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SCRIBE QUARTERLY

The Food Issue

Food for Thought

JEWS AND FOOD. It's a relationship that runs throughout history and shapes culture — the stuff of legend (and also many jokes). We are a people defined by, among other things, both by our food and our commitment to food: we love to eat and we love to talk about eating.

As with any aspect of culture that is so well-established and so familiar, it's easy to lapse into cliché when writing about Jews and food. Our hope, in this issue dedicated to this classic combination, is to shed new light on an age-old theme. There is (it seems inevitable) some chicken soup in this issue — but also agriculture and finance and DNA testing, dishes created in present-day Texas and fourteenth-century Egypt.

We begin, appropriately, not with meals that we love to dig in to but with the ingredients that go into making them: though diaspora Jews aren't often associated with farming, Avi Finegold's interview with Shani Mink of the Jewish Farmer Network is a beautiful meditation on the temporality of Judaism — its distinct annual cycles shaped by a relationship to the land and the things we grow on it.

At the very other end of the food chain are restaurant meals. Hospitality is always a challenging industry; the degree of difficulty rises even higher when that restaurant is kosher, for reasons Corey Mintz unpacks in his deep dive into the business of running a kosher kitchen. There are some obvious factors (kosher ingredients are more expensive, you need to shut down for Shabbat and holidays) — but, it turns out, some less obvious ones as well.

Between those two ends of the spectrum: dishes themselves. While the history of many staples of the Jewish kitchen is familiar, others were developed in secrecy. For her feature on the hidden history of some Sephardic foods, Caitlin Stall-Paquet interviewed historians and chefs who are still gleaning new insights about dishes that date back to the Spanish Inquisition, when Jews were forced to hide in plain sight.

Especially in Canada, land of long winters and short growing seasons, summer seems the right time to celebrate Jewish food. We hope that the stories in this issue help you appreciate it even more — and that you get to enjoy at least a few picnics as delicious as the one on our cover.

HAMUTAL DOTAN
EDITOR IN CHIEF
SCRIBE QUARTERLY

P.S. We always appreciate hearing from readers about the stories in the magazine, and hope to begin publishing some of your notes soon. Write to us at letters@scribequarterly.ca

The Kibbitz

Farmer **Shani Mink** on reconnecting to her Judaism through soil and seeds

by **AVI FINEGOLD**

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY SHANI MINK

SHANI MINK is the executive director of the Jewish Farmer Network, an organization she co-founded in 2017 along with SJ Seldin. The group works to foster community among Jewish farmers, with the aim of cultivating "social, cultural and spiritual well-being." The organization hosts Shabbat dinners and creates educational resources, among other activities — in the process, shedding light on the deep and often underappreciated connections between Judaism and agriculture. I spoke to Shani about the importance of agricultural thinking for all Jews, and how farming is still a vital part of contemporary life.

What drew you to farming?
I grew up in suburban New Jersey, in a modern Orthodox community. My parents are fairly outdoorsy. I can't quite remember when I first got interested in agriculture, but I can say that when I was in college, my first year, I had a professor in environmental ethics who said, *You seem really interested in food ethics. I get a CSA* [Community Supported Agriculture] *subscription from an organic farm down the road. Why don't you call them and see if you can get an internship?* I called and asked if I could have an internship. And the guy said, *I don't do internships, I pay people for their time,* and I said, *Great, can I have a job?* So I ended up spending the rest of my undergraduate career also working on this organic farm. I came out of university with a degree in philosophy, but also nearly four years of practical experience in organic agriculture.

You went from always being outdoorsy to realizing that agriculture was something that you can literally sink your hands into.
Yes, and I will say one of my sassy answers to people asking me why I like being a farmer is that I'm not one of those people who come to the work from a values-based position — I like to be physical. I like to be dirty, and I like to be outside. And that's it. That's kind of how I ended up in agriculture. Now I sit behind a desk running a network for farmers, so I'm not actually doing that anymore. But it's a very embodied thing that brings me to farming.

Farming was not a Jewish practice for me at first. That didn't come until a couple of summers later, when I started working at Eden Village Camp, which is a Jewish farm-to-table sleepaway camp in New York State. The rabbi there, Pesach Stadlin, told us during staff training that Judaism is one of the oldest agricultural traditions still being practised today. I think, during my time in college, I was looking to my philosophical studies for spiritual, emotional, or intellectual substantiation for my feelings of connection with the work of agriculture. And that statement from Pesach was a kick in the head for me. Everything that I'd been looking for elsewhere was here in my own tradition, and in my own body of ancestral wisdom. That sent me on this journey of reintegration of my farmer self and my Jewish self, and of understanding how those two can be mutually enforcing and a braided whole.

How did you start to see those points of connection between your farm life and your Jewish practice?
One of my teachers, Rabbi Psachyah Lichtenstein, says, *The Jew is the calendar.* The thing that makes us Jewish is how we move through time. For me, that is the most potent way of connecting with Jewish agrarianism: intentionally stepping into the Jewish flow of time, especially in terms of the *Shalosh Regalim,* the three holidays that are harvest festivals that anchor the Jewish calendar.

What's been meaningful for me has been bringing deep intentionality to these festivals: being with my farmer friends, who are often not Jewish, and inviting them to Pesach, bringing some of the first greens and fruits that are showing up on the farm on Shavuot. The stopping and appreciating where we are at in the season is so impactful for me, and for everyone that I've invited into that experience. It's not normal for farmers to take a break in June for two days — that's a busy time. *What, you're going to stop and take stock of where you're at?* No, there's shit to do. But Shavuot particularly makes you stop and say, *Wow!* That gratitude for the first of the season is something I think about as a farmer. When I think about growing cherry tomatoes or strawberries, the joy of the very first ripe one that you're able to eat is a perfect moment. Taking the moment to appreciate the first is so huge, and our tradition tells us to do that on Shavuot.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY SHANI MINK

Hanging out with a hen at the Pearlstone Retreat Center in Reisterstown, Maryland.

I don't think many people have this awareness of Judaism as an agricultural set of holidays. They think of all of the things that we map onto the holidays: the exodus from Egypt, getting the Torah, living in huts in the desert. How do you walk yourself through the year, through these holidays?
Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are all agrarian holidays. They are all pilgrimage holidays in which our ancestors brought some of their harvest to the Temple in Jerusalem. That pilgrimage was an ancient farming conference, the time of year that you see all your farmer friends and you're just like, *How are you? How's your family? I heard your daughter got married.* You're reconnecting. It's when you see everybody.

