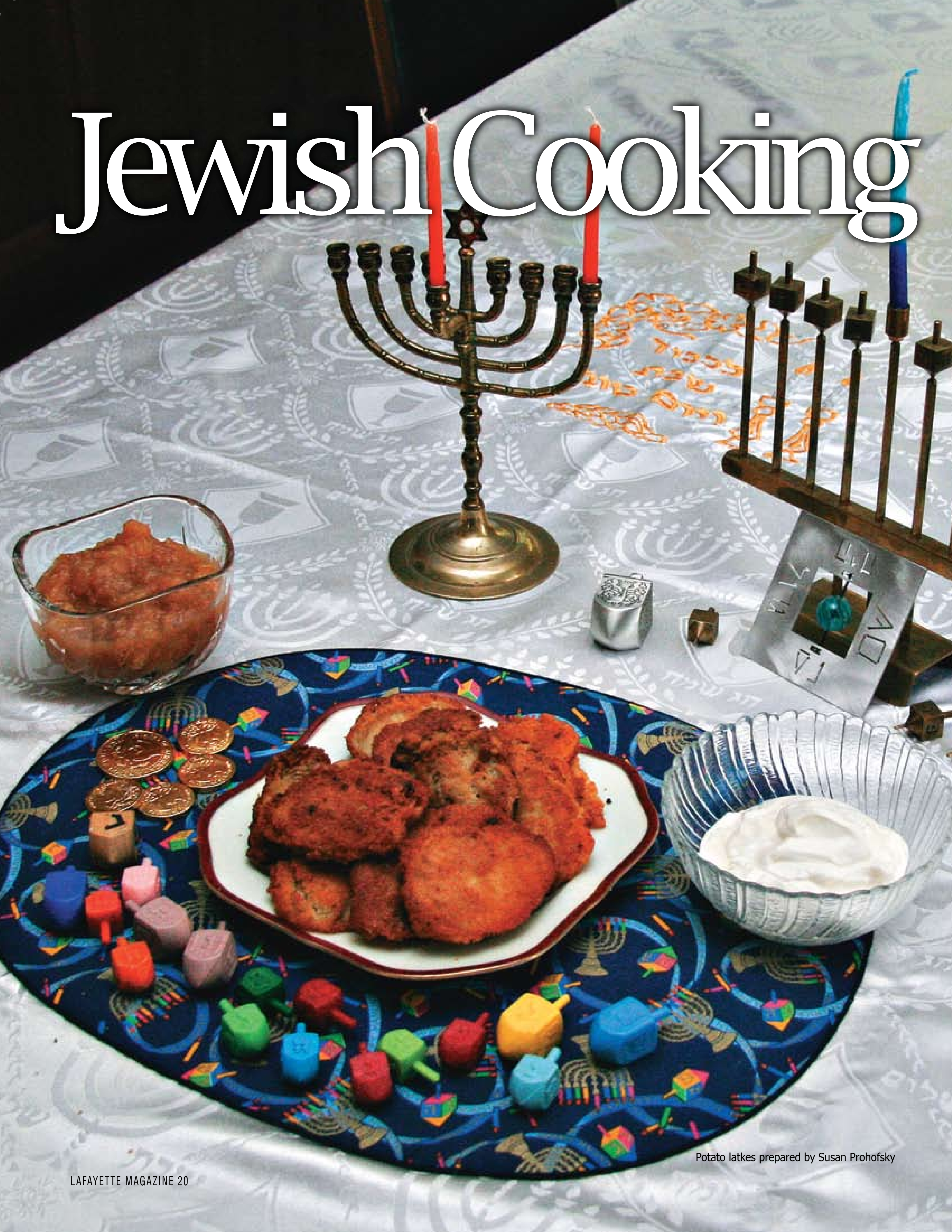

Jewish Cooking

Potato latkes prepared by Susan Prohofsky

STORY BY JENNIFER STREISAND PHOTOS BY STEVE ROBINSON AND PATRICK PATTON

for the Ages

Jewish cooking is rife with symbolism, but perhaps the strongest link is the way food connects one generation to the next.

