

# Jews, Food and Family

A Jewish Cookbook by Max Abrahams

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# Who knew that food makes books better? Or, let's have a reading meal.

My grandfather, my mother and I are all big readers. So of course, what do three big readers do at dinner? Read till they drop. I was introduced to this tradition when I learned to read. This tradition is something called “the reading dinner” - I know, creative name. A reading dinner is when two or more readers get together and read at dinner. The only rule is that talking is not allowed. This is a tradition that my grandfather taught both his children (my mother and uncle). My mother then passed it along to me. My favorite reading dinners were always at a restaurant called Mei Wah. Mei Wah is a Chinese restaurant in Washington, DC, owned by a friend of my grandparents named Larry La. We eat at Mei Wah almost every night when we are visiting DC. While it may not seem intuitive, Chinese food is a staple of the American Jewish food landscape. I don't know too many Jews who don't eat Chinese food on Christmas Eve. This is not just a tradition in my family. Jews have been eating Chinese food on Christmas since the 1800s, when both Jews and Chinese people were newly-arrived immigrants to the U.S.

# My family's food traditions: Candy Night

For those you who don't know, I am Jewish: not religiously Jewish but ethnically Jewish. This means that I have my own Jewish family traditions that I will live and die by. It so happens that they all revolve around food.

One of my earliest memories of one of these food traditions combines my favorite things: my extended family, my Jewishness and candy. For the sake of this story, candy is a food. This story started before I was born. Every year, we go to Wellfleet, MA. My mom's family has been going there since the 1990s. There used to be a candy store there called the Chocolate Sparrow that had a penny candy room. When my oldest "kissing cousin" Ezra was just three years old, my grandfather took him to the Chocolate Sparrow and said "Ezra, you can get one piece of candy for each year you've been alive." On the first year, he was the only child there and he got 3 pieces. Fast forward 25 years, there are now nine "kissing cousins" and my grandfather would host Candy Night each year for us children - no adults allowed. Every Candy Night we got as many pieces as Ezra was years old. Ezra is now 27. My grandfather stopped being able to come to Wellfleet a few years ago. My parents picked up the tradition but my mom always sent the bill to my grandfather. The woman who owned the Chocolate Sparrow expected us each year. Unfortunately, my grandfather passed away early in 2020. Then, the Chocolate Sparrow closed in the summer of 2020. There is another Chocolate Sparrow store in a nearby town. In 2021, I want to carry on the tradition, so we will go to the other Chocolate Sparrow and continue Candy Night (and the actual adults will continue to pay for it).

Children at play:  
Candy Night 2008  
Candy Night 2019



# My inspirations

Aside from just liking to eat, there were a couple of other things that inspired me to do this project. Back in 7th grade, my family lived in Amsterdam for about 9 months. While there, we got to do a lot of travelling and whenever we went to a new place, we always had to try the local food. We have a family tradition of going to a specific restaurant in Amsterdam called Cafe de Prins and there I had found my favorite Dutch food - puffertjies. Puffertjies are the most heavenly thing you will ever taste in your life. They are little mini-pancakes drowned in syrup and powdered sugar. We also sampled a lot of different sausages - the best were from the train station in Cologne and on the street in Prague. We took a cooking lesson in Morocco from a school called Souk Cuisine and I certainly tried new things. We got the idea to take that cooking lesson from a cookbook that we found in London, written by Yotam Ottolenghi, who also owns a restaurant called Nopi. We ate at Nopi twice when we were there. The owner of the restaurant, Yotam Ottolenghi, is a famous Israeli chef and cookbook author. His books include Jerusalem, Plenty and Plenty More. I was inspired by Ottolenghi and his partner Sammi Tamimi's cookbook called Jerusalem because it focused on the the history of the recipes, where the recipes come from and how Ottolenghi and Tamimi found them.

# Me eating food in different countries



# Culture of Food

## Anthony Bourdain - Jerusalem





# Anthony Bourdain, Parts Unknown

## Anthony Bourdain talks to Yotam Ottolenghi

### S2 EP1: Jerusalem

Anthony Bourdain was a chef who also hosts documentary TV shows where he travels around the world and talks to people about their food and culture. One episode features the food and culture of Jerusalem, Israel. Israel is a very controversial topic, politically and food-wise. Jerusalem is a true melting pot of food and culture. One of the greatest food debates in Jerusalem is who created and who makes the best falafel. Lots of different cultures have laid their claim to falafel, but it is very hard to prove where falafel originated from. Because so many cultures have said “it’s mine,” it’s very hard to tell just how old falafel is. This same debate is going on with Hummus.