At Pesach, we're coming out of the rainy part of the year, where we've been in our liturgy since Shemini Atzeret. Every day we've been praying for rain. On Pesach, we change our liturgy and we start praying for dew because the rainy season's over. The rainy time is when we're seeding and when we want things to be greening and growing. When we enter into Pesach, we enter into this very special period of time that's centred around the harvest of grain, specifically of barley and wheat. [In hot climates, these crops are often harvested much earlier than they are in North America.] This period of time is very auspicious spiritually, but also very crucial practically because for the Jewish people, our central seed is wheat. We're wheat people. When I talk about this with our farmers, I talk about how the inner sanctum of the *Beit Hamikdash* wasn't filled with gold or piles of riches. There was a really elaborate table full of bread. I also think about the bitter greens that we're eating. The greens that come up early in the season are often bitter. The *maror* that we eat today is a legacy from Ashkenazi diaspora in Eastern Europe because there are no greens there in March or April: horseradish is one of the only things that's coming up green at that time.

Then we begin the period of counting the *Omer* between Passover and Shavuot. During this period, every day we are praying that it's not going to rain, because we're counting on our grain harvest, and when grain is harvested you want it to be dry. You need it to store up well; you need it to hold you through a whole year. So we enter into this very tricky time, holding our breath for 49 days, counting the days between Pesach and Shavuot, when we end the barley harvest, which was traditionally food for animals. We have finished our grain harvest, all of the wheat is in for the year, and we eat bread. People talk so much about Shavuot being a dairy holiday, but it's a fruit and bread holiday as much as a dairy holiday.

I don't believe in the dairy part, actually. I always say that if there's ever a custom that has multiple reasons for it, none of them are true. They are after-the-fact projections onto existing customs.
Do you want to know my agricultural reason why? Think about livestock. What do we traditionally eat on Pesach? Lambs. This is when lambs are being born. Seven weeks later, those babies have been weaned and there's dairy available.

That's really cool. I never thought about that.
I love hosting Shavuot, having cheese and bread and cheesecakes. Everybody brings a different cheese; there's lots of butter and lots of fruit.

And then we get to the fall. And for me, Sukkot is about so many things, but primarily taking a minute to appreciate the hard work of the season and all that we have grown, all that we have produced, and really inhabiting that abundance in the space of the Sukkah and living and sitting and eating amongst our harvest. Traditionally, they hung garlic and onions and peppers and all of these fruits from the sukkah, beautifying the space and being able to rest in gratitude. That time of year, you still have summer fruit along with the fall things. It is the most abundant time of the year.

You run this organization that connects Jewish farmers together, who are not necessarily working in a Jewish context, they're just Jewish and also farmers. Tell me about these people and what it means to have a network of Jewish farmers across North America.
We're connected to about 1,800 Jewish farmers, mostly in the United States, but definitely a lot in Canada, too. We have a bunch of British Columbia Jewish farmers, as well as the folks at Shoresh in Toronto, and others. We work to cultivate the social, cultural, and spiritual well-being of Jewish farmers, and we do that by helping Jewish farmers connect to each other. Most farmers are pretty rural, pretty isolated from Jewish community.

> Judaism is one of the oldest agricultural traditions still being practised today. For me, agrarianism is intentionally stepping into the Jewish flow of time.

A lot of them are also pretty alienated from Jewish community in virtue of having a very different lifestyle than the rest of the Jewish community. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard from a Jewish farmer some version of this story where they say, *When I started farming and I went back to my Jewish community, people asked me what I was up to and I told them I was farming and they said, Jews don't do that.* A lot of people feel really rejected from mainstream Jewish community. The story that most of us have been told about what it looks like to be Jewish in the world today is not one that includes the stories of Jewish farmers. The work that we do helps tie them back into the Jewish story. Being a Jewish farmer is the most Jewish job there is, because we are an agrarian people at our core. A third of the Talmud is about agricultural law, and our ancestors, our sages, had so much to say about how to do agriculture in a way that is regenerative of self and community and soil. We offer Jewish farmers opportunities to tap into the surprisingly relevant rhythms and technologies of Jewish agricultural thought.

Our expectation is not for people to become religious or start "farming Jewishly," but just to shift the way they think about themselves in the context of the wider Jewish story, believe that they are an essential part of that story and not antithetical to it.

What are the options for people who live in cities to contribute in some way to the food system?
My recommendation would be to subscribe to a Community Supported Agriculture program, which supports your local farmers. CSA subscriptions are such an amazing way to support your local food economy because you are investing in your farmer at the beginning of the season. It allows them to buy the things that they need to buy to grow the food that they need to grow, and makes the year a lot less volatile for the farmer. And you are guaranteed to get amazing seasonal, well loved, well cared for, often organic produce. It keeps money in your local economy, and it's relational. Some CSAs have a model where, if you are a member of the CSA, you are invited to come volunteer on the farm or you can come pick your own produce. Some even have community events where you get to have a party on the farm with other CSA subscribers. It's an amazing way to support local food. Our country, our Western society, doesn't value farmers.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

"IT'S VERY MUCH TIED TO ECONOMICS"

RUNNING A KOSHER RESTAURANT ISN'T JUST A MATTER OF FAITH—IT'S ALSO A COMPLICATED BUSINESS PROPOSITION

BY **COREY MINTZ**

ILLUSTRATION BY **KAGAN McLEOD**

BOAZ RACHAMIM LOVED HIS FIRST

feta cheese. It was soft and crumbly, perfect for the popular Greek salad at Eisenbergs Sandwich Co., his kosher dairy restaurant. When the locally produced cheese lost its *hechsher,* its kosher certification, Rachamim switched to another brand. Then they lost their *hechsher* as well. Now, Rachamim tells me, “we’re stuck using other feta that we think is not as good, and is also double or triple the price.”

It’s not like he can go to a supplier to choose another from a dozen feta-style cheeses — find a similar Greek or perhaps experiment with a grassy, creamy Bulgarian. It must be one of the options recognized by the Kashruth Council of Canada (COR), Eisenbergs’ kosher certifier. Unable to find a satisfactory replacement via commercial distributors, Rachamim is stuck buying an expensive import from the supermarket, rendering the dish, one of his best sellers, unprofitable.

As a result, Rachamim is exploring a menu change, a switch to another salad that may have better margins. For the swap to succeed, the new salad will also have to be flavourful, healthy, and colourful — he’s thinking maybe a fattoush with pomegranate seeds and goat cheese, which he can get at a better price.

