

Honey should be fine but fried locusts can be tricky

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1 of 1

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August 20 2010 5:28PM

Jewish scholars are rewriting the kosher cook book to rescue vanishing traditions

Last month 250 Orthodox Jews gathered at a restaurant just outside the old city walls of Jerusalem to discover what pork tastes like. They were following an obscure piece of Talmudic advice that tells Jews who want to eat pork to find a similar-tasting fish — which the rabbis of the Talmud called shibuta — and they had worked out which species the Talmud was referring to. Before this dinner shibuta had not been eaten at a kosher meal in the Holy Land since around 500 BC.

The diners also got an idea what meat-and-milk tastes like. The cardinal rule of Jewish dietary laws is never to eat these two foods together. But Talmudic tradition recommends the curious to get an idea of what it tastes like by sampling udder of cow.

“I think we all deal with the question of kashrut, and for the most part we feel a little limited by kashrut laws,” said Zvi Klein, a doctor from Beit Shemesh near Jerusalem. “People are looking for a new taste experience but they don’t want to eat non-kosher.”

The 18-course kosher-but-you-wouldn't-have-guessed-it evening was about something far more serious than stimulating taste buds, however. In the past century many Jewish traditions have fallen into obscurity, partly because of migration and partly because of the Holocaust, when entire communities went to the gas chambers and took their traditions with them.

As Jews have migrated the range of meat and fish they eat has tended to narrow to what is popular in their new surroundings. People have started to forget which other species are kosher.

For the past 28 years two Israelis, Ari Zivotofsky, a scientist, and Ari Greenspan, a dentist, have worked to ensure that Jewry does not lose traditions about which foods, beyond everyday fare, are kosher.

Zivotofsky and Greenspan are detectives of sorts. Their evidence comes in a variety of forms. With each course in the Jerusalem dinner they gave a presentation with documentary evidence to support their view that the food in question was kosher. The evidence consisted of pages of Talmud, ancient manuscripts, old newspaper articles, scientific studies, letters from rabbis, interviews with elderly shochets — the religious slaughterers, who recalled traditions from before the Holocaust of slaughtering such-and-such a species.

The most challenging research is that into birds, which are kosher only if an oral tradition exists saying that they are. Zivotofsky and Greenspan spent long hours finding reliable references to a given species being eaten in observant circles. As species were known by different names in the Diaspora, this process also involves a clear identification of the bird referred to.

The results of their labour were extremely tasty. In 2002 they bought two guinea fowl and drove around Israel from elderly shochet to elderly shochet. One bird escaped, but they managed to find shochets from Algeria, France and Israel who remembered killing the birds. For the pheasant, the clinching identification came from a leading Yemenite rabbi in Israel and from an English shochet. Diners were treated to a wrap of tender guinea fowl and pheasant. The soup was sparrow, dove and pigeon; there was wild chicken and wild turkey, and there was a hybrid of Muscovy drake and female pekin, or Long Island duck.

In his presentation on guinea fowl and pheasant Greenspan discussed the challenge of sourcing creatures which are not eaten in Israel: “We went to the zoo and said that we needed a couple of pheasants, and they said, ‘Why?’ We said, ‘To kill them,’ and they said, ‘Get out of here.’”

After the birds came the fish courses. In theory it is easy to determine whether a fish is kosher: If it has fins and scales, it is. But in reality, it can be tough to call, and it was with the fish that the evening entered really controversial territory.

Swordfish is widely considered non-kosher, as, supposedly, it doesn't have scales. But Zivotofsky brought sources to suggest that this is a recent view that became dominant only since a list of fish put out by the US Orthodox Union in 1951 categorised it as non-kosher. He invited diners to make their way to the lobby and feel the enormous swordfish that he had laid out on a table.

Greenspan and Zivotofsky worked out that shibuta, the pork-like fish mentioned in the Talmud, is actually *Barbus grypus*, a kind of carp, adducing a reference in a 19th-century work on Jewish law to corroborate their linguistic research.

Highlights of the meat courses, in addition to the udder, included water buffalo, which was declared kosher by Israel's Chief Rabbinate in 2006. This was after years of studies by Greenspan, Zivotofsky and others to prove that water buffalo chew their cud and have cloven hooves as required by Jewish religious law. To satisfy the Chief Rabbinate, Greenspan and Zivotofsky also had to satisfy extra stringencies — to gather testimonies of slaughterers and prove that water buffaloes have no upper front teeth. To this end they delivered a water buffalo skeleton to the desk of Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar.

The final treat of the evening was fried locusts. These, it turned out, tasted a bit like tiny chicken wings. Kosher laws ban all insects except for four types of locust, but matching the biblical description with the

locusts existing today has proved difficult, and led most observant Jews to avoid them. But Yemenite and Moroccan Jews claim to know which locusts are permissible, according to testimonies collected by Zohar Amar, an expert on locusts with Bar-Ilan University.

After six hours and 18 courses — or more accurately 18 tiny taster portions — Zivotofsky insisted that it had not been an exercise in gluttony: “From our perspective, it’s to maintain the tradition — the religious tradition, the cultural tradition and the culinary tradition, part of which was lost as Jews have concentrated in Israel and America.”

But writing scholarly articles about such traditions is not enough, he said: “If you do a dinner where the foods are eaten publicly and with rabbis in attendance, then it gives them more weight.”

Last updated August 20 2010 4:33PM

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