During the episode, Anthony Bourdain talked to a very famous Israeli chef named Yotam Ottolenghi. For those of you who do not know this very famous chef, Yotam Ottolenghi was born in Jerusalem in 1968. When Bourdain and Ottolenghi are together, they go to a restaurant called Majda, a vegetarian restaurant run by a married couple consisting of a Palestinian and a Jew. They also ate falafel from food stands on the street. His show was what inspired me to do this project - to talk to people about their food and learn about their culture through cooking and eating with them.



# Uncle Danny's Matzah Balls Recipe

## Ingredients:

- 1 cup canola oil
- ½ cup chicken stock
- 2 cups Matzah meal
- 12 eggs
- Pepper
- Salt
- Add a little chopped parsley if you want

1. Mix all ingredients in a bowl till blended.
2. Once done mixing, put a cover on the mixture and put it in the fridge for 30-45 minutes. This will allow the mixture to absorb the extra moisture.
3. Form them into balls and cook in a pot of chicken stock or broth to make soup.



# About Uncle Danny's Matzah Balls

When my Uncle was a little kid, his grandmother would come over for holidays. For Passover, his grandmother would cook her family-famous Matzah Balls. While he never explicitly learned the recipe from her, through watching her cook, he learned how to make said Matzah Balls. To this day, my uncle still owns his grandmother's eggbeater, which we did get to use when we cooked these together for this project.

When I was cooking with my uncle, I realized that a lot of Jewish history, and Jewish cooking more specifically, is mostly passed down orally. As I grew up, I've become slightly obsessed with eating Matzah Ball soup. Whenever I go to a new diner, I will always judge the quality of food based on how good their Matzah Balls are, because my opinion is not subjective (read with sarcasm). To me, Matzah Balls are a staple of Jewish cuisine, which has led to a whole bunch of different recipes to be created.

# Baba's Brisket

## Ingredients:

- 1 brisket
- Salt
- Pepper
- 1 cup water
- 1 onion
- Can of tomato sauce
- 3 stalks of celery
- 3 carrots
- Minced garlic
- 6 hours

Brisket will shrink, so buy more than you think you need. Many people cook Brisket in the oven, but Baba said to cook it on the stove top.

1. Put Brisket in large pot.
2. Sear Brisket in large pot over hot burners until brown.
3. **Then bow down to the Brisket.**
4. With a large fork, flip the Brisket and sprinkle salt and pepper on both sides.
5. Pour ½ cup of water on Brisket.
6. Put burners on medium heat.
7. Pour half can tomato sauce over Brisket.
8. Chop 1 onion and put it on Brisket.
9. Get 3 stalks of celery - cut them up and pour them in the Brisket.
10. Pour a little bit of minced garlic on the Brisket.
11. Peel and chop 3 carrots. Add them in the Brisket.
12. Get ½ cup of water and pour it in.
13. Cover and cook over low heat until tender (about 4 hours).
14. Flip brisket into vegetables every 30 minutes or so to cook evenly.
15. Let meat rest for 5-10 minutes before serving.

This recipe is what is known as a Shtetl recipe. There are no set measurements - you just add ingredients until you think it tastes good. This is how my grandma defines Shtetl cooking. This is a recipe that I've cooked with Baba previously. I cooked it for this project for the first time by myself. Learning this recipe from her is the embodiment of what I want this project to be. I want to be the one to pass down the recipes next, whether my grandkids like it or not.



# Baba's story

My Baba's family is originally from Russia. When her parents immigrated to the United States, they moved to Forest Hills, Queens. When she was very young, her father (my great-grandfather) died, so it was just my grandma, her sister, and mother. When I was growing up, I cooked a lot with both my Baba and Papa (her husband). When I was young, my Papa taught me how to cook scrambled eggs. I've cooked Brisket with my Baba many times before, but this project was the first time I had ever made it by myself. I like cooking with Baba because she is a very entertaining and funny person to talk to, so cooking with her is never boring or quiet. When we cook, we talk about random stuff. Cooking together is the main thing we like to do together, and she is really the only person in my family I cook with since I normally cook alone. Since my Baba made up the family's secret recipe for Brisket, she passed it onto me by cooking together. A lot of Jewish history is passed on through family traditions and oral traditions, including cooking and recipes.

# Ruth Tifford's Niece, Marie's, Challah

Challah is the most heavenly bread in the entire universe. It is a type of bread that comes from Ashkenazi cuisine and is usually braided. Many people eat Challah for special occasions, including Shabbat dinners. There are specific ceremonial steps to open the Shabbat meal that involve the challah, so it is a central part of the historic traditions of Shabbat.

Challah is a delicious food, but it is easy to make incorrectly. My grandma calls it a “high impact, low effort” dish because people are easily impressed but it does not actually take a lot of effort. When I was younger, my mother and I would make challah together every Thursday so that it would be ready to bring into school on Fridays. Everyone enjoyed it, of course.

