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Coming Tomorrow

Posted on Fri, Dec. 12, 2003

The Mercury News

Centuries of wandering enrich Jewish cuisine

By Kim Vo
Mercury News




The way Jonathan Hirshon sees it, the Jews have been everywhere. And everywhere they went, they ate.

Since the Jewish Diaspora touches every continent, it's likely that in addition to matzo balls and rugelach, Jews ate Sevilla-style olives in Spain and Mongolian beef in Kaifeng. Somewhere in the Ukraine, they may have polished their meal by sipping honey pepper vodka.

So what better way, Hirshon figured, to teach Jewish history than a dinner series that combines a lecture with a gourmet meal from a particular region. Hirshon, a history buff and gourmet, launched the Diaspora Dinner series this fall at Temple Emanu-El in San Jose, where he is a board member.

``People may be conceptually interested in Jewish history," he said, ``but they get excited about food."

To read the complete story, see tomorrow's Family & Religion section.

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``People may be conceptually interested in Jewish history," he said, ``but they get excited about food."

The temple plans to hold the dinners every other month. The dinners are a moneymaker for the temple, and ticket prices fluctuate depending on the menu.

The series began in September with Spain, followed in November by food and talk about the Caucasus region, which includes Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine. January's meal will feature China -- there was a Jewish community in Kaifeng on the Silk Road and Jews fleeing Europe during World War II temporarily stayed in Shanghai.

Future regions include India, west Africa, Italy, central Europe and the West Indies.

``I'll never run out of material. I can go forever," says Hirshon, who earned a bachelor's degree in ancient history from Clark University in Massachusetts. ``You name me a country, I can name you the link."

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**Sharks Family Pack**

Save \$31 on four hot dogs, four sodas and four tickets to the Sharks vs. L.A. Kings game on Friday, Dec. 26 at 7:30

Hirshon, a public relations consultant, knows how to impress his audience. He tells them about the ancient -- and largely forgotten -- Jewish empire of Khazaria. And jaws dropped, he said, when he explained the theory that Christopher Columbus was a ``crypto" or hidden Jew. He argues Columbus, who had his crew board the same day Jews were being expelled from Spain, was himself Jewish but hid his identity.

But it's the food that makes the biggest impression.

``It was fantastic. Very authentic," says Marsha Felton, who attended the November meal and left with a recipe for *katmis mkhali*, Georgian chicken salad.

Rebecca Bronstein, 17, agrees. She plans to return in January to learn about China; she's also intrigued by what Hirshon will cook. ``All you're offered in Chinese food is noodles and chicken," says Bronstein, a temple member, ``but I know Jonathan's really creative."

While Hirshon tries to keep all the dishes authentic, some are altered because of hard-to-find seasonings or in deference to the temple's kosher kitchen. For instance, there was no shellfish in the paella, and the dish was studded with chicken, not pork sausage.

Jews may have eaten these dishes, but it's not really Jewish food, says Ginny Hoffman, a volunteer cook for the dinners who considers Jewish food ``what my grandmother cooked."

As she puts it: ``There's nothing Jewish about paella."

Not that it matters, she says. She loves to cook, and the dinners allow her to help feed scores of people.

``I enjoy new foods and new culinary experiences," she says. ``And if you learn something in the process about culture or whatever, all the better."

For information on the next *Diaspora Dinner*, at 6 p.m. Jan. 25, send an e-mail to admin@templesanjose.org with the subject line ``Diaspora Dinner."

Contact Kim Vo at kvo@mercurynews.com or (408) 271-3635.

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The Mercury News

Georgian chicken salad

Serves 8-10

- 1 5- to 6-pound roasting chicken
- 3/4 pound of shelled walnuts
- 2 tablespoons of ground coriander seed
- 2 teaspoons of crushed elderberry flowers
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
- 2 1/2 teaspoons of salt, or to taste
- 5 tablespoons of red wine vinegar
- 1 1/2 to 2 cups of chicken broth
- 4 scallions, including the green portion, minced
- 1 cup of minced fresh cilantro
- 1/2 cup of minced fresh dill
- 1/2 cup of minced celery leaves
- 1/2 cup of pomegranate seeds

Place the chicken in a large pot with 1 quart of water and bring to a boil. Simmer, covered, until tender, about 2 hours. Allow the chicken to cool in the broth. Meanwhile, finely grind the walnuts, then mix them with the ground coriander, elderberry, garlic, salt and vinegar. When chicken has cooled, shred it fine. Using your hands, work in the seasoned nuts and enough chicken broth to bind. The texture of the salad should be almost that of a paste. Mix in the scallions, cilantro, dill and celery, and chill 3 to 5 hours. One half-hour before serving, remove the salad from the refrigerator and allow to reach room temperature. Just before serving, serve the pomegranate seeds on the side.



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The Mercury News

Georgian beef soup

Serves 8-10

- 1 pound of veal or beef bones
- 2 quarts of bottled water
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 sprigs of cilantro
- 1/4 teaspoon of whole black peppercorns
- 1 large onion
- 2 tablespoons of butter
- 1 3/4 teaspoons of salt
- 1/4 cup Georgian green *tkemali* sauce (available at Russian delis)
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1/4 cup uncooked rice
- 2 pounds tender leftover meat such as from brisket or beef stew cut into bite-sized pieces
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and minced
- 1/4 teaspoon of cayenne
- 1/4 teaspoon of paprika
- 3 tablespoons of finely chopped fresh herbs (parsley and dill)
- Fresh ground black pepper
- Generous 1/2 teaspoon each of ground coriander seed, dried basil, ground caraway seed and turmeric.

Bring the bones to a boil in up to 2 quarts of water (or use enough to cover), and skim the foam that rises to the surface. Then add the bay leaves, cilantro sprigs and peppercorns and simmer for 1 1/2 hours. Strain and discard all, saving the broth.

Meanwhile, finely chop the onions and cook in butter until very soft but not brown. Add them to the soup along with salt and rice -- cook for 15 minutes, then add the lemon juice and *tkemali* sauce.

Stir in the freshly ground pepper, garlic, cayenne, paprika and ground spices and the meat. Cook for 10 minutes more. (The soup may be cooled and refrigerated at this point. When ready to serve, heat gently, then proceed with the recipe.)

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Stir in the fresh herbs and let the soup stand for 5 minutes before serving.

Serve with hearty bread and butter and a good Georgian red wine such as *khvanchkara* or *kindzmarauli*.

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