"The whole idea is to try to bind the generations together so you follow a practice that your mother and her mother did, and it seems to be something that your child will learn from you and carry on," says Rabbi Gedalyah Engel of West Lafayette. Engel is a traditionalist rabbi, and specifically, he is speaking about the practice of keeping kosher, but recipes and the style of Jewish cooking is passed from generation to generation, regardless of whether a family keeps kosher or not.

Traditional dishes are cooked for all of the Jewish holidays, including the Sabbath, Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), Passover and the upcoming festival of Hanukkah, where in the United States, the timeless treat of potato latkes or potato pancakes is prepared.

The oil is the symbolic ingredient because it is a reminder of the oil used to replenish the eternal light when rededicating the Second Temple during the second century BCE.

"The oil in the ancient Temple lasted unexpectedly for eight days," so you make things cooked in oil, says Susan Prohofsky of West Lafayette. "For the Eastern Europeans, a food that they had available—especially at that time of the year—was potatoes, so fried potatoes, in one form or another, was what they did." Today, latkes are made every year on Hanukkah, at home and at synagogue dinners.

"Oh yes," says Esther Chosnek of West Lafayette. "Everybody loves potato latkes; some like it with applesauce, some like it with sour cream."

In modern Israel, the tradition is to prepare Sufganiyot, a type of jelly doughnut, also cooked in oil.

Central to traditional Jewish cooking is the practice of keeping kosher, which dates back to biblical times, explains Engel, but has evolved through centuries of Jewish life all over the world.

Some of the basic laws of keeping a kosher home include not eating meat and dairy foods at the same time, only eating kosher meat that is usually labeled that way or purchased at a kosher butcher, not eating shellfish, and keeping two separate sets of dishes: one for meat and the other for dairy, and still separate dishes that are used for the eight-day long celebration of Passover.

In Lafayette, families who keep kosher have the added challenge of purchasing their meat from Chicago or Indianapolis because there is no kosher meat sold here. Over the years, this challenge has also provided another sense of connectedness because the small number of families who keep kosher in Lafayette and West Lafayette have ››

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worked out an informal arrangement with each other for buying the meat, so that one family buys for the others on a rotating schedule. And while it seems like more stress for everyday cooking, most people who keep kosher find it becomes routine.

"When I plan a party, my first question is, 'Will it be meat or dairy?' Once I make that decision, everything falls into place," Prohofsky says.

Even for Jewish families who don't keep kosher, the basic laws still have a profound impact on the way they eat, says Heather Moskowitz of West Lafayette.

"For example, making a recipe with oil instead of butter because it is going to be served with meat," she explains.

As in celebrations for many faiths, food is often an integral part of marking holidays, change of seasons and joyous occasions, often known by the word Simcha in the Jewish community, which is usually associated with a lifecycle event, such as a birth, bar or bat mitzvah or a wedding. Many of the same foods that are eaten during Jewish holidays are also eaten at a Simcha, so they further solidify the link between the generations and enhance the memories of family gatherings.

Every Passover, Johanna Gartenhaus of Lafayette would have up to 24 people for a Seder, the ritual dinner that commemorates and tells the biblical story of the Exodus or Jewish liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt.

A favorite recipe for Gartenhaus is a herring and beet salad that she originally got from her mother. She says the recipe became more valuable as she grew older and time passed.

"I really love beets, and I love herring. I remember making it more as a young adult than eating it as a child. I think a lot of times kids see something, and it doesn't go in very well. But later on, when it comes back to you, it's worth holding on to." ✠

Top: Esther Chosnek prepares Noodle Kugel.
Bottom: Esther Chosnek's Beef Brisket

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Classic Jewish RECIPES

While the flavors and tastes are remembered throughout a lifetime, many traditional Jewish dishes are high in fat and calories. You can still keep the flavor while making the foods less fattening, notes Dorothy Light of West Lafayette.

While ingredients can be modified, the basic content of the recipe stays the same. Here are some classics—with some variations—that have stood the test of time throughout generations of Jewish life.