While most Challah recipes are hand-me-downs, this one happens to be a hand-me-up recipe. My aunt Ruth Tifford never baked Challah for her family, but when her niece started baking Challah for her family, Ruth wanted the recipe to pass down to her only grandson, so I call this a hand-me-up-down recipe. This shows that Jewish recipes are intergenerational.

## Ingredients:

- 2 cups water
- 2 eggs
- ⅓ cup canola oil
- ⅓ cup sugar
- 1 packet yeast
- 4 cups flour
- 1 tsp salt

1. Mix liquid ingredients (water, eggs, canola oil) with sugar till blended.
2. Add flour, salt, and yeast to liquid ingredients.
3. Knead with a dough hook for 10 minutes.
4. Put dough in large bowl and cover with a clean dish towel. Put in a warm place and let rise until doubled in bulk.
5. Divide dough in half. Then, divide each half-portion into 3 pieces. Braid strands together and put on a parchment paper-lined baking sheet. Cover with a clean towel and let them rise again (about 30 minutes).
6. Preheat oven to 350. If using an egg wash, beat one egg and brush onto the surface. Bake for 15-18 minutes.



# Uncle Ed's Aunt Jen's Kneydlach

## Ingredients:

- 3 eggs
- ¾ cup Matzah Meal
- A little salt

1. Separate yolk and whites of eggs.
2. Beat egg whites until stiff.
3. Gently fold Matzah Meal and yolk into stiffened egg whites.
4. Let stand for five minutes. During this time, let salt water or chicken stock boil.
5. Use water to dampen hand, then shape Kneydl.
6. Once all Kneydlach are in the chicken stock, let cook for 45 minutes





# Uncle Ed's Aunt Jen's Kneydlach

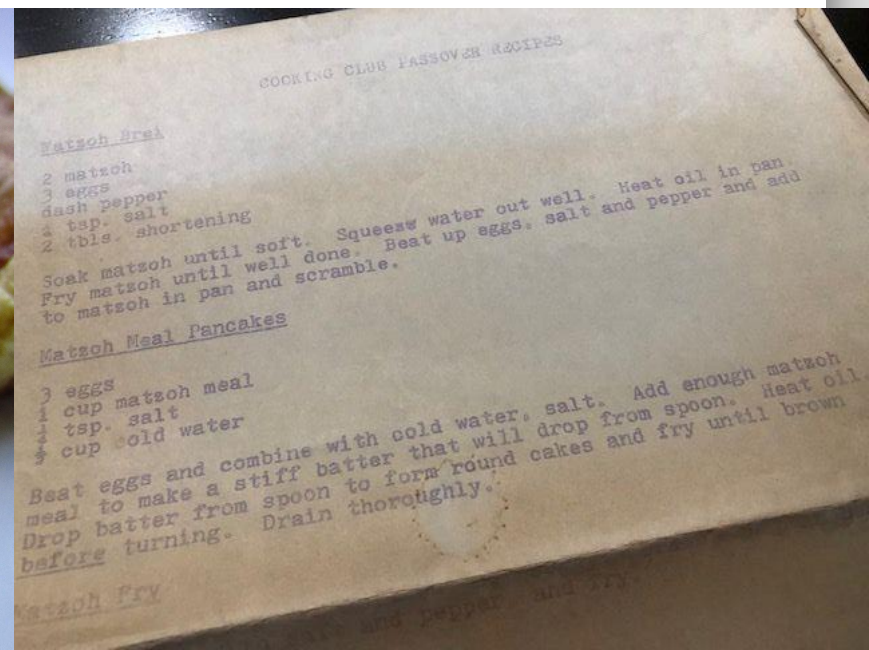
Kneydlach are matzah balls, so if you've eaten matzah balls you've eaten Kneydlach. This recipe came from my uncle Ed's mother and aunt, who came from Eastern Europe to the United States in the early 1900s. He grew up eating Kneydlach and watching his mother make them, but did not make them with her. After she died, he found the recipe in one of her cookbooks written in her handwriting. Even though I am close with my uncle Ed, I don't think of him as someone who cooks a lot. It was interesting to learn about his background and family history through learning this recipe. When I talked with Uncle Ed, he talked about the importance of passing recipes down through generations and having each generation make the recipe their own. This relates to Jewish history because each generation is in a different place and time than their parents were, so they have access to different ingredients and different ways of cooking, which changes the recipes. My uncle Ed cooks the Kneydlach in the same way his mother did, but we talked about making a new version called the Burton-Cogen Kneydlach.



# Aunt Ruth's Matzah Meal Pancakes from the Tifereth Israel Sunday School Cooking Club

This is a recipe from my mother's family's synagogue, Tifereth Israel, when she was growing up. They had a group called the TI Sunday School Cooking Club that my mother participated in in the 1970s. The Club started meeting in my Aunt Ruth's kitchen, which was around the corner from the synagogue, and then began to meet in the synagogue kitchen. My mother and other Hebrew school kids would participate in the Club and learn to cook Jewish recipes. This kind of social tradition is how much of Jewish history and cooking is passed down to the next generation - you have to teach it through the synagogue.

