

CLAUDIA RODEN: The Book of Jewish

Food writer and historian Claudia Roden, who has been a Suburb resident for many years, recently received international acclaim for her latest publication, *The Book of Jewish Food*. This follows a list of best-selling titles including *A Book of Middle Eastern Food and Mediterranean Cookery* (which was also a television series). *The Book of Jewish Food* is the culmination of many years of research, of collecting recipes, visiting and talking to people throughout the world, and exploring libraries and archives.

The book is subtitled "An odyssey from Samarkand and Vilna to the present day" and, uniquely, Claudia tells the stories and describes the foods of both the "Askenazi" (Eastern European) and "Sephardi" (Middle Eastern and Asian) Jewish communities. The stories of communities from Kurdistan to South America, Georgia to Morocco, are interwoven with personal reminiscences and anecdotes, and illustrated with historic photographs and prints that provide memorable images of past life in far-flung places. The 800 recipes in the book range from the more familiar (to English Jews) Eastern European dishes of potato kugel, blintzes, cholent and kreplach to the less familiar dishes from the Sephardi world.

These include spices, sauces and salads, "borekas", meat, pumpkin or cheese pies from Salonika, Bukhara or Georgia, fish cakes from Calcutta, chicken and rice croquettes from Baghdad, whole roast baby lamb with rice stuffing (a Bedouin dish adopted by Iraqi Jews for wedding celebrations), couscous of many kinds, Livornese date cake and Moroccan coconut cake, to mention a very few.

The book has been hailed as a cultural history, and reading it and also talking to Claudia about her research and approach underlines this. Through their food, she traces the passage of Jews through history and throughout the world, following trade routes or fleeing persecution. Thus the dishes of medieval Spain appear later in South America, Italy and beyond, in the wake of Jews and "new

Christians" fleeing the Inquisition. The movement of Jews also meant that they introduced new foods as they travelled; for example they brought aubergines to northern Spain and Venice.

As Claudia acknowledges, Eastern European Jewish cuisine is far more uniform than Sephardi cuisine. It was developed in the distant past from French dishes (such as the Sabbath bean stew or "cholent") and Italian dishes (such as "lokshen" pudding, made from pasta) and adopted in Germany in the Middle Ages. The repertoire of dishes has remained constant for centuries as Jews left Europe for England, the States and Israel. Many of the dishes, such as salt beef, latkes and pickles, have been "emancipated" by New York's delis. On the other hand, Sephardi cooking is far more diverse.

Claudia's own family is Sephardi and had to leave their home in Cairo in the 1950s. Her interest in food is a direct result of the experience of exile. She sees it as a means of maintaining continuity and keeping in touch with family and friends. As she explains, food was "the one thing that was very important to salvage when we had begun to lose each other... I became aware of this because people were asking for recipes and giving recipes that they had found. All of us in Egypt had a very mixed background. It was a community where Jews came from various parts of the world. Not so much a melting pot, but my family for instance came from Syria and had a very strong Syrian identity and the cooking was Syrian... and one grandmother was from Turkey and so



Claudia Roden

we had that Turkish side. And there were Jews in Egypt who had come from all over because Egypt had become one of the great centres in the Middle East. The cotton trade and the Suez Canal had made it a time of enormous economic growth. Jews came from different parts of the Ottoman Empire where there had been a decline, and so we all had access to all these styles of cooking which were Jewish and which were from different parts of the Middle East."

Claudia's career as a writer on food began with the desire to keep the cultures of her family alive. "There were a lot of aspects of our way of life that we couldn't keep up. But cooking is something we could keep up and we could make something of it in the new country... I was collecting and collecting recipes. Although in my first book, *Middle Eastern Food*, I mentioned if a recipe was Jewish, I was mainly

concerned to research the food of the Arab and Islamic world." The food she described included some Jewish Middle Eastern dishes. "I was not only interested in the recipes of my relatives and our own community. I went on to research what Egyptian cooking was and what Turkish cooking was, just because I wanted to get to the bottom of it. I went into a lot of depth. I did look into cooking like Persian, and even Iraqi, where I could find people who could instruct me... At that time, more than 30 years ago, there was barely a handful of cookery books in that part of the world, which was also a reason for collecting. The only thing we could find were a few Middle Eastern recipes in Elizabeth David's *Mediterranean Cookery* book [*A Book of Mediterranean Food*], where in her introduction to Middle Eastern recipes she says 'this is the tip of the iceberg - somebody has to research it'.

So Claudia took up the challenge: it was "a labour of love and a very serious thing to do."

The idea of writing a book on Jewish food was raised by Jane Grigson who together with Elizabeth David thought Claudia should write a new book of Jewish food. Until then Jewish food in England had only been Eastern European, and people were becoming aware that there were other kinds of Jewish food. Claudia's initial reaction was that it was an impossible subject: "At first I didn't think there was such a thing. I just thought it's only a variation on the national cuisine; it's only a touch different and Jews eat the same things as the non-Jews... But Jews and their background fascinated me, and I thought it was worth trying."

While European Jewish cookery had been recorded, that of the communities from the Middle East and Asia had not, and their worlds were little known. These communities had begun to disappear in the 1950s and 1960s. Claudia felt that recording their food was a way of remembering them. "Even in India, for instance, although the Jews have not left completely, much of the old Jewish world of Cochin, Bombay and Calcutta, which had been a rich one, is not there any more. Even in countries like Turkey where there is still a good-sized community, the kind of Jewish way of life that had been there disappeared..."

Researching the book led her to meet and talk to people the world over. In this way she learnt a great deal about day-to-day life. "History books can't give you the same sense of life as it was... I wanted to go and find people on the spot as much as possible, to see them cooking as they did originally. I had the feeling that maybe there might not be anyone left in 20 or 30 years - who knows... It's not that easy to find people when so many have left. You can't go to countries and find them without introductions. In some cases I could. In Venice I went to the synagogue in the Ghetto ... In Rome I went to Jewish restaurants (and found that they are no longer run by Jews!)... For me, studying the history of each community separately - because it is different in every town - you can see that the food fits in like a jigsaw puzzle. Every dish that is there has a reason for being there, and it's usually a very old reason. For me, part of the excitement of the book was finding that out, when the community itself was unaware of it."

The Book of Jewish Food describes the symbolic and ritual associations with food. "I realised that food is more important to Jews than to anybody else. There are several reasons for this. First because the dietary laws create a spiritual atmosphere around food. You have to think about God when you eat." She remembers: "For us, one of the pleasures of life was the activities of the community which were around the Jewish festivals and Friday night and Saturday. They had a very important role in our lives



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