Beef Brisket – with a barbecue sauce

(Esther Chosnek, West Lafayette)

Barbecue Flavor

- 1 large brisket, 2 to 3 lbs.
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 12-ounce can of beer
- 1 12-ounce jar of chili sauce
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 large onion slice

Season the brisket with salt and pepper. Put sliced onion on top of the brisket. Mix brown sugar, beer and chili sauce together. Put the beef in roasting pan, and pour chili sauce over the brisket. Cover the pan and bake in the oven at 325 degrees for 20 to 30 minutes per pound of beef. Then uncover the pan, and bake for about another 45 minutes.

Let brisket sit and cool at least 30 minutes to an hour before serving. Slice across the grain.

Potato Latkes

(Susan Prohofsky, West Lafayette. Recipe is from The Art of Jewish Cooking by Jennie Grossinger)

- 2 eggs
- 3 cups grated, drained potatoes (about 6 large potatoes)
- 4 Tablespoons grated onion
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 2 Tablespoons matzo meal or bread or cracker crumbs
- ½ cup vegetable oil

When grating the potatoes and onion, don't over process, says Prohofsky. Make sure you drain off the liquid from the potatoes and onions before you add the eggs and matzo meal. Beat the eggs, and then add the grated potatoes and onions, salt, pepper and matzo meal. Mix together.

Heat half of the oil in a frying pan, and use a tablespoon to drop the latke mixture into the pan. Fry until the latkes are brown on both sides. Add more oil as needed. Latkes taste best when served hot.

Noodle Kugel *(Esther Chosnek)*

- 8-ounce package of broad egg noodles
- 4 eggs, beaten (5, if small, medium)
- 2 Tablespoons butter or if serving with meat, use vegetable shortening
- 2 apples, chopped
- 1 cup raisins, soaked in brandy or orange juice for 15 to 30 minutes, drain
- Salt to taste
- Cinnamon and nutmeg to taste
- ¼ to ½ cup sugar

Cook the noodles, drain and rinse. Add butter, eggs and the remaining ingredients. Mix well. Pour into a greased 9x13 casserole dish. Bake at 350 degrees for about 45 minutes to an hour, or until the eggs are set and the top is golden. Cool slightly and cut into squares to serve.

Herring and Beet Salad

(Johanna Gartenhaus, Lafayette)

- 1 15-ounce can of julienne drained beets
- 6 to 8-ounces of herring in wine sauce – cut into smaller pieces
- 1 large or 2 small Granny Smith apples, cubed or diced
- 1 cup low-fat yogurt or low-fat sour cream

Mix together all of the ingredients, and the salad will have a pretty, pale beet color, notes Gartenhaus. Refrigerate for 2 to 3 hours before serving. You can place the salad on a lettuce leaf on a platter for a festive look, or serve in a bowl. Serve the salad alongside boiled potatoes with the skins on.

Honey Cake *(Susan Prohofsky)*

- 3½ cups sifted flour
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- ⅛ teaspoon powdered cloves
- ½ teaspoon ginger
- Allspice to taste (optional)
- 4 eggs
- ¾ cup brown sugar
- 4 Tablespoons salad oil
- 2 cups dark honey
- ½ cup brewed coffee
- 2 Tablespoons brandy (optional)
- 1½ cups chopped nuts, walnuts or almonds (optional)

Bring the honey to a boil. Cool. Add coffee and brandy. Put aside.

Sift the flour, salt, baking powder, baking soda and quantity of spices together to your personal taste, says Prohofsky. Beat the eggs, gradually adding the sugar. Beat until thick and light in color. Beat in the oil, honey and coffee mixture; stir in the flour mixture and the nuts.

Oil or grease two, 9-inch loaf pans and line with aluminum foil. Turn the batter into the pans. Bake at 325 degrees for 50 to 60 minutes or until browned and a cake tester comes out clean. Cool on a cake rack before removing from the pan.

Chosnek, Gartenhaus, Light, Moskowitz, and Prohofsky are all members of the Lafayette Chapter of Hadassah, a volunteer—and the largest—Jewish women's organization in the United States. A recent cookbook published by the national Hadassah is titled The Hadassah Jewish Holiday Cookbook, Traditional Recipes from Contemporary Kosher Kitchens, edited by Joan Schwartz Michel.

Potato Latkes

Noodle Kugel