I talked to my Aunt Ruth to learn one of the recipes they used to cook, matzah meal pancakes. Many Jewish recipes are made with matzah meal because they are Passover recipes. During Passover, you cannot eat leavened bread, so instead you eat matzah. Many recipes have been adapted to be made with matzah so that they can be kosher for Passover. Before I made them for this project, I had never eaten matzah meal pancakes, but I didn't expect to like them. I prefer basic matzah with butter and salt instead of eating it in other dishes. When I tried them, I did not like the texture, but I am glad I tried making them.



Recipes from The National  
Council of Jewish Women  
Cookbooks from 1975

# The Chicken Cacciatori

## Ingredients

- 2 lb. chicken parts
  - 2 T. oil
  - 1 can tomato soup
  - ¼ cup water
  - ¼ dry red wine or 1 T. vinegar
  - 2 large garlic cloves, minced
  - 1 t. oregano, minced
  - ¼ t. Salt
  - 1 medium green pepper
  - ½ onion, chopped
1. Brown chicken in fat in large frying pan. Pour off the fat.
  2. Mix all other ingredients in a small bowl.
  3. Add mixed ingredients to pan with cooked chicken.
  4. Cover and cook on low heat for 45 minutes.

This recipe is from a cookbook that my Nana gave me, so I consider it a hand-me-down recipe. The cookbook is from the Council Cookery, which was put out by my great-grandmother's synagogue in the 1970s. All the recipes are from Jewish women from the synagogue. I did not know that this book was in the family until I talked with her after I started this project. This book are examples of how Jewish history (in this case, recipes) are recorded.

For this project, I cooked chicken cacciatori with my cousin Caroline. This is an example of how Jewish history and food are shared and passed down through generations, as the next generation learns the information and then shares it with others.



Chicken Cacciatori



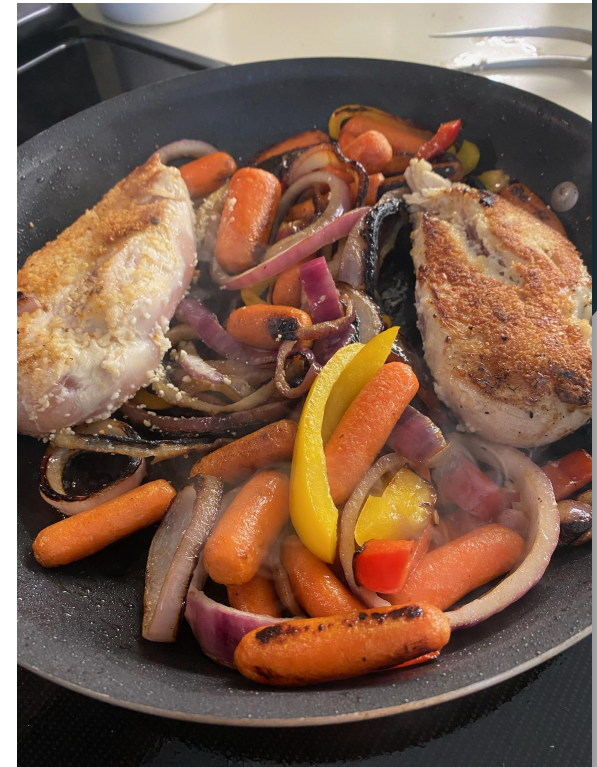
# Nana's Chicken Dinner

## Ingredients:

- 2 Chicken Breasts
- 1 red onion
- 1 green pepper
- 2 eggs
- Bread Crumbs
- Salt and pepper
- 1 cup carrots

1. First, brown the veggies in the pan.
2. Then add the chicken with breadcrumbs.
3. Allow to simmer until cooked.

This is one of my grandma's favorite recipes from the National Council of Jewish Women.



Food from the Kane Street  
Synagogue Jewish community

# Rabbi Val's Vegetarian Matzah Balls

Rabbi Val, the rabbi at my synagogue, made up this recipe. She put it together based on many other recipes. She is a vegetarian, so she has a vegetarian version of matzah ball soup, which is normally made with chicken. This recipe is unique because it is vegetarian, so you don't have to worry about it being kosher since there is no meat in it. Unlike me, she didn't cook matzah ball soup until she was in rabbinical school in her 20s. She had to adapt the usual recipe to make it vegetarian, but the good news is that she can eat it at Passover. She wants it to taste like spring, so there is a lot of fresh dill and herbs in the broth.

