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### **A chance to sample the diversity of kosher foods**

**Marlin, elk -- even yak -- are on the menu at a learning and tasting event in Beverly Hills. And then there's the strange fish said to taste like pork.**

By Tami Abdollah, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
August 11, 2007

More than 1,500 years ago, Jewish scholars wrote of the *shibuta*, an unusual fish found in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers of ancient Babylon, modern-day Iraq.

In the Talmud, that encyclopedic compendium of Jewish law and tradition, the *shibuta* is described as a tasty and popular fish with a distinctive trait -- it apparently tastes like pork.

According to *kashrut*, Jewish dietary laws, it is forbidden to eat pig. A kosher animal must have split hooves and chew its cud. The pig, however, is not a ruminant, and is also viewed as an unclean animal in many faiths.

The significance of the *shibuta* is the idea that while God forbade certain foods, God also provided kosher equivalents that will evoke a similar taste. Thus a porky fish.

The *shibuta* was explained and (by some) tasted Sunday at an event at the Prime Grill, a new high-end kosher restaurant on Beverly Hills' Rodeo Drive. About 120 people, primarily Orthodox Jews, turned up to surprise their taste buds and learn.

"Kosher law we often view as very restrictive," said Ari Zivotofsky, a main organizer of the event. "It doesn't have to be. . . . People should know the Torah doesn't prohibit these things."

For example, there are no prohibitions against yak. It was served with a spicy Asian sauce. The 15-course meal also included blue marlin, sparrow and dove in a minestrone soup, crispy pigeon with mango salad, quail and partridge served with Korean-style cucumber, and spice-encrusted grilled elk.

The meal marked the first time in history that a yak had been ritually slaughtered and eaten kosher, said Ari Greenspan, another key organizer of the event. It was impossible to confirm such a sweeping statement, but it certainly made sense.

Referring to "ritual slaughterers," Greenspan said, "there's not too many *schochtim* up in the Himalayas."

At one table sat Tzepah Zarmi, 22, and her husband, David Zarmi, 27, along with Alan Cooper, 35, Jeff Astrof, 41, and Irvine Rabbi Dov Fischer, who decided at the last minute to drive 90 minutes to Beverly Hills to make the \$175 program, despite the cost.

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"This was my one chance, perhaps, to experience all the diversity God put on this Earth," Fischer said. "I knew if I didn't come, I would not forgive myself."

Cooper and Astrof both left their wives at home. "It was too exotic for my wife. She eats chicken on Shabbos, and that's about it," Astrof said.

And Tzepah Zarmi arrived with an intentionally empty stomach. "I didn't eat all day, I was saving room," she said.

The 3 1/2 -hour event, which mixed lectures with fine dining, had a celebratory feel. Many courses were greeted with sporadic applause or laughter while servers positioned exquisitely arranged plates of food in front of diners.

When the blue marlin was served, diners began to eat as Zivotofsky discussed fish, which are considered kosher if they have scales and fins. A slide projection listed non-kosher fish, including marlin. Astrof paused and stared at the screen.

Zivotofsky then displayed another slide showing that in 2003 marlin was declared kosher by the Orthodox Union, a major Orthodox Jewish organization in the U.S. known for its circled-U kosher label on food products. The problem in the past was that adult marlin have atypical scales and a pointy head -- traditionally viewed as non-kosher. After much discussion it was ruled that the shape of the head is not an important factor in determining whether a fish is kosher.

"We're eating it," Zivotofsky said of the marlin. More applause. Astrof resumed eating. Greenspan said similar work is being done to allow swordfish.

Partridge was another iffy one. At a similar New York dinner a few years ago, the Orthodox Union, which also put on Sunday's event, would not allow it to be served. However, since then, Greenspan and Zivotofsky have continued to collect testimony that it is indeed kosher.

Collect testimony? This is done because tradition and custom sometimes help establish what is kosher. For example, the Torah lists 24 birds that are considered not kosher. Theoretically, all other birds are kosher; the problem is that there is no clear understanding of what the ancient words used for those birds refer to today. Therefore, for fowl, one generation must teach the other -- "father to son, rabbi to student" -- which animals are kosher, Greenspan said.

Zivotofsky is a neuroscience professor and Greenspan a dentist, but both are trained in ritual slaughter. They have spent years interviewing elderly rabbis and *schochtim* from small villages across the globe to find out if they remembered slaughtering a particular bird. The partridge was finally allowed for Sunday's meal after testimony by Iranian, Yemenite and German rabbis.

"We're that last link," Greenspan said. "What we decided to do was try to find these old men before they died."

The elk is still a source of contention. Based on a 1940 argument between rabbis, it is not eaten in Israel because there is no tradition of doing so, although it has split hooves and chews its cud, Greenspan said. Elk was served at the dinner Sunday, although at least one rabbi present telephoned his father, also a Sephardic rabbi, to ask whether it would be OK to eat elk. "Go ahead and eat it," he was told.

One of the evening's more intriguing stories was the tale of the *shibuta*.

"There is a fish, evidently in Babylon, or modern-day Iraq, called the *shibuta*, and if you're so lucky to taste this fish. . . you can taste the taste of pork," Greenspan said.

Zivotofsky and Greenspan traveled to Turkey at the end of July in hopes of catching *shibuta* at the northern end of the Euphrates. They didn't catch any but were given one, which they froze, packed in ice and carried in a suitcase.

Greenspan offered up some trivia about the *shibuta*: By tradition, there are 700 types of kosher fish and all were exiled, along with the Jews, from Israel to Babylon. Eventually, the fish were allowed to return to Israel, except the *shibuta*. When the Messiah comes, the *shibuta* will return to Israel.

"We bring to you this evening, straight from the [Euphrates], the *shibuta*. We asked the chef to put an apple in its mouth. I don't think he understood; he put some applesauce on it," said Greenspan, to much laughter.

But one fish was hardly enough for 120 people. It was returned to the kitchen. Peoples' eyes followed the platter.

The night ended about 10 p.m. Diners said a blessing after the meal, some prayed the evening service, and most left for the night. *Shibuta*-less, it seemed. But not for the Zarmis and Cooper, who suggested that the fish be brought out for the few who remained.

"We're the table with no shame," Cooper said. The few morsels of cream-colored fish were brought out on plates.

"Does it taste like pork?" Tzepah Zarmi asked, scooping a bit onto her fork and into her mouth. She looked from face to face at the table, searching for a reaction.

Cooper responded: "I've never tasted pork."

tami.abdollah@latimes.com

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