Every restaurant in the world is struggling with the industry’s three main types of overhead: labour costs; fixed costs (rent, utilities, insurance, etc.); and what’s called the cost of goods sold (COGS) — the price of the raw materials, including not just ingredients but wine, packaging, and other consumable or disposable products. Historically, these have each been pegged at eating up 30 percent of a restaurant’s revenue, leaving just 10 percent for profit. That model, if it was ever the norm, is now long gone: the average full-service restaurant sees profits of between three to five percent. Food inflation, though easing off its 2023 height, has sent COGS into the stratosphere. (The cost of filling a deep-fryer with oil, hardly an ingredient seen by diners as a luxury that justifies high prices, has jumped 55 percent in five years.) A mass exodus of employees, and the resulting competition for staff, has been not just a cost increase but a drain on time and resources for owners and managers, who are constantly seeking, interviewing, and training new people. And fixed costs in Toronto and Montreal, where the majority of Canada’s Jewish population lives, are always climbing; every lease renewal threatens the bottom line.

Running a kosher restaurant means facing all these same challenges, and then adding in several more variables. First, there’s the matter of the COGS. Not all kosher foods are more expensive, but key ingredients like beef or cheese can be double or triple the price of their non-kosher equivalents. Obtaining kosher certification for the restaurant itself adds another layer of fees, as does the employment of a *mashgiach* who ensures a kitchen adheres to the standards of kashrut on an ongoing basis.

Then there are the hours of operation: many kosher restaurants, which need to be closed by sundown on Fridays, don’t open at all that day; some also don’t open for dinner after sundown on Saturday. (For most establishments, opening the business for a half-day is more trouble than it is worth.) These are the busiest days for restaurants: even those that do open for Friday lunch or Saturday dinner are forgoing some of the most lucrative meal services of the week. “They’re closed for 24 hours or longer every week, 52 days a year,” says kosher restaurant maven Dani Klein, a marketer who has operated the website *YeahThatsKosher* for the last 17 years. “And it doesn’t include Passover, Shavuot, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot — that’s five holidays with multiple days they’re forced to close. And usually the day before those holidays, nobody’s going out dining because they’re at home preparing. That’s a lot of days to not have revenue.”

Finally, there’s the size of the market itself. Of the 15 million Jews in the world, just over 400,000 live in Canada. COR estimates that a fifth of those keep kosher at home. Nationally, that’s a market of roughly 80,000 customers — small enough to constrain the range of kosher products and businesses that would be sustainable, even absent other factors.

If following kosher dietary law is challenging, and the restaurant industry has notoriously thin profit margins, then making a dollar in the kosher restaurant game is practically a circus act — a financial and culinary tightrope walk where the rope is on fire and there is a bear behind you. Staying upright requires even more adaptability and attention to detail than regular restaurant ownership, since the bear has to be kosher and the rope has to be blessed by a rabbi.

BLINTZES OR PASTRAMI?

BARRY CHAIM HAS OWNED EDO, A JAPANESE restaurant in midtown Toronto, since 1986. It’s a neighbourhood with a large Jewish clientele, and members of the community regularly asked him to open a kosher restaurant. He decided to look into it. Despite the required closures, he concluded, “you’ll get the support on the other days to make up for the loss of that Friday night. Because in Jewish tradition, Friday night is not what it is in Western tradition.”

Five years ago, the right opportunity came along. Scotiabank Arena, where Chaim has had an outpost of EDO since the venue opened in 1999, had terminated the contract of its kosher food vendor and asked him to take over the station. Very quickly, the business proved that overhead was a bigger concern than operating hours. “The real challenge is the cost of food,” Chaim says. “Meat is so expensive. How many [kosher] restaurants opened and closed within the last 30 years? If they’re meat restaurants they don’t last.”

All aspiring kosher restaurateurs face a basic question: Meat or dairy? The answer doesn’t just affect their menus — it shapes their business models.

Rachamim operates two locations of Eisenbergs: a dairy kitchen inside the Prosserman JCC and a meat location in the Schwartz/Reisman Centre. He cites two elements as being central to understanding the meat versus dairy equation: the profit margins on ingredients and the range of services an establishment offers.

On the first count, Rachamim says, “dairy and pareve [are] where your margins are better.” Simply put: because the baseline cost of the ingredients is lower, restaurateurs can mark them up more than they can meat items. Over the last 15 years, beef has become a luxury ingredient for everyone: the price climbed 75 percent from 2009 to 2024. Kosher beef is at least 50 percent more expensive than that. But while the cost of beef seemingly knows no upper limit, there’s a hard cap on what guests will pay for it. As any restaurateur will tell you, they can charge only so much for a hamburger or a steak. “On the meat, unfortunately, you can’t really mark up so much. Nobody’s going to pay you $30 for a sandwich.”

Not unless you’re an institution and tourism destination, like Katz’s Delicatessen, which can get away with charging $28.95 (US) for a pastrami sandwich because people want to eat at the restaurant from *When Harry Met Sally.* At $19.95 (Canadian, equal to less than half what Katz’s charges), Eisenbergs doesn’t expect such revenue — but sandwiches are still important to the restaurant’s operations. “You need those on the menu to draw attention,

as your loss leaders," Rachamim says. "Like Costco — they have hot dogs for $1.50, and [those] drive people in to buy other items."

Profit margins aren't the only consideration. Another factor that plays a distinctive role in the kosher food ecosystem is catering, which is far more common that in the mainstream restaurant industry. Catering is more profitable than restaurant service, and it can provide steadier income through contracts (such as standing arrangements to cater meals for a JCC, school, or synagogue).

This is helpful because margins tend to be higher on catering than restaurants. A caterer doesn't just sell the food, which has thin margins: they sell services, like wait staff, and access to supplies — every glass, plate, and utensil is rented to the client at a much more advantageous markup than a steak. Restaurants, of course, provide services (waiting on patrons at their tables or packaging up their takeout orders) and require supplies, but, because guests aren't charged for these separately, these costs get folded into the prices of menu items; there's only so much mark-up that restaurateurs can add to those. In catering, each of these other items is invoiced separately, on top of the food: businesses charge for the hourly wage of each employee and the rental of every piece of tableware, each of which can then be marked-up.

STAMP OF APPROVAL

OPENING AND MAINTAINING A KOSHER COMMERCIAL kitchen goes far beyond the ingredients and recipes you use. Kashrut isn't an honour system: it requires operating under the oversight of a certification organization — in Canada, that generally means COR (The Kashrut Council of Canada), MK (MK Kosher Global Certification Agency, née Montreal Kosher), or KSR (Kashrut Supervision du Rabbinat).