## Ingredients:

For 8 matzah balls

- 1/4 cup melted butter
- 4 large eggs
- 1/4 cup plain seltzer
- 1 cup Streit's matzah meal or another brand of matzah meal
- 1tsp salt
- pepper to taste
- tiny pinch of nutmeg (optional)

1. Beat eggs. Add seltzer, melted butter, salt, pepper, nutmeg. Mix well. Add matzah meal and stir thoroughly.
2. Refrigerate this batter at least one hour.
3. While batter is in the refrigerator is a perfect time to make the broth.
4. When broth is boiling, ball up matzah balls (they will expand a bit when cooked) with your hands. Put them in the boiling broth and cook for 25 minutes. Add extra fresh dill and fresh parsley if you like. Cook 5 more minutes. Serve.



# Rabbi Val's Vegetarian Broth

Rabbi Val, the rabbi at my synagogue, made up this recipe. She put it together based on many other recipes. She is a vegetarian, so she has a vegetarian version of matzah ball soup, which is normally made with chicken. This recipe is unique because it is vegetarian, so you don't have to worry about it being kosher since there is no meat in it. Unlike me, she didn't cook matzah ball soup until she was in rabbinical school in her 20s. She had to adapt the usual recipe to make it vegetarian, but the good news is that she can eat it at Passover. She wants it to taste like spring, so there is a lot of fresh dill and herbs in the broth.

## Ingredients:

- vegetable stock – about 2 cups per person (Osem parve chicken style consommé powder mixed with water according to package)
- Carrots peeled and cut into 1 – 2 inch pieces (about 1/2 carrot per person)
- Onions cut into large chunks (1/8ths or so) (1 onion per 6 people)
- Celery stalks cut into 1-2 inch pieces (about 1/4 per person)
- 1-2 tsp to Cumin to taste
- 1-2 tsp Curry powder to taste
- Salt to taste
- Pepper to taste
- Large Bunch of fresh dill – roughly chopped; plus extra for last minute if you like
- Large Bunch of fresh parsley – roughly chopped; plus extra for last minute if you like
- add 1-2 tbs butter, oil or margarine to enhance flavor

- 
1. Put stock in pot, add onions, celery, carrots, salt, pepper, cumin, curry, chopped parsley and chopped dill and butter.
  2. Cook for about 20 minutes until boiling.
  3. When broth is boiling, ball up matzah balls (they will expand a bit when cooked) with your hands. Put them in the boiling broth and cook for 25 minutes. Add extra fresh dill and fresh parsley if you like. Cook 5 more minutes. Serve.

# Grandma Fannie's Passover Cake

Sheila Rabin is a woman at my synagogue who agreed to teach me the ways of the cake. Over Passover, the Jewish people don't eat leavened bread to pay respects to the Jews fleeing Egypt, who didn't have time to let their bread rise. Because we don't eat leavened food during Passover, Sheila's grandmother had to be creative on how to get the cake to rise. The air comes from whipping the egg whites, so when the cake is in the oven, the air tries to escape.

## Ingredients:

- 9 eggs
- 1 ½ cups sugar
- ½ cup matzah cake meal
- ¼ cup potato starch
- ¼ tsp. salt
- ½ lemon juice and zest

1. Set the oven to 325.
2. Sift the Matzah meal, potato starch and salt together.
3. Then mix in the sugar and lemon juice.
4. Then separate the yolk and egg white. Whip both till stiff.
5. Add the yolk and egg whites to the batter and mix.
6. Put in oven for one hour.



# Hai Knafo and the kibbutz

Hai Knafo is a member of my synagogue. Hai was born in Morocco. When he was about 3 years old, he and his family moved to Israel. As a child, he lived on a kibbutz, which is an Israeli collective community involving farming, so he grew up eating what he called “Israeli cafeteria food.” Because of the farm, Hai and his family grew vegetables and took care of animals, including cows. This meant they were able to make almost all their food from what they had on the farm. Typical dishes included meatballs, eggs, and veggies.

