

“Gefilte fish can be the next sushi”:
21st Century Jewish American Inventions and Aspirations

In 2004, a character in Tova Mirvis’s novel *The Outside World* presciently remarked, “Gefilte fish can be the next sushi.... Because people are hungry for something authentic.... They miss the past. Even if they never had it, they still miss it.” Twelve years later, Liz Alpern and Jeffrey Yoskowitz released their cookbook, *The Gefilte Manifesto: New Recipes for Old World Jewish Foods*, to both popular and critical acclaim. “Gefilte is not just about your bubbe,”¹ they write. “It is not about kitsch or a foodie revolution. Gefilte is about reclaiming our time-honored foods and caring how they taste and how they’re sourced. It is about serving a dish with pride, not simply out of deference to hollow convention. It is about taking food traditions seriously and reclaiming the glory of Ashkenazi food—what it has been and what it can be.”²

The trajectory of Jewish food in America has changed dramatically in the last decade, calling into question the ever-fraught relationship between “Jewish” food and “kosher” food—a connection that while not always held in private practice, has more frequently held in public spaces. The impact of explicitly Israeli food in hip American restaurants, as well as the establishment of high end, unapologetically Ashkenazi (and frequently non-kosher) delis and bakeries, has also challenged earlier historical narratives that tended to treat ethnically Jewish food as casual, low-brow, and inexpensive. Alpern and Yoskowitz’s Brooklyn-based *Gefilteria* (along with their accompanying *Manifesto*) actively seeks to redefine specifically Ashkenazi Jewish food within the contemporary values of seasonal, local, and sustainable eating. They are not alone, flanked by a new generation of culinary innovators who has embraced what it sees as Old World inspiration, radical fermentation, and a back-to-the-land ideology.

¹ Yiddish for “grandmother”

² In *The Gefilte Manifesto*

To paraphrase Mordechai Kaplan, these new arbiters of Jewish food give kashrut and “authenticity” a vote, but not a veto. This morning’s presentation will grapple with the questions thus posed to historians about the changing nature of American Jewish food studies, as narratives shift from arguments concerning acculturation and orthodoxy, to contemporary arguments regarding sustainability, social justice, and the place of nostalgia on the Jewish American plate.

The history of Jewish food in America has been one that is obviously entwined with both Jewish immigration and religious trends. The story we have been telling as scholars has been, until recently, one of declension. Until it isn’t. The restaurant scene is an interesting one to follow. Ted Merwin’s 2016 *Pastrami on Rye* chronicles the rise and fall of American deli culture, demonstrating the ways that the 20th century deli made New York Jews American, and made all New Yorkers a little Jewish. Merwin’s thoroughly researched celebration of the deli ends with a jeremiad, lamenting that young Jews have lost the taste for deli and therefore have lost something intrinsically Jewish. (We’ll come back to that later.)

An interesting aspect of the Ashkenazic food scene is that historically this was never a site of fine dining. We can set aside a home holiday or Shabbat table for a moment; we’re discussing eating out. You weren’t going to eat delicatessen on white tablecloths with elegant wait staff. This is food you order at a counter and eat with your hands. Tuchman and Levine, in their influential essay on Jews and Chinese food, delve into this difference between the Jews and, say, the Italians in early 20th century New York City.³ Kosher restaurants in the later 20th century could be fancy, but they were fancy kosher steak houses or kosher Italian or kosher French restaurants. Deli is not fancy. Post 1967, an interest in Middle-Eastern food grabbed hold of the Jewish culinary imagination, but these falafel joints were not fancy either; strictly counter service.