Kitchens must be regularly scrutinized by a *mashgiach*, an organizationally approved food inspector whose duties include lighting pilot flames (to make certain that an observant Jew is involved in the cooking), ensuring that fridges are locked (to guarantee that no one can tamper with the items in it, intentionally or accidentally), examining raw ingredients (produce must be washed to ensure it is free of bugs), and signing off on the *hechsherim* (the certification labels) on packaged products — not all of which are recognized by each certification body. Rates are different for every restaurant, but this supervision and approval costs thousands per year.

It's also a system that can be hostile to those perceived as outsiders. In 2014, Alex Levy opened ELNA Bistro inside a medical centre in Montreal's Côte Saint-Luc. Levy is not observant, and his application for kosher certification was rejected by MK and KSR. He appealed KSR's decision, explaining that there was nothing in their rules prohibiting this: KSR had previously approved three other restaurants with similar ownership. Once Levy was approved by KSR, the first inspector was strict but respectful, taking the time to explain why a particular can of pumpkin couldn't be used even though it had US kosher certification. The business grew over the next few years until the supervisor was replaced by a less pleasant *mashgiach*, who came into Levy's kitchen demanding access to books, cameras, and fridges.

"He didn't even introduce himself as the new supervisor, and he was walking in my kitchen," says Levy. Asked why he was being treated with suspicion, the supervisor told him it was because Levy was not observant. On a second visit, things got more heated. "He points at the certificate and he snaps his fingers and says, *I remove this. You're a nobody. You will do as I say or you're not going to have the certificate*."

For its part, MK said it would approve Levy's restaurant at triple the rate he was paying KSR. Eventually they settled for the same fee, but without any transparency about rates and policies, the restaurateur was left feeling that the enforcement of kashrut was capricious. (MK did not respond to requests for comment.)

Public health agencies, which also inspect restaurants, often hand out letter grades to inform the public about an establishment's status, with timelines for fixing minor rule-breaking, which is a restaurant's responsibility. Kosher certifiers are more interventionist and generally work with restaurants on compliance, helping the operator meet their standards. "Most mistakes that happen are unintentional," says Richard Rabkin, managing director of COR, "and can be corrected with better forethought and direction." But when there are serious, intentional violations — for example, sneaking purchases of non-kosher meat — agencies can revoke a restaurant's kosher certification. If a restaurant loses that, with it goes the trust of the kosher clientele. The only options then are transitioning to a being non-kosher restaurant or going out of business. There's no coming back.

If monitoring for all this sounds labour intensive, that's because it is. Some Canadian organizations, including MK and KSR, assign

the restaurant's *mashgiach*. COR allows restaurateurs to select their own working *mashgiach* (who works directly in the kitchen and COR must then approve), with additional oversight provided by what's called a "route *mashgiach*" — a COR *mashgiach* who has several restaurants, generally clustered close together, which they simultaneously oversee — who visits multiple times a day. They, in turn, report to a senior *mashgiach* in the head office. In 2016, COR launched a *mashgiach* training course that includes food safety and knife handling education. That's a lot of labour and bureaucracy that the restaurateur is paying for through fees.

A contemporary tech upgrade to these long-established practices: installing cameras in the kitchen. This allows kosher agencies to both bring down their own labour costs as well as collect documentation in case of infractions. Like all security measures, the cameras are a double-edged sword. Employees don't like it. But it helps ensure a kitchen's kosher status and may be used to settle a dispute with a *mashgiach,* which is in a restaurant's favour.

The single greatest increased cost to a kosher restaurateur is the requirement of employing a *mashgiach*, which becomes very pricy if that person only oversees kashrut and does not perform any other kitchen labour. "I've seen some [kitchens] where the only function and job for the *mashgiach* is the kosher supervision," Klein says. "They literally will not lift a finger and do anything else, where they technically could. And in those cases, they're a real financial strain on those businesses." This is, to be clear, not due to religious obligations. "There are plenty of other *mashgichim* who are very hands-on and are working as if they're a manager or a cook," explains Klein. "They're serving a dual purpose in the restaurant so they're not bloating the payroll." This, obviously, is a better situation for the restaurateur, but still an added cost: Klein says that someone in this role "is still going to cost more than a typical restaurant worker."

In the United States, smaller certification agencies like DC Kosher and Lighthouse Kosher are working to lower this financial barrier. Focused primarily on vegetarian and vegan restaurants whose ingredients require less oversight, DC Kosher provides an easier avenue for businesses that aren't aimed at a kosher audience but could easily reach them without too much additional effort. "That's a quality of food that I want to model for our community," says

Rabbi Uri Topolosky, a member of DC Kosher's kashrut supervision board. "I'm motivated to help out a small business owner when I know it can be a fully kosher operation."

The volunteer-based DC Kosher charges no fees. Though stressing that he does not oppose the work of the major certification organizations, Topolosky wants to provide another option in order to increase the availability and variety of kosher restaurants. "For some smaller operations, it's not tenable. They can't afford to drop another $2,000 to these agencies. It cuts too deeply into their bottom line."

Topolosky stands behind his Orthodox kosher standards, but he does operate differently than other Orthodox certifiers, relying on collaboration with restaurateurs — for example, working with them to standardize their vegetable-washing processes — and casual visits from community members rather than a clockwork inspection process. Topolosky doesn't feel the need for daily checks, and would rather practise this as a trust-based partnership than require constant oversight. "The reality," he says, "is that we don't need what has become the standard in the kosher world. It's become a standard to require a kosher supervisor on site all the time. That has not been an easy option for many of these restaurants."

A SMALL MARKET & SMALL SELECTION

SOME KOSHER RESTAURATEURS SAY THE LACK OF competition among suppliers — manufacturers and distributors of items like the feta Rachamim was looking for — is one of their biggest challenges.

"There is no competition in *kashrus* in Montreal, in terms of meat," says Steven Lapidus, a professor at Concordia University and an expert in Montreal's kosher scene. "Most of the kosher beef manufacturers are all owned by the same company." Mehadrin (which alone distributes 75 percent of Canadian kosher beef) and Shefa effectively have a duopoly on the supply of kosher meat in this country. In addition to the high costs, kosher restaurateurs describe a lack of variety in the goods that are available, but with so few options they must choose from that limited selection and pay when prices rise, which is frequently. "It's debatable if the market is even big enough for multiple players," says Manny Azulay, owner of Ely's Fine Foods in Toronto. "The problem with the kosher guys in Canada is there's nowhere else to go. It's not that restaurant A is sourcing chicken from over here and it's cheaper than restaurant B, who's sourcing his chicken over there. We're all buying it from the same guy."