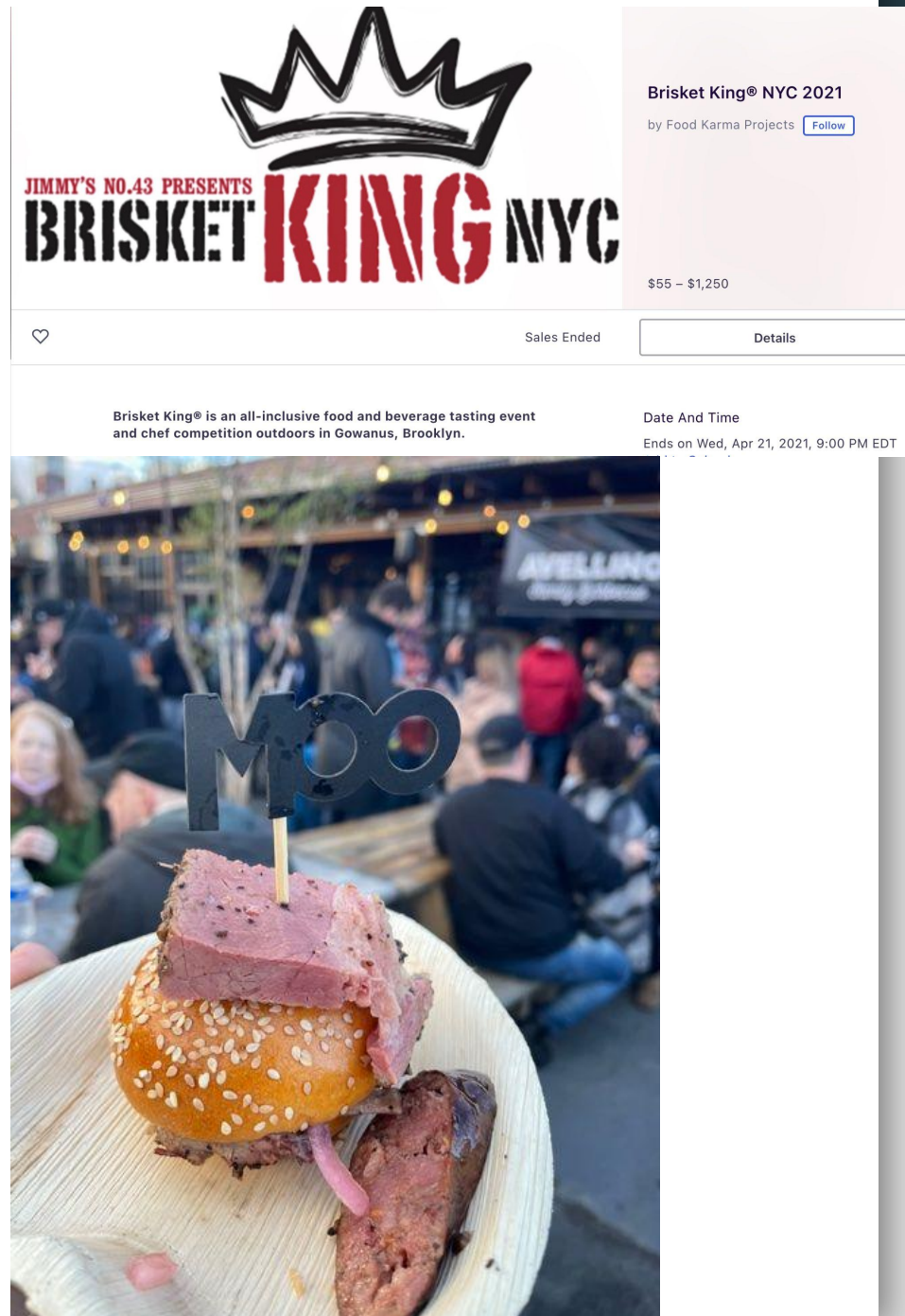
Talking to Hai made me think about my family and my experiences visiting a kibbutz. Kibbutzim are unique to Israel and revolve around a collective respect and shared responsibility for all aspects of life, including food.

Because farming is so central to life on a kibbutz, the food that is eaten is automatically going to be seasonal and local, which determines what dishes can be created. Something I have learned throughout the project is that Jewish food and recipes are always dependent on what you have available to cook with.



# My Brisket Story (Harris)

I went to a Brisket Festival called Brisket King NYC at a place called Pig Beach. I went there mostly to eat Brisket, but I also went there to study Brisket. Brisket is a traditional Jewish-American food, so a whole festival for it would be a great place to go. There, I met a guy named Harris. He runs a restaurant called Pulkie's in Dekalb Market. I was able to interview him to learn more about why he started Pulkie's and what makes Jewish cooking Jewish.