³ Tuchman and Levine

Which brings us to the strikingly different restaurant scene of today. Israeli-British chef Yotam Ottolenghi, along with his Palestinian partner Sami Tamimi, opened their first London-based Israeli restaurant in 2002 and published their first cookbook *Ottolenghi* in 2008. Ottolenghi and Tamimi's subsequent books, including the 2012 *Jerusalem*, have inspired an Israeli renaissance in the States. In Philadelphia, for example, you have three such restaurants co-owned by Michael Solomonov and Steve Cook. Zahav, established in 2008, is often cited as one of the major influences on modern Israeli cuisine in America. It, along with hummus bar Dizinghoff and the vegan Goldie (that serves falafel, fries, and tehina shakes) are explicitly Israeli in both menu and style—no vague Middle-Eastern descriptor needed. Another Israeli restaurant by chef Alon Shaya opened in 2015 with much success in New Orleans. He opened a new restaurant this year in NOLA and will be opening another in Denver next month; they are named Saba and Safta, respectively, Hebrew for Grandfather and Grandmother. Who says the revival isn't about your bubbe?

In Rochester, NY, my own local hipster bowling alley/craft cocktail bar Radio Social offers the following on their dinner menu: Eggplant schnitzel, Beets (served with pomegranate, fig, dill and tahini), fried halloumi cheese, hummus with tahini (served on laffa with pickles), as well as Coal-roasted Avocado on lavash with pistachio schug and labne). That they offer falafel goes without saying, but their lamb tartare is served with an eggplant puree on grilled challah. They also serve octopus (not a kosher animal, by the way). It is hard not to see this as the Ottolenghization of the American kitchen. *But does this also suggest a de-judaization of Israeli food?*

More remarkable is Abe Fisher's, opened in 2014, also co-owned by Solomonov and Cook. The restaurant's website explicitly calls out the "journey of the Jewish people from their homeland to the Diaspora" in order to describe the Ashkenazi-influenced menu. After consuming your Tomato Soup with Fried Matzo Ball and Rapini, your Montreal Style

Smoked Short Ribs with house-made rye bread, pickles and mustards, you can cap off your meal with a Bacon and Egg Cream, made with maple custard and chocolate foam. The menu plays with nostalgic adaptations of New World adaptations of Old World foods. Both Zahav and Abe Fisher are reservation-required, high end restaurants that cater Jewish-identified food to a mixed audience.

2017 saw the opening of Essen, a Jewish bakery with a Yiddish name in an Italian neighborhood in South Philly. The owner, Tova du Plessis, stated upon opening: “My goals are to provide the best Jewish baked goods in Philadelphia to draw people from all over Philly and also to become a neighborhood staple,” she expressed, adding that she is not just targeting a Jewish audience.⁴ The menu consists of Jewish bakery staples: challah, rye, Jewish apple cake, black and white cookies, etc. She also serves sandwiches with pastrami-smoked salmon, labneh with zaatar, and a Tunisian tuna salad with harissa. In an interview, she claimed “I wanted the bakery to represent me - of course it has to have a Jewish slant - and to make products I really love,” she said. “I’m not a purist; I’m not trying to make old Jewish recipes. I see them more as inspiration, as a jumping-off point.”⁵ Zak the Baker is a similarly inventive Jewish bakery, set in a non-Jewish Miami neighborhood, that opened in 2012 by Zak Stern. Stern speaks for many of these chefs when he claims that “Ashkenazi food has been relegated to bland and boring, and that’s so not true,” he said. “Deli is a soulful, soulful food. I think we can shed some light on it.”⁶

New York’s Mile End Deli opened in 2010, offering Montreal-style smoked meats and other foods inspired by Noah and Rae Bernamoff’s grandmothers. The menu also includes a breakfast sandwich with maple bacon. Says Noah, “No one should question my

⁴ Stern, Marissa. “A Little Slice of Leaven Coming to South Philly.” *Jewish Exponent*, Mar 17, 2016. <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/1779236425?accountid=13567>.

⁵ “South Philly Bakery Sells Jewish Classics.” *The American Israelite*, Nov 16, 2017. <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/1965611856?accountid=13567>.