This isn't true of just meat: there's enormous concentration across the kosher food sector nationally. COR and MK don't just provide *mashgiach* services; they are also the two largest kosher certifiers of packaged food and kosher slaughtered meat in Canada. "It's a double-edged sword," says Klein of *YeahThatsKosher*. "On one hand, the community probably trusts the option that's there, the COR or the MK. But it becomes an issue for kosher businesses because they're not really offered an opportunity to shop around. They don't have options. So whatever the price is, the price is. And that is in turn reflected in the price of kosher goods."

A MATTER OF FAITH

FOR SOME WHO KEEP KOSHER, RELIGIOUS adherence is not a question of fair business practices or affordability. "The restaurant business complains a lot about it," says Ron Gersh, a government relations consultant who worked with a bidder, unsuccessfully, to secure a kosher chicken quota in Ontario. "But this is the business of kosher. You can't just say, *Trust me*. That's not okay for people who keep kosher like myself. You want it at the highest standards. For someone who is eating kosher, it's their connection to God. Eating food that is forbidden damages that connection."

Keeping kosher, but not trusting the health standards of kosher meat producers, Gersh bought his own grass-finished cow and hired a *shochet* to do the slaughter, at a cost that makes him laugh. "This is what it means to be kosher," he says. "And this is what God's people have to do. Everyone knew what they were getting into when they decided to live this lifestyle."

Lapidus says that hasn't always been the case. Over the last century, he says, Orthodox standards have become more strict, a phenomenon he attributes to a disconnection from living tradition.

In the wake of the world wars and the Holocaust, says Lapidus, "the tradition of doing what your father and your zayde did was gone. Because most of them were dead. So instead of the mimetic tradition, where you imitate your parents, you went to books." It took some time for the full effects to be realized: in North America in the '60s and '70s, Orthodox Jews were still guided by yeshivot that had been established before the war, which tended to be more liberal. Their eventual waning "led to a reliance on books, which make people more stringent. Because the book doesn't have a heart, the book doesn't give exceptions. The book is black and white, and you can't argue with it."

For example, says Lapidus, in the '70s, Orthodox Jews would have one oven, one sink, eat canned vegetables without a *hescher*, kasher their dishwasher for Passover, and even go to the movies — all behaviour that is now deemed too liberal.

It also took a couple of generations for upward social mobility to kick in, to the point where it was feasible for Jewish households to own more than one oven and pay for all the other infrastructure needed to keep meat and dairy as separate as has become the norm. "You go into houses today, you see two sinks," says Lapidus. "Back in the day of my grandmother, nobody's building a second sink. Nobody had the money. You coped with one sink and you managed to be kosher in one sink."

Speaking recently on The CJN podcast *Bonjour Chai*, Lapidus explained that MK's Orthodox standards also place a financial burden on the larger constituency of non-Orthodox Jews. "What I see is a *kashrus* setup that is not responding to the needs of individuals. One of the problems with contemporary *kashrus* is it's very much tied to economic social mobility. *Buy the bug-free broccoli for two or three times the price.* That's not fair or egalitarian for the whole community."

These more stringent standards don't just affect what happens in home kitchens: they put pressure on every stage of the restaurant supply chain. End consumers — restaurant customers — cannot absorb every price increase. When the economy is strong, people spend money. When it's not, they don't. Discretionary spending on dining out is always one of the first casualties of budgetary restraint. The harsh reality is that religious Jews must eat kosher food but are not obliged to dine in restaurants. When it gets too expensive, they stop eating out. This makes restaurateurs terrified of passing their increased costs on to diners. "You end up either eating the increase yourself, which affects your margin," says Azulay, "or you pass it along and it affects your business because people are not willing to pay for it anymore. Or you eat a little bit and pass on a little bit. All you get is margin erosion, a situation where you're making less money than you need to survive."

Despite all these obstacles, Rachamim is optimistic. Eisenbergs started out as a non-kosher restaurant. Then they had the opportunity to open in the JCC, which required becoming kosher. "That was a big decision," says Rachamim. "Restaurants are challenging. Being kosher is definitely more challenging. But going kosher for us was the best decision for our company. As soon as we became kosher, we realized that we levelled up and we're one of the top vendors in kosher."

For Rachamim, the smaller market, though it creates challenges, is an advantage. "The reality of a kosher business is: it's niche. It's a small pool. So there's less competition. Because of that there's opportunity, and it's easy to flourish. I think if you have a good product in the kosher game, you should be okay." ◪

DURING THE SPANISH INQUISITION, *CONVERSOS* HAD TO PREPARE JEWISH FOOD IN SECRET. WE'RE STILL UNPACKING THE WAYS THAT HAS SHAPED CULINARY HISTORY.

KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

BY **CAITLIN STALL-PAQUET**

A PIECE OF LARD KEPT IN A COOL CORNER of the kitchen. A vegetarian dish prepared in tandem with a pork-rich analogue. A pot of Shabbat stew simmered ahead of time to allow for a hands-off meal later. Simple sights you might find in many a home kitchen — and also, sometimes, evidence of secret rebellion. It's a collection of findings all cited during the Spanish Inquisition trials, which ran from the late fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, peaking in the sixteenth. Food has a long history of getting mixed up with politics, and it was the weapon of choice for Catholics during this time: they used it to denounce the Jews and Muslims who had been forced by the state to convert to Christianity but secretly maintained their religious practices.

When Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II issued the Alhambra Decree (the edict ordering the expulsion of practising Jews) on March 31, 1492, Jews were given a choice: be baptized or leave. Over the course of the next 300 some years, somewhere between 200,000 and 600,000 converted.

GEFILTE FISH A LA VERACRUZANA
Developed by Ashkenazi Jews in Veracruz, this version of the classic poaches fish in spicy tomato sauce with capers, peppers, and olives.

(Approximately 160,000 chose exile, and—estimates vary wildly—between 3,000 and 300,000 refused both expulsion and conversion, and were executed.) Of the Jews who stayed and converted, some continued to practise their religion secretly, though how many is impossible to know given the necessary secrecy of it all.

