

## **Food Chat: The Evolution of Jewish Cooking**

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As part of the national celebration of Jewish American Heritage Month, the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) hosted Evolution of Jewish Cooking in America, a conversation with Steven Cook, Joan Nathan, Michael Solomonov and Molly Yeh. The event was moderated by food writer and editor Devra Ferst. It was held before a capacity crowd of 230 people, with others tuning in via Facebook.

Earlier this month, Solomonov won the James Beard Award for best chef in the country. (Other Philadelphians lauded this year at the James Beard Foundation awards ceremony were Greg Vernick and Stephen Starr.) Last year, Solomonov and Steven Cook won for their first cookbook, *Zahav: A World of Israeli Cooking*. The two men now have a range of establishments, including Zahav, Federal Donuts, Abe Fisher, Dizengoff, Goldie and the Rooster Soup Company. Rooster Soup donates all of its profits to the Broad Street Ministry's Hospitality Collaborative, which provides meals and services to vulnerable Philadelphians.

Like Solomonov and Cook, the other chefs at the NMAJH event have also written popular cookbooks. In fact, Nathan's 11th book, *King Solomon's Table: A Culinary Exploration of Jewish Cooking From Around the World*, was published this spring, receiving much acclaim. The book offers historical context and personal narratives about food in the Jewish diaspora. Yeh's first book, *Molly on the Range*, was one of the New York Times' top fall cookbook releases of 2016. Her food blog, *My Name Is Yeh*, which showcases recipes inspired by Yeh's Chinese and Jewish heritage, was *Saveur's* 2015 Blog of the Year and Yahoo's 2014 Food Blog of the Year. Yeh is a Julliard-trained percussionist who lives on a farm on the North Dakota-Minnesota border with her fifth-generation farmer husband (also a Julliard graduate) and their flock of 20 chickens, all named Macaroni.

During the NMAJH event, the chefs responded to a range of questions posed by the moderator. For example, what was Jewish food during their childhood? Cook cited brisket with Lipton soup mix. Nathan recalled roast chicken with garlic salt and canned gefilte fish. Solomonov enjoyed bread with tahini (not butter) and cashew chicken, which he claimed is a Jewish food. Yeh noted the holidays distinguished by matzah balls or challah; her favorite holidays were those featuring both foods.



From left to right, Devra Ferst, Steven Cook, Joan Nathan, Michael Solomonov and Molly Yeh. Photo by Jessi Melcer.

How is Jewish food defined? Cook reminisced about shopping in wine stores and reading labels for Spain, Italy and kosher. “Where is kosher?” he quipped. Nathan cited the dietary laws, the insatiable search for new foods, and the history of Jews being kicked out of so many countries and having to adapt to new local foods. She recalled a woman in El Salvador who served yucca latkes. Solomonov, who loves pastrami on rye, defined Jewish foods as those that retain, transform and transmit Jewish heritage. He recently learned that the iconic English dish fish and chips was introduced to the British by Portuguese Jews. Then, he and Nathan tussled over the origin of bagels. Yeh said arguing over food makes it Jewish.

What is Israeli food? Cook said people conflate Israeli food with Middle Eastern food. Solomonov, who recalled his terrible first year of running Zahav, learned to adapt to local ingredients, because an Israeli chopped salad cannot be made well with American produce in the middle of winter. Nathan cited the Ottolenghi effect (of Israeli-British chef Yotam Ottolenghi) and the Zahav effect (now in its ninth year) on Israeli food. She noted that Israeli cooks started traveling abroad in the 80’s and 90’s.

What Jewish foods are they most excited to delve into? Solomonov offered Georgian food (from the former Soviet republic of Georgia), but it would first have to filter through Israel. Cook said Israeli food is now considered sexy. Yeh recalled that her mother did not offer coloring books, but blank pieces of paper. Extending the metaphor to cooking, Yeh learned that there were no boundaries between Chinese and Jewish foods, and she grew to love experimenting and blending flavors. Nathan noted that our immigrant ancestors all embraced processed foods. Many products were targeted to Jews, with Yiddish labels and advertising. She thinks we’re better cooks nowadays, with better ingredients. “We can play with our food,” said Nathan.

Are there Jewish foods or food myths that should die? According to Nathan, the bad reputation of Jewish cooking is being dispelled. Cook said it is the cinnamon-raisin bagel that should go; Ferst said it is the blueberry bagel; and Yeh said it is the rainbow bagel.



The chefs during the panel discussion. Photo by Jessi Melcer.

What is the next food they plan to cook? Yeh is on bagel practice and has ordered salmon to make lox. Solomonov said a peanut butter and matzah sandwich. Nathan plans to make a lemon cake with curd for a friend. Cook plans to bake a pie. He's been on a pie jag, having made strawberry-rhubarb and lemon chess pies.

What would be their last meal? Cook had pastrami on rye at the Famous 4th Street Deli and treated it as if it were his last meal. "Which [freaked out] his son," quipped Solomonov, who would prefer dim sum and a firing squad. Nathan would chose fettuccine with white truffles, while Yeh would settle for mac 'n cheese and hot dogs.

Cook answered a query from the audience about opening a kosher restaurant. (Cook and Solomonov were involved with the kosher restaurant Citron and Rose for a year.) He said restaurants earn 40-50% of their week's revenues from Saturdays. I later asked why supermarkets can sell kosher prepared foods items on Saturday, but not restaurants. He said it depended on the community, i.e., the level of observance

The evening was lots of fun, and the panelists seemed to enjoy the conversation with each other. After the panel discussion, I showed Nathan my tattered copies of the first two cookbooks she wrote, back in 1978. I spoke to Solomonov, who remembered me from previous encounters. I also noticed that Yeh had dyed her hair since the photo shoot for her book; it's now ombré, with blond ends.

Another upcoming NMAJH event, From Yiddish Folk to Jazz: An Arts Salon, will be held on Tuesday, June 27, coinciding with the museum's current special exhibition, 1917: How One Year Changed the World. The event will feature music from 1917, ranging from Yiddish folk and American jazz to art songs and chamber music. Curated by Andrea Clearfield, it will feature performances from the likes of Group Motion Multi Media Dance Theater, The Hot Club of Philadelphia and klezmer fiddler Alicia Svigals.