⁶ <https://www.jta.org/2017/01/26/life-religion/this-new-kosher-deli-may-be-miamis-hippest-restaurant>

definition of my own Judaism. If I call myself a Jewish deli, that's my prerogative."⁷ Other notable nontraditional delis include Saul's Restaurant and Deli in San Francisco and Kenny & Zukes in Portland. Ted Merwin sees this deli revival as a flash in the pan. It's possible. But what I find interesting is that of all these explicitly Jewish businesses, only two (Zak the Baker and The Gefilteria) are kosher. This shouldn't be surprising given the demographics of the American Jewish community, as well as the greater American population. And yet.

As a visiting professor at Connecticut College from 2005-2007, I had the opportunity to interview several women on the board of the successful 1969 charitable cookbook from New London's Conservative Congregation Beth El, *From Manna to Mousse*. More than one of my interviewees explained that they would frequently have to change some of the submitted recipes so as to adhere to kashrut. The most common switch was from butter to margarine in *milchig* dishes. I asked Editor Shilly Daren, "Did it ever occur to you to leave them as is?" She looked at me aghast, "Oh, we would never publish a non-kosher recipe in our cookbook!" I followed up, "What percentage of the congregation kept kosher, do you think?" Her response was unintentionally comic, as she expressed more horror than in her initial response, "My dear, *nobody* kept kosher!"⁸ This response, typical of a midcentury Jewish American woman, raises interesting questions about identity and self-representation. *From Manna to Mousse's* Foreword asserts, "The Jewish people take for granted that Jewish cookery possesses characteristics of its own which differentiate it from ordinary cooking."

These mid-century cookbooks emphasized Jewish particularism—that which makes its cooking distinctive. Those cookbooks were specifically directed to Jews, in hope that these traditional recipes will enrich Jewish practice and increase Jewish observance. Some of these, such as Jennie Grossinger's *The Art of Jewish Cooking* and Mildred Bellin's *The Jewish Cook Book* emphasized Jewish traditional recipes and were largely centered around

⁷ Fishkoff, S. (2011, May 26). What's cooking. *Jewish News* Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/903976217?accountid=13567>

the Jewish calendar year.⁹ Others such as Ruth and Bob Grossman’s midcentury series including *The Chinese-Kosher Cookbook*, *The Italian-Kosher Cookbook*, *The French-Kosher Cookbook*, attempted to demonstrate that keeping kosher did not cut one off from sophisticated cuisine.¹⁰

Despite the actual decline of kashrut observance among American Jews in the latter half of the twentieth-century, the presence of kosher Jewish cookbooks increased dramatically. The availability of cookbooks on the so-called “authentic” recipes of earlier, exotic Jewish communities capitalizes on a nostalgia for a Jewish past and it would become quite challenging to find a contemporary Jewish cookbook (that called itself a Jewish cookbook) that was not a kosher cookbook. Suzie Fishbein’s incredibly popular *Kosher By Design* books included gourmet twists on old Jewish favorites, but those recipes sat side by side with “Teriyaki Salmon”, “Artichoke and Spinach Palmiers”, and “Grilled Chicken over Sesame Noodles”. For Fishbein, any recipe can be Jewish, for to eat like a Jew is to eat anything as long as it adheres to *halakha* (Jewish law). These culinary shifts demonstrate, if not a return to tradition, at least a turn toward the recognition of ritual importance, defining Jewish food as kosher, despite a declining number of kosher Jews.¹¹

In the 2000s, one could still see the Fishbein-ization of Jewish cooking. The early 21st century Orthodox Jew—at least in gastronomic terms—is the new acculturated Jew in America. Go to any expensive MO wedding and see the expansive culinary offerings, from tacos to sushi stations. All kosher. According to recent studies, the fastest growing Jewish movement in America is that of the Orthodox. But for those Jews who have left the strictures of kashrut behind, it seems that gastronomic invention has increased. While it isn’t the first

⁸ Personal interview, New London 2006

⁹ Mildred Grosberg Bellin, *The Jewish Cook Book* (New York,: Bloch publishing company, 1941); Jennie Grossinger Grossinger, *The Art of Jewish Cooking* (New York,: Random House, 1958).