At first, explains Ilan Stavans, a Mexican-Jewish food historian, coercively converted Jews and Muslims were called *cristianos nuevos* (new Christians). The term *converso* eventually emerged to describe Jews who hadn't fully renounced their religion or who still acknowledged their background. "*Converso* became a term that, at first, was used in a derogatory way, and then those *conversos* appropriated it with a sense of pride," Stavans says. (The term *marrano*, meaning pig, was more widespread, and an insult with extra heft given that Jews don't eat pork; unlike *converso*, it hasn't been reclaimed as thoroughly.) Later on, the term *crypto-Jews* (from the Greek word for hidden) was coined, perhaps a more accurate reflection of these people who were forced to hide their true selves. (In Hebrew, the term is *anusim*, which translates to "coerced ones.")

Bordeaux-based historian, chef, and cookbook author Hélène Jawhara Piñer is of French and Spanish heritage and grew up Sephardic; she had always been interested in the relationship between food and religion and devoted her PhD to the subject. In 2016, when embarking on that research, she wanted to dig up the oldest Jewish cookbook but struck out, instead finding elements of Jewish culinary practices tucked into broader works. Jawhara Piñer did find six Jewish recipes within a thirteenth-century Arabic-language Andalusian cookbook and two others gleaned from a fourteenth-century Egyptian cookbook.

Many other sources for her PhD relating to Sephardic cuisine were less traditional and required some detective work to locate, not to mention being able to read Italian, Catalan, Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese: "[This food] was not something that could have been shared openly, so you have to delve into sources like shopping lists, letters or poems, or other kinds of literature," says Jawhara Piñer. "Because of the Inquisition trials, you have to gather all those different kinds of sources to be able to understand the culinary history of the Sephardic Jews." She combed through food-related writings from the Cairo Geniza, a repository that contains over 400,000 Jewish manuscript fragments from all sorts of sources, dated between the sixth and nineteenth centuries. On a twelfth-century scrap of paper, the historian spotted a shopping list written by an Andalusian woman living in Egypt, addressed to her husband and asking him to buy chicken and lemon for Shabbat. However, when it came to gathering details about the food practices of medieval Jews, no sources were more helpful than the Inquisition documents that mentioned food: according to Jawhara Piñer, approximately 60 percent of the trials used food as evidence. "They unveil the real life of the crypto-Jews, from Spain, from Italy, everywhere where the court of the Inquisition settled in order to spy on *converso* practices," she says.

Crypto-Jewish lives were defined by secrecy to avoid violence and expulsion from their Iberian communities, but these people maintained a covert connection to their culture through food. Shrouded in secrecy, food remained a cultural thread within the diaspora of Jews who left Spain and its threats of execution. Sephardim dispersed around the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic to Latin America, which was illegal as Spain spread its discriminatory concept of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) and wanted to prevent *conversos* establishing openly Jewish communities elsewhere. In these new homes, encounters with a whole new set of ingredients redefined *converso* food. Something it did retain was its air of secrecy, with generations of Jews trying to blend into Catholic majorities, leaving it all but forgotten, present mostly in traditions practitioners don't know are Jewish. But a more recent wave of people curious about their lineage is uncovering those long-buried roots, often connecting with the formerly secret culture by way of its food.

MARKERS OF SECRECY

Given the Inquisition's famously repressive and violent tactics, Jews who wanted to maintain both their religion and their homes needed to exercise extreme caution. "They obviously had to hide their practices, including their food practices," says Jawhara Piñer. "It was so easy for people to spy on the food practices of the Jews in order to denounce them." Despite precautions, many *conversos* were found out and turned in—often due to a whisper network of women denouncing other women, Catholic servants in Jewish households sharing *converso* indications with the authorities. They would report being asked not to come in on Friday, or to use different spoons to stir pots of stew, only one of which contained pork, or describe a piece of lard (a Christian home staple) kept as a decoy for guests. Jews often became identifiable not because of a specific dish but rather by abstention: in Spain, avoiding pork became a tell.

However, a rich culinary culture continued to proliferate. Adafina—an overnight Shabbat stew of chickpeas, chard, and meat, thickened with eggplant—was already being prepared by Sephardic Jews in medieval Spain before the Inquisition, but it became a *converso* staple. According to Jawhara Piñer, trial documents were the first source that tied *conversos* to the stew. Foods also turned into an unspoken signifier between Jews, a kind of secret code that you deciphered when you saw who gathered for Saturday lunch or brought over stewed eggplant seasoned generously with garlic and olive oil, with unleavened bread on the side during Passover. Though eggplant—which grows easily in hot climates and arrived in Spain in the tenth century after a long trek on the Silk Road—was also eaten by Muslims, Christians stayed away from this food and associated it with Jews.

PREVIOUS PAGE, PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNY HUANG

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE BUTLER

TURCOS
These savory-sweet turnovers were originally eaten on Sukkot; hailing from Portugal, they're now popular in South Texas.

Jawhara Piñer dug up instances of Christians using the culinary preference in mockery, namely comparing Jewish dark skin to the eggplant's exterior.

Maintaining secrecy requires adaptability; for *conversos* this meant tweaking recipes to incorporate local ingredients. These shifts were a survival mechanism of sorts, ensuring that certain traditions would continue while also blending into the surrounding culinary landscape. Changing ingredients meant that what defined certain Jewish foods as Jewish was often more about how they were prepared than what they were made with: "The process is really important," Jawhara Piñer says of dishes like adafina—of which there are countless versions, depending on where they're made in the Sephardic diaspora. "In fact, most of the time, the process is more a way to identify the *converso* family than the food itself."

That adaptability became only more relevant as *conversos*, expelled from Spain, boarded ships headed for Latin America, becoming the first wave of Jewish immigrants in the New World. Proof of their passage can still be tasted in dishes that survived undercover for centuries, like a Mexican version of the Iberian meatball soup, *sopa de albóndigas,* inflected with local herbs and spices in the broth. As with the coded communication back in Spain, these foods were legible to those in the know. "Those that participate in the secret ... will feel that they are members of a

group that nobody else can recognize," says Stavans. "And that gives them a sense of authenticity and uniqueness."

Having grown up amid a confluence of traditions in Mexico City, Stavans has long been interested in how Jewish food becomes Jewish. He's travelled throughout Latin America gathering recipes born from mishmashed waves of immigration: Sephardic Jews in the late nineteenth century, the Ashkenazim and Sephardim fleeing the Second World War and, finally, Israeli and Mizrachi Jews in the 1960s. The *converso* immigrants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have seniority; private documents describing their food culture help tell their story. "We have a lot of letters, diaries and autobiographies, and other types of writings including recipes of *conversos* in those cities," Stavans says.

