

Matzah Brei: Passover Comfort Food Goes Gourmet

Dish is a 'Blank Canvas' to Create Tastes from Savory to Sweet, Fruit to Nuts

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Soon after the sugar high of Purim puckers out, when spring drops hints of its imminent arrival, the cookbooks come out. Some people start by cleaning out a closet, I kick off my Passover season by scanning through my Jewish holiday cookbooks. This Passover recipe season has been devoted to "Jewish Holiday Cooking: A Food Lover's Treasury of Classics and Interpretations" by Jayne Cohen. And the chapter that boasts the most post-its so far, is the one about matzah brie.

Matzah brie (or brie) is a satisfying and soulful Jewish comfort food. It tastes like a warm memory, and eating it often brings people right back into the kitchen where their first plateful was enjoyed. In "Jewish Holiday Cooking," Cohen offers easy-to-follow tips on how to achieve your ideal matzah brie texture: scrambled egg style, French-toast style, frittata style, or pancake like. She includes a sumptuous sounding buffet of sweet and savory versions of the dish that has typically been eaten for breakfast, and makes it possible to consider serving it for a weeknight dinner, Passover or not.

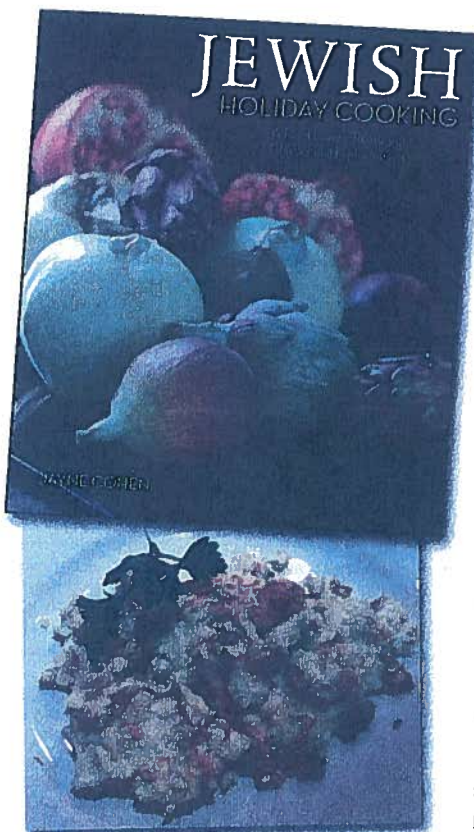
Jayne Cohen has dedicated a lot of thought and experimentation to all things matzah brie. She serves it to her family year-round, because it's what she calls a "blank canvas comfort food ... you can flavor it to suit your mood, the seasons, or just the contents of your pantry." Although she grew up eating the sweet version of the dish, as an adult, and as a cook, her tastes now lean towards the savory. Her favorite matzah brie recipe is one "with artichokes, or one based on LEO (lox, eggs, and onions)." But she finds herself constantly tinkering with the dish, explaining that "blank-canvas foods are like siren songs to us irrepressible futzers."

For cooks looking to create a new generation of Jewish foodie memories, matzah brie offers the opportunity to utilize seasonal fruits and veggies, and interesting flavor combinations in a traditional dish. Approaching it as a matzah quiche, or as matzah French toast could make for some pretty yummy and unique Passover fare. Like Cohen's "Cinnamon Matzah Brie with Toasted Pecan and Warm Vanilla-Maple Syrup."

As a matzah brie maven, Ms. Cohen offers these helpful hints: "It's really important to include additions with vibrant taste because the basic matzah brie is so bland. So ingredients like caramelized onion or sautéed garlic and fresh herbs for savory matzah brie. Maybe vanilla, fresh or dried fruit, or a bit of grated ginger or a sprinkle of fragrant cinnamon for the sweet kind". She cautions against using any sort of overly processed sweet filling, because "for me, matzah brie should be the taste of wholesome hominess."

After studying the "Matzah Brie" section for a week or so, I'm now ready to indulge in Jayne Cohen's mouth-watering brisket recipes, and then enjoy her renditions of matzah ball soup. The closets will have to wait.

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Cinnamon Matzah Brie with Toasted Pecans and Warm Vanilla-Maple Syrup

From "Jewish Holiday Cooking" by Jayne Cohen (Wiley)

- 3 whole plain or egg matzohs
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- About 1/8 teaspoon of salt
- 1 cup pure unsweetened apple juice
- ½ teaspoon kosher-for-Passover vanilla extract
- 3 large eggs
- 3 tablespoons chopped toasted pecans
- 2 to 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- For the Vanilla-Maple Syrup
- ½ cup pure maple syrup
- ½ teaspoon kosher-for-Passover vanilla extract

Break the matzohs into small pieces in a bowl. Sprinkle with cinnamon and salt.

Combine the apple juice and vanilla in a wide saucepan and boil over high heat until reduced to about ½ cup. Pour it over the matzohs and toss until all the liquid is absorbed.

Beat the eggs until light and foamy and add to the matzah mixture. Stir well and set aside for a few minutes to soak the matzohs. Stir in the pecans.

Make the syrup. Warm the maple syrup and vanilla in a small saucepan until heated through. Keep warm until ready to serve.

In a 9 or 10-inch heavy skillet (nonstick works well) heat the butter over medium heat until it sizzles. Add the matzah batter, either by dropping it in by the heaping tablespoon-fuls, like pancakes, or all at once, like an omelette or frittata. Fry until golden brown on the bottom, and turn and fry until done to taste on the other side: either golden and fluffy or more well done and crisp.

Serve at once, accompanied by the warm syrup.

Makes 2 servings

Sour Cream & Onion Matzah Brie with Sautéed Spring Onions

I opted for a savory matzah brie that uses pantry and fridge staples. The crispy sautéed spring onions add texture to this dish, as well as an extra dose of flavor.

- 1 bunch of trimmed spring onions, chopped
- 3 tablespoons butter, divided
- 3 whole plain matzohs
- 4 eggs
- 1 cup sour cream
- 2½ -3 tablespoons dry onion soup mix

In a large skillet over medium flame heat butter until it melts. Add chopped spring onions and sauté until medium golden brown and crispy around edges. Remove from skillet and set aside.

Break up the matzohs, wet them with cold water, and squeeze them dry in a colander with the back of a spatula.

In a large bowl beat eggs until light and foamy. Fold in sour cream and then mix in dry onion soup mix until incorporated. Stir moistened matzah into egg mixture and combine well.

Add remaining 2 tablespoons of butter to the skillet and heat until it sizzles. Pour batter into the skillet. Fry until golden brown on brown and turn over and fry on the other side until done to taste.

Serve hot and sprinkle sautéed spring onions across the matzah brie.

Makes 3 or 4 servings