¹⁰ Ruth Grossman and Bob Grossman, *The Chinese-Kosher Cookbook* (New York,: P.S. Eriksson, 1963); *The French-Kosher Cookbook* (New York,: P. S. Eriksson, 1964); *The Italian-Kosher Cookbook* (New York,: P. S. Eriksson, 1964).

time that American Jews have publicly shunned kashrut (the late 19th century being the clearest example), this might be the first time for the embrace of Jewish food to be removed entirely from kashrut. (Notable exceptions would be the kosher-style deli and the Reuben sandwich.)

In 2002, Mitchell Davis advocated for butter as the best way to make roast chicken in his cookbook *The Mensch Chef: Or Why Delicious Jewish Food Isn't an Oxymoron*. Davis writes in the introduction, “Somewhere between the Exodus from Egypt and the migration to New York’s Upper West Side, Jewish food got a bad rap.”¹² Davis attempts to rectify this, and his might be the first popular Jewish cookbook in a long time to openly advocate for the mixing of milk and meat in a dish. Ken Gordon, the owner of Kenny & Zukes in Portland, Oregon, agrees with him as butter is his preferred schmaltz substitute in chopped liver.

Many of the restaurateurs mentioned here have various reasons for eschewing kosher certification. First of all, kashrut is expensive—which is an issue for new people starting out. Kenny & Zukes is not kosher: “The number one part of sustainability is staying in business. We can’t afford a kosher kitchen, and there aren’t enough people who really care. Portland is not exactly west Jerusalem.”¹³ In other cases, it has to do with issues surrounding the meat.

Peter Levitt, of Saul’s Restaurant and Deli in San Francisco, explains:

“Americans have doubled their meat consumption in recent years. To do that, meat had to be made cheaper, along with a huge reduction in the ethics of production. The kids today say we can’t eat like this. They say we want to eat sustainably - that’s how they practice their spirituality.”¹⁴

¹¹ Steven Martin Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within : Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 60. At a glance, perhaps 18% of American Jews keep kosher.

¹² Mitchell Davis, *The Mensch Chef*.

¹³ Fishkoff, S. (2011, May 26). What’s cooking. *Jewish News* Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/903976217?accountid=13567>

¹⁴ Fishkoff, S. (2011, May 26). What’s cooking. *Jewish News* Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/903976217?accountid=13567>

Saul's removed kosher salami from its menu in 2009. "It's industrially produced meat that gets blessed by a rabbi," says Levitt. "We all know that isn't good enough."¹⁵ Unlike Kenny & Zukes, Saul's does not serve bacon. In David Sax's 2009 *Save the Deli*, he quotes Fred Austin of Katz's Deli, saying "I use the term organic to describe this place, not to mean we serve organic products, but in the sense that it's alive."¹⁶ For many of these chefs, serving organic and sustainable products is more important than securing rabbinic approval. The thread that seems to connect all these Jewish food makers is the idea that "Authenticity" is not a deal breaker.

While Alpern and Yoskowitz have stated that their *Gefilte* revolution is not about "your bubbe", the Bernamoff's *Mile End Cookbook* is very much about *their* bubbes. Noah Bernamoff: "Other ethnicities have reinvented their comfort food, their grandmothers' recipes, and made great restaurants," Mr. Bernamoff said. "Where is ours?"¹⁷ *The Mile End Deli Cookbook*, which came out in 2013, is dedicated to—and features many pictures of—the couples' grandmothers. The Introduction states: "This book is all about overturning the assumptions that have long governed Jewish food—namely, that deli specialties like smoked meat and lox are things you never make at home, and that the Jewish food you do make at home is just matzo ball soup, latkes, and other bubbe classics reserved for the holidays." The first section is called "Do-It-Yourself Delicatessen" which has recipes for beef salami, gefilte fish, and many many pickles.