Stavans and Margaret E. Boyle, co-authors of *Sabor Judío: The Jewish Mexican Cookbook*, both come from Ashkenazi families. The two also share a similar — and specific — culinary lineage. "We discovered that, in our respective families, there was this very precious document," explains Stavans. "A recipe book that has travelled through the generations. It was written by women and came from [Eastern] Europe and then shows the fusion with Mexican food." The two texts have entries in common, which then took on Mexican twists with subsequent generations. The introduction to *Sabor Judío* describes Stavans's mother putting her own spin on the classics, spicing up the matzah ball broth with jalapeño or adding Mexican coffee to honey cake. However, the people who wrote down these foods lived in Mexico in ignorance of *conversos*. By the time they arrived, *converso* traditions had been absorbed into the Christian majority, leaving the newly arrived Jews to think they were the first People of the Book to settle there. The buried-but-present history is visible in a photo of Stavans' sown grandparents kissing in the famous Alameda Central park, where the Mexican extension of the Spanish Inquisition executed accused witches and Jews in the seventeenth century: "They are oblivious to the fact that, in the back, there is a plaque that says this is the Plaza del Quemadero, the very place people were burned at the stake," he says.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Much like Stavans's grandmother wrote down her recipes, *conversos* also passed along their culinary traditions, leaving out the fact that these practices were Jewish. Over time, as their descendants were raised in Christian homes, that omission manifested in families whose culinary habits had unexplained quirks: they would eat fish early on Saturdays while neighbours feasted on meat hours later, or undertake a spring cleaning of the kitchen that actually coincided with Passover.

For Stavans, what makes these dishes and practices inherently *converso* is how the discernible details aren't necessarily overtly Jewish. "If you tell somebody [about] gefilte fish with salsa or mango, they will say, 'Oh, I see the Jewish and the Mexican connection,'" he says. By contrast, if you describe a dish of fish cooked in tomato sauce, "people will not immediately think this is Jewish food. But, for those families, it was something that you cooked so that the neighbours would not suspect you, and that passed on from one generation to another."

As Jawhara Piñer sees it, the change food underwent as it arrived in a new location is a marker of identity: Sephardic Jews "are so diverse, and this diversity makes our strength," she says. "We have a very singular food identity that has been shaped thanks to the different foods we were able to find in our locations." That trusty Shabbat stew is the perfect illustration of her point. What came to define *converso* food outside of Spain is how it adapted to its new home. Its superpower was blending in by taking up ingredients that were widely used locally, leaving the process of cooking the dish as the strongest tie to history and tradition. The ingredients of adafina, which is mentioned repeatedly in Inquisition trial documents, vary wildly depending on location and climate. Italian and Portuguese varieties mixed in freekeh and chestnuts. When adafina arrived in South America, tomatoes and sweet potatoes made their way into the pot, while Mexican versions incorporated corn. "I really love when one dish is mentioned in different kinds of sources," adds Jawhara Piñer, "from different territories and different centuries, different periods, because it really shows that this is a Sephardic food, because when people move, food moves."

Years of research inspired Jawhara Piñer to write cookbooks, including *Sephardi: Cooking the History*, based on historical sources and mostly staying true to original concoctions. One of her favourite recipes in the book is for a haroset that tracks the movement characteristic of *conversos*. It was created by a Portuguese family that was expelled and went to Italy before settling in Mexico, where it was cited in Inquisition trial documents. This version of the Passover staple combines chestnuts, vinegar, figs, soaked dates, apples, and thinly cut cinnamon sticks, all shaped like a meatball and rolled in almond.

Jawhara Piñer points out that, though they might not always be understood as such, hints of *converso* Jews are widespread in foods that have been absorbed into Christian culture. Turcos, for example, are savoury-sweet turnovers of Portuguese origin that were prepared for Sukkot; they were brought to Mexico by *conversos*, documented in the Mexican Inquisition, and are now popular with South Texans. This absorption of Jewish culinary history isn't limited to foods that left the Iberian peninsula for the New World, either. Hojuelas — a fried dough dessert of Spanish Sephardic descent — is now prepared mainly for Easter in Andalusia. Foodstuffs also travelled in the other direction: chocolate, which came to Europe after colonization, was brought there by Sephardic Jews who left Mexico to return to Spain, and eventually settled in France. Jewish chocolate makers set up shop in the southwest Basque city of Bayonne. In Mexico, *converso* Jews sometimes substituted the wine in the Shabbat blessing of the *Kiddush* with a chocolate-based drink, a practice they adopted from local Indigenous people. In Bayonne's historic Jewish quarter, residents, over time, became versed in chocolate manufacturing. Eventually, they created the gelt prized by sugar-hungry kids on Hanukkah.

ADAFINA
Left to cook gently overnight, ingredients in this Shabbat stew vary from chickpeas and chard to tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and corn.

PHOTOGRAPH BY APRIENA JUGOO PUMMER

REDISCOVERED LEGACIES

When Jawhara Piñer started digging into *converso* culinary history, it was a relatively unstudied field: the food had never garnered much attention. Stavans points out that rising curiosity about *converso* traditions is partially attributable to many Latin American families discovering their Jewish heritage via contemporary ancestry databases. As they have, long-hidden traditions have become a source of pride: "It's an amazing life under the surface that is about tricks — it's about silences, and it's about using metaphors for certain things because you can't name them directly," says Stavans. "That, I think, is what crypto-Jewish food is about. It's the emotional attachment that comes with a secret."

Havana-born Genie Milgrom is familiar with the experience of uncovering that secret. Raised in a Catholic family, the Miami resident found out about her Jewish ancestry only as an adult. The truth came to her by way of food, specifically a collection of hundreds of recipes found in her mother's belongings, many dating back to the Inquisition. (After this discovery, she realized that there had been clues: in a 2019 interview, she told NPR that her grandmother had taught her customs she later learned were Jewish, like checking eggs for blood.) One of the found recipes was for *chuletas* — the Spanish word for pork chops — which are actually sweet bread-based snacks akin to French toast, shaped like the thick slices of meat they are named after. Milgrom ended up converting to Judaism, undoing her ancestors' forced conversion to Catholicism some 500 years earlier, and writing books about her experience, including one titled *Recipes of My 15 Grandmothers*.

