

# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

## Jewish Culinary Cuisines Continue to Evolve

By [Rachel Kurland](#)

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From left: Devra Ferst, Steven Cook, Joan Nathan, Michael Solomonov and Molly Yeh | Photo by Jessi Melcer

When it comes to Jewish food, it can be defined in different ways: For Steven Cook, it was his mother’s matzo ball soup made with onion soup mix; for Joan Nathan, it was canned gefilte fish — with a side of shrimp, per her mother’s appetizer course.

The National Museum of American Jewish History hosted these chefs — CookNSolo team Michael Solomonov and Steven Cook, prolific cookbook author Joan Nathan and Saveur Blog of the Year award-winner Molly Yeh — last week for the “Evolution of Jewish Cooking in America.”

Moderated by food writer and editor Devra Ferst, the Jewish-centric culinary masterminds discussed Jewish food and how it’s not a static genre.

“It wasn’t so much the food. It was the way everybody attacked it,” Solomonov laughed.

But what exactly is Jewish food? Is it just what Jews like to eat? Descendants of Eastern European culinary experiments? Kosher-only?

“It starts from memories of what we ate growing up, which is pretty varied,” Cook said. “Especially for American Jews, there’s kosher, and then there’s shrimp — sort of kosher,” he nodded toward Nathan.

But the dietary laws are a central element.

Nathan agreed; she has traveled the world gathering Jewish recipes. Even though the four speakers do not keep kosher, she said it’s always in the back of their minds.

Jewish geography plays a role in the food-obsessed culture, too.

“Jews have been kicked out of so many countries and they’ve had to adapt to new foods,” Nathan said. In her latest book, she visited Jews in El Salvador — there are about 100 — who replaced potato latkes with yucca. “I realized that’s what Jews have done, but the thing is they’ve done these things and brought them to their table. Those traditions have given Jews strength throughout history.”

Jewish food, therefore, is not necessarily rooted in the land, but rather, in storytelling.

“It goes along with that old saying, ‘If you have two Jews in a room you’re going to have at least three opinions,’” chimed in Yeh. “If you can sit around a table with a group of Jews and maybe have a bacon-wrapped matzo ball in the middle, then you can have your argument about it and sustain that argument. That certainly by default, I think, makes that food Jewish.”

Yeh, who is half Chinese, lives in Minnesota, which, as you can imagine, is sparse of Jewish delis or za’atar.

She’s become known for her blog but has received comments about appropriation.

“You really do have to go in with a lot of sensitivity to that,” she said. “But a lot of the recipes that will do really well on my site will be something that is a familiar dish that uses something new, so like a pink-frosted sugar cookie but I’ll throw some mahleb in there.”

Blending traditional Jewish cuisines with new flavors is taking over, as seen on Yeh’s Instagram account (see: scallion pancake challah).

Growing up, Yeh said her two cultures never appeared separate.

“Over the holidays we would have our dumplings of the world party and we would be making all sorts of fusion foods,” she said. “I just have so much fun thinking up all these different combinations and not feeling restricted.”

Cook said traditional Ashkenazi food has received a bad rap over the years, possibly because, Nathan pondered, older generations in America who came over during the age of industrialization were exposed to processed foods.

Nathan recalled Pillsbury cookbooks in Yiddish, or advertisements saying “Jews had been waiting 4,000 years for Crisco,” aimed toward immigrants.

Even among some rather discerning current trends — Yeh noted babka push pops, a combination of babka, ice cream and sprinkles in a Popsicle mold — she’s optimistic.

“People on the internet right now are reconnecting to their Ashkenazi Jewish roots through this new internet influence of what’s Instagrammable, what’s colorful, what’s going to look the best,” she said. “They are celebrating these traditional foods in twisted ways.”

Some traditions remain more secular — Cook has dabbled in making a pie each week... for the past two weeks.

But with advancements in technology and global influences, Nathan said food is better today than it was generations ago.

“I think the babkas are better today. I think my matzo balls are better than — no, my mother’s are better,” she laughed.

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