

Seasons of Latkes

by

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Until I was invited into my mother-in-law's kitchen, I'd never learned how to cook any of the Jewish classics. My own mother hated to cook, and my grandmother was a stern woman who seemed to feel that her kitchen was her realm, and any children there were just underfoot. But my husband's mom, Ray, had always wanted a daughter, and it gave her great pleasure to pass her techniques on to me. I was lucky. She was a master. I carefully wrote down every step and every piece of advice, but, as you'll see from my adventures with her latkes, it's one thing to memorize the steps, and quite another to learn the subtleties that make a potato pancake into a little patty from Heaven.

Ray did everything from scratch. She had a little metal grinder she attached to the kitchen counter with a screw, and after she'd peeled all the potatoes and cut them into just the right sized pieces, and had done the same with the onions, she'd carefully feed each piece into the grinder, push down on them with a little wooden block, and turn the metal handle until she had the shreds just the right consistency. It was four pieces of potato and then a piece of onion, over and over and over, and turning that handle was hard work. The family had a long-standing tradition that "the boys" (my husband, his brother, and my father-in-law) would take a turn at the handle to help Mom out. Another part of the tradition was that her boys so loved her latkes, that those crispy little patties were the centerpiece of the meal, and the boys had a yearly contest to see who could eat the most. So this woman made sixty or seventy pancakes, and even more when I came on the scene. She never left her fry pans except to bring another platter to table, despite the pleas of her boys that she join them.

Ray only added a tablespoon or so of flour and one egg, plus a little salt, to the mixture, so this was a tricky batter to work with. But somehow, using just the right amount of oil and batter and keeping the heat just right, her latkes never fell apart. For years, I worked as her sous chef, and it wasn't until she passed away at the far-too-young age of 70 that I took up her mantle and tried my hand at potato pancakes at Chanukah. Oy.

Right away, I gave up on her grinder, which just seemed like too much work, and used a Cuisinart

instead. I never could get the magic consistency, but the boys kindly ate the burned, broken-up, and undercooked ones along with the okay ones. The next year, we started including my family too, so I was cooking for 8 or 9 instead of 4. That meant making maybe 100 latkes, and it took so long that we were eating at 10 at night. Every Chanukah, we'd try to somehow shorten the process, and by enlisting my husband as sous chef to do all the peeling, and my sister Jeanette to help with the frying, we got to sit down by 9. When my niece Ramona joined the act, we actually got to eat by 8, a real dinner time. Meanwhile I kept reading articles on latkes and trying new combinations and grinds, and taking notes on the results, but still I wasn't able to make Ray's latkes.

I might have gone on that way forever, except for a Chanukah party we had at my father-in-law's house one night. He was now in his late 80's, and too weak to travel to our house. There were 13 people that night, which meant 150 latkes. All I did for three interminable hours was bend over a splatting fry pan. And the next morning, I admitted to myself that this tradition, which had been so wonderful for 4 and then for 5 people, just wasn't going to work for 10 or 15. Something had to give. One thing was clear. No more giant latke parties. We returned the next Chanukah to our 8-9 guest pattern, sadly without my father-in-law, who'd passed away.

And I started looking for ways to lighten the fresh latke numbers. One year, I tried a complex way to freeze freshly fried latkes for a couple of days. We ate one third fresh ones and two thirds reheated. I was pleasantly surprised by the results of our family taste test. We awarded the frozen ones a "B." So we had the frozen/unfrozen combo for a few years, and yearly I reminded myself that Ray had been frying for 4 while I was doing double that.

One year I went so far as to try out Trader Joe's frozen latkes. I guess they never heard of onions. Soggy potato paste with a sort of crisp outside. Well – live and learn. In my mind, I apologized to Ray and promised never to sin like that again. I did however play with the idea of another sacrilegious departure from tradition. I'd noticed the last few years that we 50 plus year olds weren't eating up latkes by the dozens any more, like we had in our 20's. Might I bend tradition enough to make potato pancakes a side dish – figure 2-3 per person, and have a brisket or turkey too? Ooooo. No, no, no. That was going Too far. But I did cut down on the numbers of latkes a bit – 80 instead of 100 – and that worked without causing a ripple.

The latest latke seasonal change just occurred this year. I hurt my knee badly enough that I wasn't

going to be able to do the party at all. Jeanette and I played with the idea of having a “Thanksgivingaka” blend, as so many Jews were doing this year because Chanukah came so incredibly early it overlapped with Thanksgiving. But when my niece Ramona, who has now acquired a husband, a cat and a house, volunteered to host Chanukah in her new home, we all smiled and passed her the baton.

I was there in something of Ray's role – teaching the recipe, doing demos, directing the flow, sharing those key details of technique, shaping patties or taking up the spatula when necessary. Ramona and her sister-in-law Courtney, Jeanette, and I worked at 4 sizzling fry pans to feed 11 people with what wasn't exactly a main course, but more than a side dish. (There was a brisket and a kugel too.) Oh, some of the latkes came out a bit thick, and maybe not always fully cooked inside, but a good time was had by all. It was a far cry from Ray's crispy patties of perfection devoured by the dozens by her 3 competing “boys”, but I think she gave us her blessing. The love was the same.

And next year? Who knows? Will Ramona continue to host Chanukah? Will latkes be relegated to a side dish like mashed potatoes? Will a start-up company in Silicon Valley sell a million automatic electronic latke makers? (And would our family take the plunge?) Only time will tell.