As more and more Latin Americans discover their Jewish histories, that interest has rippled outward. In Mexico City, says Stavans, "*Kosherísmo* is really a widespread term.... It can mean that something is kosher or it can mean that something is deliciously Jewish, though it really isn't kosher. Today, being Jewish is complicated, but Jews are no longer in the shadows, so I think it's part of the new Jewish identity that is much more recognized and widespread."

In contemporary Spain, though, the culinary impacts of the Inquisition are both obvious and invisible. As Jawhara Piñer points out, Spanish officials were very successful in placing Christianity at the centre of society, positioning their power in opposition to Jewish and Muslim culture via food. They essentially pork-washed history. "People think that the people from Spain have always been eating pork, which is totally crazy because it's totally wrong," says Jawhara Piñer. "There has only been a Spanish cuisine since the fifteenth century, erasing all the populations that were living in Spain before." As it turns out, the winners not only write history — they also often write the recipe books. ◪

Olivia Ostrow: *Matzah Ball Soup*

by **COREY MINTZ**

NO ONE LIKES TO BE SICK. But if we're lucky, we do at least get a bit of pampering to help us through. To be cared for when you're unwell is to receive a transfer of love. This usually takes the form of that most basic of needs: food.

So what happens when it's a chef whose got the cold?

Like many people who work with food, chef Olivia Ostrow usually makes the meals at home, too. "No one cooks for me" she laments. "After 25 years I'm still complaining to my husband that I don't even get a coffee brought, ever, in bed." Except if she's sick. When Ostrow has a cold, she spends her days on the sofa watching British

The ultimate Jewish comfort food, Olivia Ostrow's version of chicken soup has a distinctly French twist.

FOOD/PROP STYLING/PHOTOGRAPHY **MARISA CURATOLO**

crime shows, while her husband and children buy a whole chicken and make matzah ball soup. As with many Jews, the emotional bond with this soup goes back to her youth.

Born in France and raised among two sets of Holocaust-survivor grandparents, Ostrow recalls childhood Shabbat dinners that were a mix of French and Ashkenazi comfort food: gefilte fish with horseradish, *pot au feu* — meat braised in stock on the stovetop, which Ostrow describes as akin to a French version of brisket — and, of course, challah dipped in chicken soup. These indelible family dinners gave her a lifelong hunger for classic French and Jewish cooking. "Everything in my childhood food was comfort food," she says, "which translates in my food today. Even at the restaurant, which is fine dining. I like to say that my restaurant is a fine comfort food."

In 2023, the chef opened Ostrow Brasserie in Miami, a restaurant she is keen to identify as serving French food that is kosher rather than the other way around. French cooking, famously, relies on heavy doses of butter the way the Earth relies on the sun. Asked how she navigates without it, Ostrow says there are two magic words: duck fat. (She has also concocted a butter alternative that she uses in a few dishes; it's a recipe she prefers to keep secret until the cookbook she's writing is published.)

Aside from these substitutions, her restaurant is strictly French: there is no matzah ball soup on the menu, none of the *ungapatchka* that many kosher restaurants indulge in, trying to offer something for everyone or dress up old standards. "I'm not a fusion person," says Ostrow. "In my restaurant, there's no smoke coming out of your steak. I don't put sushi on my endive and blue cheese salad." It's a sense of purity that cuts both ways: just as much as she isn't going to dilute French classics, she says, "I'm not going to make a Thai or Chinese version of my matzah ball soup."

Maztah balls are best made by touch rather than measurement; a little olive oil on your hands will make it easier to roll them out.

And so, Ostrow taught her husband and children to prepare her favourite comfort food to her standards, starting with a whole chicken, a bit of dill, and cloves. "I like the clove because it adds a little spice" says Ostrow. "And I also enjoy the smell in my house while it's cooking."

She instructs her family to simmer for hours. "The longer you cook it, the better it's going to be," Ostrow says. "That's when you're going to have that aroma and that brownish colour that's lovely." (There's no one right way to make matzah ball soup. Though there is a wrong way. I loved my bubbe, but she was the worst cook. Her chicken soup contained no meat. Or matzah balls. Or salt. The chicken was removed and served on its own, with the rubbery skin attached.)

After making the broth, shredding the meat, adding carrots and celery and, if they are truly making it to her specifications, caramelizing onions, her family brings the soup to Ostrow to eat on the sofa. The only downside to this effort, the delivery of love and nourishment through cooking, is the mess they make in her kitchen. "They're terrible," laughs Ostrow. "It's also probably why my husband doesn't want to cook. Because if he cooks, and he leaves a mess, then I go a little nuts."

Not that Ostrow is one of those chefs who cleans as they cook. "I like to create new dishes and taste flavours — to put music on and have a hundred ingredients out. And then it has to be cleaned up the moment I'm done. Not by me. Unless it's at my house. I have the luxury of owning a business. Because I pay all the bills, someone is going to clean for me."

CHICKEN SOUP WITH MATZAH BALLS

SERVES 6

- whole chicken, cut into pieces
- cloves (easily overpowering, so start with as few as possible)
- fresh dill
- onions, thinly sliced
- olive oil
- carrots, sliced into coins
- celery, roughly chopped
- matzah meal
- eggs
- salt
- pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Place the chicken, cloves, and some of the dill in a large pot. Cover with water and bring to a boil. (Adding salt during the simmering will make the broth too salty once the liquid has reduced; do not add it until the end.) Reduce heat and simmer for two hours. ("But when you're sick, you want it fast," says Ostrow. "So an hour and a half at the minimum.") Strain the stock and transfer the chicken to a bowl to cool. Return the chicken stock to the pot.

2. Meanwhile, place the onions in a wide pan with a splash of oil. Cook on low heat until caramelized — sticky, brown, and sweet — stirring only occasionally. (You'll find many recipes online claiming that this can be done in 10 minutes. It can't. These recipes are lying to you to make things seem easier. But doing this correctly requires no additional effort or skill, only time — at least 40 minutes. All you have to do is stir the pan gently every five or 10 minutes.)

3. In a mixing bowl, combine matzah meal, eggs, salt, and some herbs (I added what I had — dried oregano and fresh parsley) until a dough forms. I used two eggs for one cup of matzah meal. Pour a little oil on your hands and shape the dough into golf-ball-sized spheres. Add the matzah balls to the strained soup, along with the carrots and celery, and simmer for 25 minutes.

4. When the chicken is cool enough to handle, separate the meat from the bones. Discard the bones. Shred the meat and return it to the soup. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve with a spoon of caramelized onion in each bowl and garnish with a bit more dill.

FOOD/PROP STYLING/PHOTOGRAPHY **MARISA CURATOLO**