

## ESSAY

## A FEAST OF MANY FISHES

Jessica Soffer's immigrant family didn't really celebrate Hanukkah—until the day her parents brought home too much gefilte fish, and an unlikely tradition was born.

**M**y father was raised in the Jewish quarter of Baghdad, Iraq, and fled to Brooklyn in the late 1940s because of growing anti-Semitism, and worse. My mother was the child of second-generation Russian Jewish immigrants who avoided temple and adhered to exactly no traditions except Chinese food on Sundays.

When my parents found each other, they didn't have fantasies of reaffirming their religious faith. They didn't have grand dreams of family get-togethers, annual reunions that involved heirloom recipes or even heirloom tomatoes. My father had to give up everything because of his religion. My mother couldn't have cared less about hers. I, in turn, wasn't raised in a religious household. From year to year, what I could count on most was not latkes or candles or presents at Hanukkah, but the space to ignore them.

Everything changed, however, when I was 10 years old. One winter evening, my mother and father each brought home containers of gefilte fish from some of New York City's most famed Jewish food shops (my mother's from Barney Greengrass and Zabar's; my father's from Fairway and Fine & Schapiro). This was entirely unplanned, but the coincidence was not lost on them. In fact, they were heartened by it, connected by it, inspired by it—and so they tasted and compared, discussed and judged. They called it their First Annual Gefilte Extravaganza, or just Gefilteextravaganza.

I called it ridiculous and refused to partake. I hated the stuff, and I wouldn't go near it. As far as my 10-year-old palate was concerned, gefilte fish was gross: flesh-colored gelatin;



suspended pearlescent bits of carrots, onions, or celery; and the oval pieces of the “fish” itself (patties of ground carp or pike or whitefish). And so I'd refuse dinner and wouldn't let either of them kiss me good night until they'd brushed their teeth twice.

Every year from then until my father passed away, they reenacted this: For a couple of days around Hanukkah, they'd come home, make sure I was watching, do a little drumroll, and then ceremoniously place large plastic container after large plastic container of gefilte fish on the dining room table. “From Russ & Daughters,” they'd say.

Or Carnegie Deli. Or Murray's Sturgeon Shop. Multiple varieties of horseradish were always involved. And every time, I'd refuse to engage, living on tofu or granola for the duration, disappointed by the lack of latkes and gifts, and sour about how nontraditional our “tradition”

was. Not only were we *bad* Jews, I thought, but we were weird ones, too. Here's another thing: In over a decade of those tastings, my parents never settled on a verdict. Year after year, they'd sit at the kitchen table, hem and haw, theorize and posit, talk it over as only we Jews can do, and never come to any conclusions.

The next Hanukkah they'd be at it again—as if they'd forgotten their preferences, as if they *tried* to forget. Because in the end, it wasn't about the gefilte fish. Of course it wasn't. I've come to think that it was about the process, which itself was a tradition but better, because it was homemade and theirs alone: It would never be taken for granted, grow stale, or get complicated as family traditions so often do.

About a year after my father passed away, I read about Gefilteria, which was making an updated artisanal version of gefilte fish. I brought some home for my mother, and though I'd long since become an adventurous eater, I halfheartedly feigned disgust for old times' sake. And then we ate it, the two

of us together, taking small, careful bites, tasting it, as if to compare it with everything that had come before. The truth is, I didn't hate it. But what did I know? I knew that this new version was nothing like anything either of us had ever had, and that by eating it, we were establishing that the tradition was over. The most essential ingredient, my father, her

husband, was gone. Some traditions, I think, aren't meant to be passed down. They are made and remembered as they existed: only for their specific time, for their weirdness, for their character, for those who loved, honored, and needed them so.

**JESSICA SOFFER**  
is the author  
of *Tomorrow There  
Will Be Apricots*  
(Houghton Mifflin  
Harcourt, 2013).  
She teaches  
writing at  
Connecticut  
College.