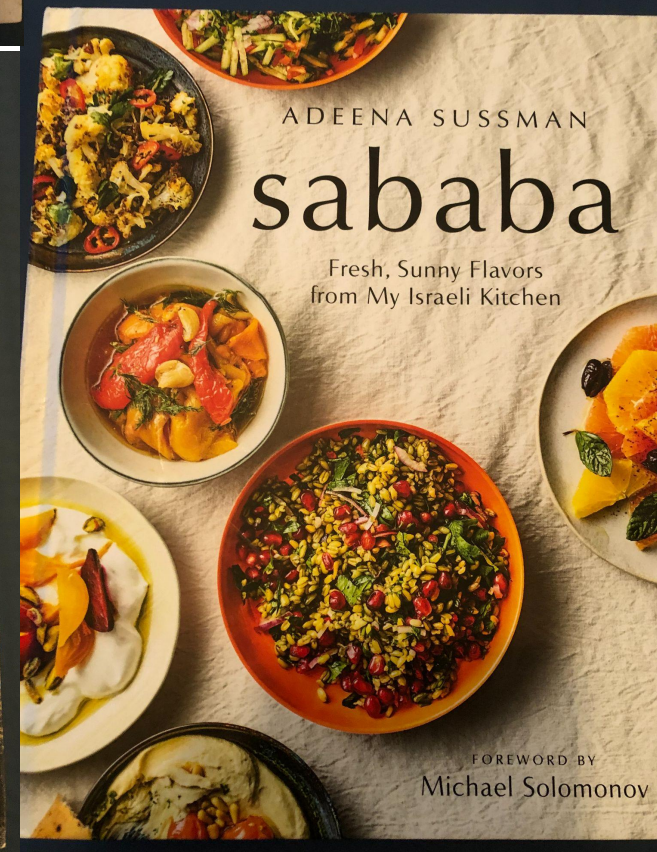
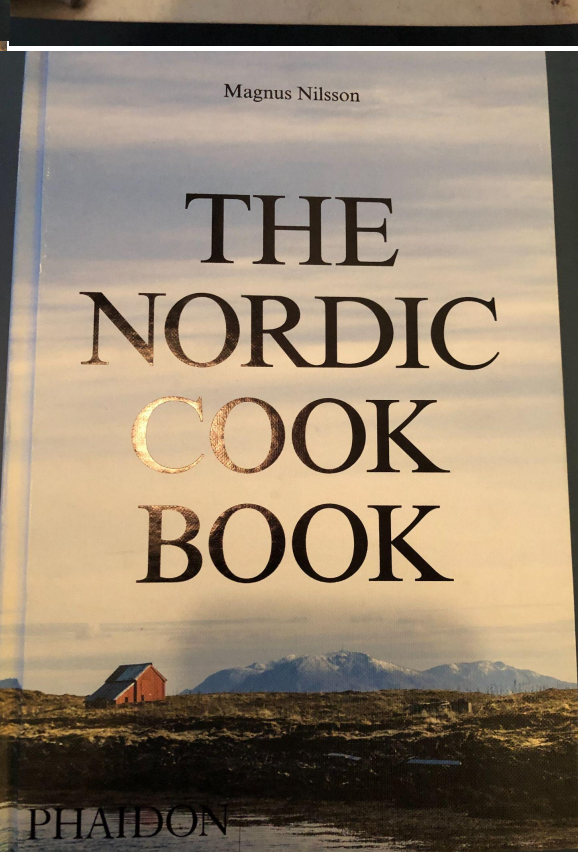
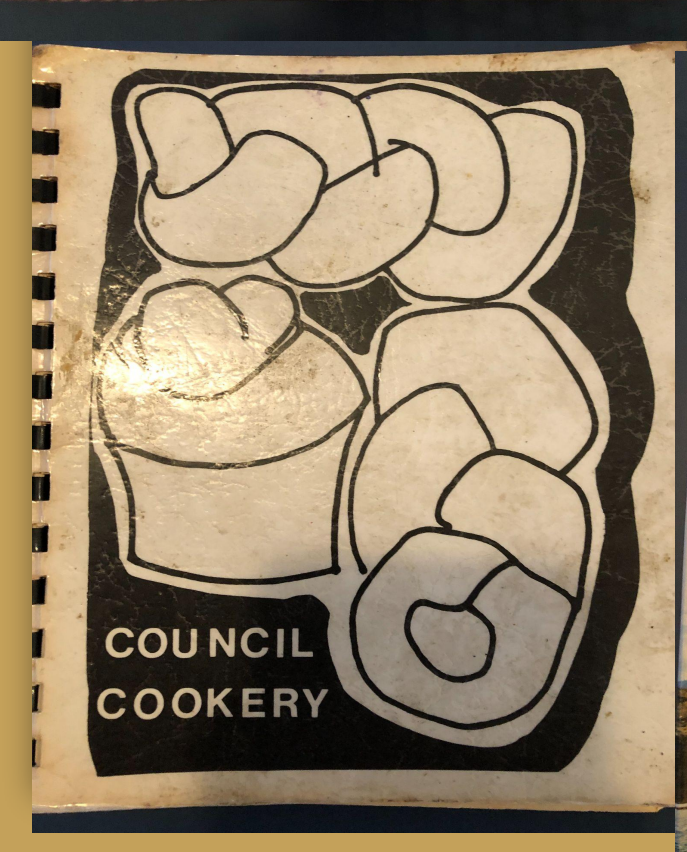
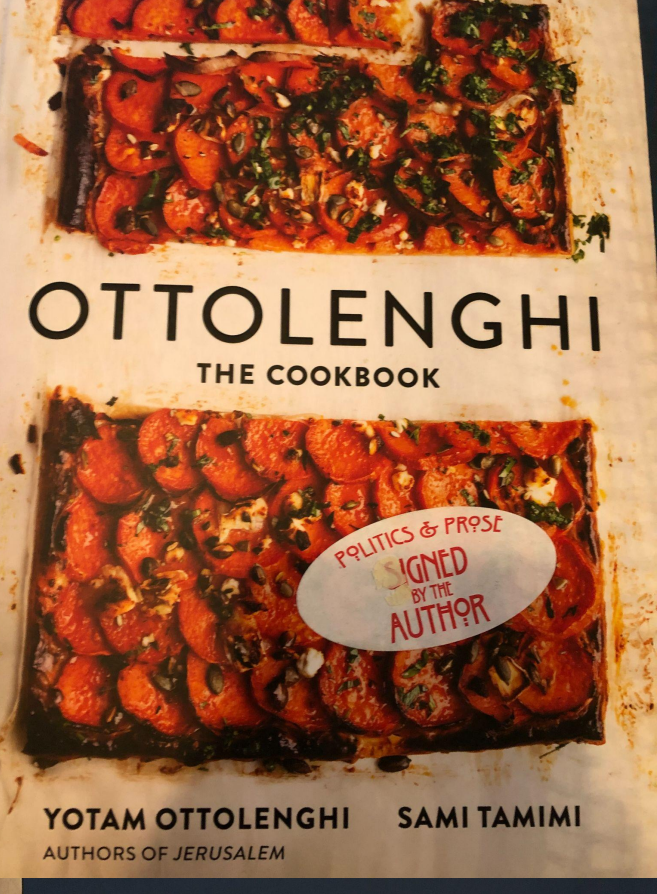
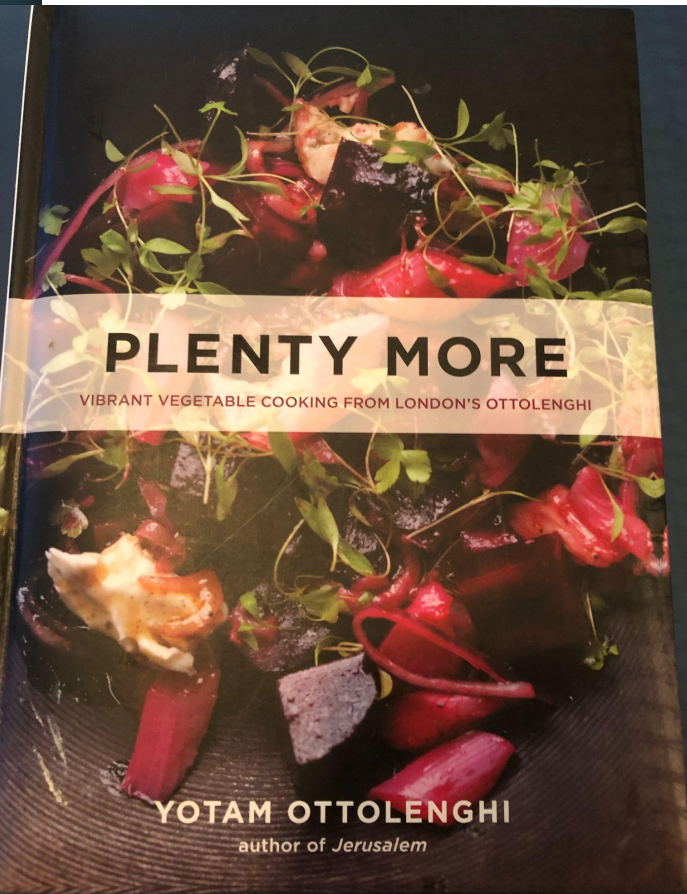
# Harris

When talking to Harris, a topic we came back to a lot is what makes Jewish food Jewish. Harris said something that I hadn't thought of before. He said that the restrictions that Jews put on their food is what makes it Jewish. Take being Kosher for example. Kosher is a Jewish custom, and any food that is kosher is most likely Jewish. Being Kosher means that you never mix meat and dairy under any circumstance. This idea of restrictions directly relates to Jewish history. Over the course of Jewish history, a big theme is the Jewish people being restricted in their lifestyle. Take the Jews time in Egypt. Joseph started out his career in Egypt as a slave and then was put into jail. During the time of Moses, all of the Jews were enslaved, having their culture restricted. Restriction is also a way to show that you are part of the community, such as through fasting during certain holidays. Right now, Harris's restaurant, Pulkies, is heavily restricted due to Covid. He can't serve his full menu and he can't seat at full capacity. An important aspect of Jewish food is being able to share the dishes with others, Due to Covid, our ability to share food has gone down, but because of restaurants like Pulkies, people can still taste the deliciousness of Jewish food.

**Pulkies**<sup>™</sup>  
JEWISH-STYLE  
BBQ



# Cookbooks that have inspired me



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