



FOODHISTORY

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Mishpacha

An old adage says that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and who isn't longing for that first delicious bite of challah! Yet most people would be surprised to learn that challah as we know it is a relative newcomer to the Shabbos table

WELCOME BACK CHALLAH

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sk Jewish women for one word that expresses Shabbos and many would probably cast their vote for challah — the out-of-this-world

bread that is as full of symbolic meaning as it is delicious. Yet if we could time travel back 700 years or so and take a peek at the freshly baked loaves hidden under the cloth cover, most of us would be surprised by what was there. Instead of the fluffy braided loaves we're familiar with, the typical bread for Shabbos would have been round and flat. What's more, back then the bread wasn't even called challah!



CHALLAH UNDERCOVER

The Hebrew word challah is mentioned several times in the Torah. For instance, in Shemos 29:2 the *pasuk* mentions an offering of unleavened cakes (*ve'challos matzos*) made from fine wheat flour. Later on, in Bamidbar 15:20, we read:

“Of the first of your dough you shall set aside a cake (*challah*) as an offering; as the offering of the threshing-floor, so you shall set it aside.”

That is the source of separating “challah” from dough. But nowhere does the Torah tell us to eat “challah” on Shabbos. True, in *Shabbos* 117b Rav Abba tells us that on Shabbos a person is obligated to recite *hamotzi* over two loaves of bread, in commemoration of the double portion of *mahn* (manna). However, the word used for “loaves” is *kikarim*, and not *challos*. Even the Rambam speaks of two *kikarim* in his *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Brachos* 7:4, when he mentions the two loaves we place on the table for Shabbos and Yom Tov.

According to Gil Marks, author of *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, both Sephardim and Ashkenazim used flatbread for their Shabbos loaves until the 15th century. To honor Shabbos and differentiate the loaves from weekday bread, during the early medieval period it became customary to use white flour for Shabbos — although the Persian community continued to prefer whole wheat flour to white. Some Sephardic *kehillos* would also sprinkle sesame or some other type of seed over the round loaves, an allusion to the *mahn* that fell in the shape of coriander seeds.

But whether the loaves were made from whole wheat or white flour, or had sesame seeds or were plain, one thing they were not was “challah.”

A NEW TWIST

We have to wait until the late 1400s to find Shabbos loaves being described as “challah” in a *sefer*. That *sefer* was *Leket Yosher*, written by Rav Yosef ben Moshe, who was from Bavaria. Rav Yosef was a *talmid* of Rav Yisrael Isserlein, a leading halachic authority of his time, and in his *sefer*, Rav Yosef records the statements, customs, and daily conduct of his *rebbe*. One passage describes some of Rav Isserlein’s Shabbos *minhagim*, a fascinating glimpse into some of the Ashkenazic customs of his time:

I recall that every Erev Shabbos they would make him three thin challos, kneaded with eggs and oil and a little bit of water. At night, he would put the mid-sized challah in the

Key to the Gates of Heaven



On the first Shabbos after Pesach, many people have the custom to bake “*shlissel* (key) challah.” The earliest mention of the *minhag* is in *Imrei Pinchas* (#298), a *sefer* written by Rav Pinchas Shapiro of Koritz, a *talmid* of the Baal Shem Tov. In the *sefer Ohev Yisrael*, Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the Apter Rav, calls *shlissel challah* “an ancient custom.”

The custom is also mentioned in *Taamei Minhagim* and other chassidic *seforim*, although how to make the special challah varies. While the Apter Rav says to first knead the dough with a key and then form the dough into the shape of a key, another custom is to make an imprint of a key on top of the dough. A third variation calls for placing a key-shaped piece of dough on top of the loaf before baking. Some bake an actual key in the challah.

The main reason given for the custom, says the Imrei Pinchas, has to do with the fact that the Gates of Heaven that were opened during Pesach remain open until Pesach Sheini; the key therefore reminds us to pray with especial *kavanah* during these days. The Apter Rav adds a few more explanations: While the Gates of Heaven were open throughout Pesach, now that the holiday is over, we must reopen them with our observance of Shabbos. Also, after Bnei Yisrael entered the Land of Canaan, they continued to eat *mahn* until they brought the Omer offering on the second day of Pesach, after which the *mahn* stopped falling and they had to eat food grown in Eretz Yisrael — with all the effort and worry that such work implies. The key on the challah is therefore a symbolic reminder of our prayer to Hashem to open the gates of sustenance for us, just as He opened the gates of sustenance for Am Yisrael during the days of Yehoshua.

Today, there are some *rabbanim* who object to the *minhag*. Some object to the use of any *segulah*, while others claim that the practice of impressing a key into the top of the dough has its origins in a non-Jewish custom.

For those who do practice the *minhag*, just about everyone is in agreement about one thing: Choose your key carefully, if you plan to place an actual key inside the dough. Today, many keys are made partially from plastic, which can melt in the oven. Car keys — or any keys with computer chips embedded in them — like intensive heat about as much as they like being doused with water, which is to say, not at all. Therefore, use a key that’s entirely metal, and be sure to warn your family and guests beforehand to bite carefully. You don’t want anyone to break a tooth and transfer the *brachah* for *parnassah* to the dentist.

middle of his table, which was square, on a cloth in the center of the table. Under the challah was a large uncut loaf, even though it [the large uncut loaf] was made of black bread, rather than on a small roll of white bread called zeml. In the morning, the large challah and a large loaf were put on the table, like at night. For the third meal, he used the small challah and a whole loaf.