Along with the interest in seasonal, local produce comes an interest in preserving and pickling. Jeffrey Yoskowitz is an alum of Hazon's Adamah farm program and his interest in fermentation is highlighted in *The Gefilte Manifesto*:

¹⁵ Moskin, Julia. "Can this Sandwich be Saved?" *New York Times*, Apr 14, 2010, Late Edition (East Coast). <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/434350585?accountid=13567>

¹⁶ David Sax, *Save the Deli* 17.

¹⁷ Moskin, Julia. "Can this Sandwich be Saved?" *New York Times*, Apr 14, 2010, Late Edition (East Coast). <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/434350585?accountid=13567>

“Not only does the pickle have a lot of flavor, the method of making it relies on a natural occurring bacteria - acidophilus, what’s in yogurt - which is very good for your digestion and is probiotic,” he said. “Growing up, eating a pastrami sandwich with a full sour pickle next to it, wow, it’s the best way of helping digest that fatty pastrami sandwich. That’s when I learned this tradition has a built in wisdom to it. This inspired me.”¹⁸

Other recent cookbooks such as Emily Paster’s 2017 *The Joys of Jewish Preserving* and Amelia Saltsman’s 2015 *Seasonal Jewish Kitchen: A Fresh Take on Tradition* highlight the contemporary trend of preserving and pickling seasonal, local produce.

The emphasis on sustainability is in sync with current food trends (not specifically Jewish ones). But returning to Merwin’s critique of these new delis, the question is begged: how much of this is just nostalgia? Where do we go from here? Acknowledging these concerns, Karen Adelman, of Saul’s Deli, said at a 2010 “Referendum on the Jewish Deli” event: “Everyone feels like they own this cuisine. It’s connected to nostalgia, to comfort, to religion.”¹⁹ Rachel Gross writes on the current culinary revival as playing out through the lens of “camp”. “Campy nostalgia builds an emotional and sensory connection to the past, even as its practitioners recognize that their ephemeral, palpable creations belong to the present. Culinary revivalists honor the past in a way that self-consciously speaks to the concerns of the present and suggests directions for the future.”²⁰ While nostalgia is obviously a factor, it’s not all there is. Nostalgia in cookbooks is nothing new, but it is this gleeful reimagining that seems new. “It’s one thing to make something and associate it with your grandmother,” Liz Alpern says. “It’s another thing to make something at a table, today, now, with your friends who are cool.”²¹

Conclusion: more questions than answers

¹⁸ Gluck, Robert. “‘Gefilte Manifesto’ Seeks to Revolutionize Classic Ashkenazi Food.” *Washington Jewish Week*, Dec 15, 2016. <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/1853877869?accountid=13567>

¹⁹ Moskin, Julia. “Can this Sandwich be Saved?” *New York Times*, Apr 14, 2010, Late Edition (East Coast). <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/434350585?accountid=13567>

²⁰ Gross, Rachel Beth. “Objects of Affection: The Material Religion of American Jewish Nostalgia.” Order No. 3642087, Princeton University, 2014. <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/1629746283?accountid=13567>.

Ultimately: what does it mean to save the deli? Or to revive Ashkenazi food? Or to mainstream Israeli food for a non-Jewish audience? Are these attempts to legitimize Jewish authenticity outside of the synagogue? Is this a political defense of diaspora? We know these foods taste good, but a narrative is also being provided and an audience is being targeted.

1. What can we read into the new love of Israeli food when the subject of Israel is fraught?
2. What is the tension between declaring Jewish food part of American cuisine and declaring it a global food?
3. Is this merely symbolic ethnicity? Trader Joe's now carries both Everything-but-the-bagel spice blend, a Sabich (Israeli eggplant sandwich), and Yemenite zhoug.

Detractors of the new Ashkenazi Soul Food may suggest that these foodie practitioners are grasping at food legitimacy due to a lack of halakhic legitimacy. In the end, the argument over Jewish food is the same as Jewish identity. There are those who *feel* that it's Jewish enough.

²¹ Rose, Joel. *'the Gefilte Manifesto': A Loved, and Loathed, Jewish Staple Gets Updated*. Washington: NPR, 2016. <https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/docview/1819245815?accountid=13567>.