assimilate in many ways after arriving in this country – absolutely refused to compromise on any American adaptation of Augusta’s recipe. Russet potatoes had to be shredded – not food processed, cooked, chopped or sliced. The potatoes were mixed with eggs, grated onion, a minimal sprinkling of flour and salt, then formed into thin patties and fried in a generous amount of oil. They were always served with sour cream and applesauce.

Given my background, you can imagine how picky I’ve become about latkes. My chief complaints are usually texture and temperature – nothing can kill abuzz like thick, soggy, lukewarm pancakes. But, happily, there are a few places in town that get it right. Delancey Street, whose menu reads like potluck night at the Immigrants Ball, dishes up latkes all year, and during Hanukkah, they’re offered as an all-you-can-eat special.

The recipe, according to Delancey Street founder Mimi Silbert, is the result of trial, error and the collective input of her mother, grandmother and Jewish cooking expert Joyce Goldstein.

Two or three smallish pancakes arrive on a plate flanked by a dollop of sour cream and a ladle of applesauce. Crispy and golden on the outside, they give way to a moist and not overly starchy potato-onion hash within. (If we’re going to be finicky, they could have been fried just a tad longer to give them more crunch, and I personally prefer julienne-like shreds to thick grates of potato, but that’s quibbling.) “The recipe originates with my granny and my mom – we all lived in the same house. But I only had a home recipe, so Joyce came and helped me change the process so we could make them for the restaurant,” Silbert says. “I love them so much – to this day, I have a platter every day.”

Two German restaurants also regularly offer potato pancakes on their menus, with mixed results. Walzwerk begins with cooked potatoes, which gives the latkes a mushy, chalky texture. But the two cookie-cutter circles still have a nice crunch when you bite into them. And the addition of chives in the sour cream is a bonus.

Suppenküche in Hayes Valley offers latkes under the name *Reibekuchen*. They’re thinly shredded and fried to a dark golden brown. The crispy texture, wonderful salty onion flavor and large portions compensate for a patty that’s shaped more like a bird’s nest than a pancake and for runny applesauce that’s heavy on the cinnamon.

Finally, there's Firefly in Noe Valley, where those in the know make early reservations during the few weeks that chef-owner Brad Levy puts latkes on the menu (available through Jan. 1).

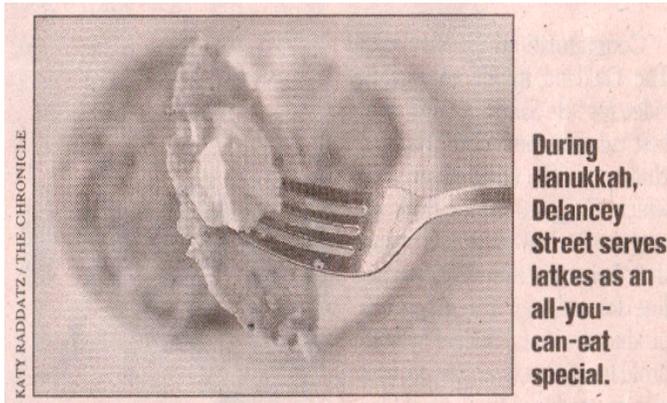
Hand-grated and made with a small amount of matzo meal instead of flour, these babies hit all the right notes for texture, saltiness and temperature – thin and crisp, with a soft, chewy interior. Levy gets extra points for offering sour cream with chives and homemade applesauce.

“My biggest rule about latkes is that you have to serve them right away, so they stay hot and crispy,” Levy says. “And there shouldn't be any cakey-ness to them.”

Levy also frowns on those who add nouveau elements like shredded carrots. Holidays, he says, are a time for honoring the past.

Merry Chrisnukkah. **W**

of “San Francisco as You Like It.”



(415) 551-7181. \$6.

Bonnie Wach is the author

SAN FRANCISCO LATKES

DELANCEY STREET: 600 The Embarcadero, (415) 512-5179
\$3.95

FIREFLY: 4288 24th St., (415) 821-7652. \$7.50

SUPPENKUCHE: 525 Laguna St., (415) 252-9289. \$9.

WALZWERK: 381 S. Van Ness Ave.,