What has caught the eye of Jewish food historians is that even though the fancier *zeml* roll was known to Rav Isserlein, he seems to have spurned it for a challah that was both thin in size and ordinary in taste. Some posit that although *zeml* might have been tastier, it was a type of bread eaten throughout the week — at least by those who could afford to eat white-flour bread instead of the more common black bread — and Rav Isserlein wanted a bread baked especially for Shabbos for his challah.

Later, Rav Yosef mentions that these challos were also called *kuchen*, giving us another clue as to what this bread was like. Although today the word *kuchen* is used for cake or some other sweet dessert, in the past the word was used to describe thin round bread baked in a pan over a fire, using a little oil. Since that method was similar to the one used to bake the challah offerings mentioned in the Torah, it’s thought that this was why *kuchen* was used for *lechem mishneh* on Shabbos and Yom Tov.

According to Mordechai Kosover, author of *Yidishe Maykholm (Food and beverages: A study in the history of culture and linguistics)*, although during the week *kuchen* might be pan-baked using butter, for Shabbos, when the bread could not be milchig, it was pan-baked using just *shmaltz*. That led a 19th-century midwife and author named Malka Berlant to complain in her book *Di Glikleke Muter (The Happy Mother)* that these *shmaltz*-laden loaves were “harmful even for a healthy person.”

At some point during the 1400s, braided breads using the best available white flour became popular in Germany, perhaps because braiding the dough helps to keep the bread fresh a bit longer. These breads, known as *berchisbrod*, started to make an appearance on the Shabbos table, possibly because the German word *bercht* (braid) sounds very similar to the Hebrew word *brachos* (blessings). In Southern Germany, this type of challah became known as *barches* or *berches*.

These challos apparently had wings, in addition to braids, because in the next century we see challah baking really take off as a culinary art.

DO YOU SPEAK CHALLAH?

Braided loaves soon became popular in Alsace and parts of Hungary, where braided loaves sprinkled with poppy seeds were known as *barhesz* or *szombati kalács*. It took a little longer for



the new look and lingo to reach Eastern Europe. As late as the mid-1500s, Rav Moses Isserles, the Rema, referred to the Shabbos loaves as *lachamin* in his gloss on the *Shulchan Aruch*. However, by the 1600s both the braids and the term *khale* were widely used in Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe.

Of course, there continued to be innovations and variations. While the three-strand braid was the easiest to make, six-strand braids were also popular; two loaves with six strands apiece symbolized the 12 Showbreads on display in the Beis Hamikdash. Another allusion to the Showbread was a loaf that had two rows with six bumps apiece.

The ingredients used to make the dough also became more varied. In some places eggs were added, as well as a pinch of saffron, to give the dough a yellow color that symbolized the color of cooked *mahn*. After sugar became more affordable in Eastern Europe, this too was added to the dough, because when *mahn* was pounded into cakes, it tasted like honey.

Since many Sephardic halachic authorities argued that a dough enriched by a significant quantity of eggs and sweetener made the resulting product more like cake than bread — and therefore inappropriate for the recitation of *hamotzi* — the Sephardim kept their challos simple.

Jews from Germany also had a recipe for a simpler challah, called *vasser challah* (water bread), that contained no eggs or oil. Yet if it was short on ingredients, *vasser challah* still had symbolic meaning. A strip of dough that ran down the length of the oblong loaf symbolized both the ascent to Heaven and the letter *vav*, which has the numerical value of six. Put two such loaves together and you once again have an allusion to the 12 loaves of Showbread.

In Lithuania and Latvia, the braided loaves were called *kitke*; even today people living in South Africa will refer to their Shabbos loaves as *kitke*, because their *bubbes* and *zeides* mainly hailed from Lithuania and brought the term with them. Poland also made a linguistic contribution, calling the loaves *koilitch* or

keylitch or something similar.

Early German immigrants to the United States brought their customs with them, and for a while the Shabbos loaves were still known as *barches*. But after Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe began pouring into America during the early 1900s, “chollah,” “chalah,” and our own “challah” eventually won the day. In Israel, as well, the term most commonly heard is “challah,” although the Israeli loaf is generally not as sweet as its American cousin, since Israelis love to start the Shabbos meal with lots of savory appetizers.

A LAST MORSEL

As we’ve become more aware of the health benefits of whole wheat flour — as well as spelt and other non-wheat grains — many Jewish women have gone back to the baking pan, so to speak, and opted to exchange white flour for something healthier, even on Shabbos.

The Malbim might not have approved. In his commentary on *parshas Beshalach*, he states that white flour is the best way to honor Shabbos; while the *mahn* that fell throughout the week looked like bits of crystal, on Erev Shabbos it was white, symbolizing mercy and kindness. Hence, the preference for white flour.

Rav Pinchas of Koritz, however, stresses that it is the woman’s intention while baking her challos that is important. In *Imrei Pinchas, Shabbos*, he discusses what exactly *Midrash Bereishis Rabbah* 60 means when it says there was blessing in the dough of Sarah Imeinu. Since Avraham Avinu was a wealthy man who could afford to give Sarah all the flour she needed, the blessing wasn’t about quantity. Instead, argues the Imrei Pinchas, the blessing must have referred to the quality of her loaves — they were sweet-smelling, delightful to look at, and tasted delicious. He therefore advises women to be happy while baking, so that our challos will be pleasing like those of Sarah Imeinu. If, *chas veshalom*, a woman is angry instead, her challos will come out of the oven charred and misshapen.∴