

Such a Cook-Off

In Alexandria, the Best Briskets and Kugels Bring Out A Crowd That Understands Jewish Comfort Food

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Wednesday, March 16, 2005; Page F01

Starting from the far left sat 20 long-braised briskets. Working back from the right, 23 kinds of sweet or savory kugel. Behind each entry stood contestants with scouring pad corsages and disposable aprons, egging on the tasters: Here! Have some more.

Together, the homemade beef dishes and baked puddings with Eastern European roots are not ordinarily the stuff of formal competition. But almost four dozen local cooks signed up to bring their best to Alexandria's Temple Beth El on Saturday in the Reform congregation's first foray into that great American sport, the cook-off. Not all of them were members, and not all of them were Jewish.

"No one even had to say it. The unspoken message here was 'Eat, eat!'" said emcee Marc Silverstein, the Food Network celebrity who served up one-liners like a Catskills comedian. "I used to be a consumer reporter. Now I consume . . . It's a marathon, not a sprint. . . ."

Certainly none of the 200-strong crowd left hungry. On the way out, trays of cookies and pastries looked untouched. Even for a synagogue event, there was a lot of Jewish food in one room. The aromas were alluring enough to send people back for second and third helpings.

The majority of the evening's kugels were noodly and cinnamon-sweet, with raisins or applesauce or pineapple or apricot accents, while the briskets had been treated with tomato-y sauces, onions, herbs, beer, wine and, unapologetically, soup -- Campbell's or Knorr or Lipton. Brisket and kugel are the cultural equivalents of fried chicken and biscuits. For those unfamiliar with Jewish cooking, the meat and starch perform a kind of Gene Kelly-Debbie Reynolds routine. They belong together. Done right, brisket glides from muscled customer to tender fellow, while kugel serves as dependable and versatile sidekick. The dishes have become a little heavy to eat often, by today's standards. But they continue to grace Sabbath and holiday platters. The leftovers are to die for.

And the winning recipes, ladies and gentlemen, were sweet and simple. The panel of six judges agreed unanimously.

Top entries in the best-tasting category both had generous helpings of sugar and uncomplicated directions. (See recipes, at right.) Brisket honors went to lawyer David Barsky of Arlington, whose samples were among the first to disappear. Sandi Rothman and Laura Naide, who happened to use varying amounts of the same ingredients, shared first place for best-tasting kugel. Neither of their recipes contained raisins, and certainly neither of the kugels would normally be served with a meat meal in a kosher home, since they are made with dairy products. As small paper plates with samples were handed over, so were stories of ancestors and recipe fine-tuning:

"I developed my own recipe because my mother overcooked *everything*," confided contestant No. 7, Lynne Somoroff of Burke, while she spread portions of her onion, mushroom and chili-sauced brisket on pieces of seedless rye. She gave the recipe to her 88-year-old mother.

"I soaked the raisins in orange juice for a week!" said kugel maker No. 23, Diane DeMaio from the Alexandria section of Fairfax County. Her husband, Barry, said later that his wife received a few whispers of "yours was the best," although she didn't win.

"I was supposed to cook a brisket today, but Giant had run out of them," said kugel contender Leslie Haemer of Alexandria. (They should have warned nearby stores about the upcoming cook-off. Who knew?) She did not deviate from her grandmother's recipe, which meant baking the kugel in something deep and round, instead of a square pan -- because her grandmother said so.

"You never cook it the same day you're going to eat it," was the opinion shared by most brisketeers, to allow the meat more leisure time with its flavorful gravy.

With the family name she has, congregant Gretchen Kugel was politely told that there was no way she could avoid participating. She managed to produce a pan of her savory kugel made with potato, onion and egg, though she was on crutches with a broken toe. She even brought a vegan version for the congregation's rabbi, Brett Isserow, and his family.

"I knew I had to learn to cook [kugel], even back in high school in Omaha," said the McLean resident. Although she didn't grow up eating the dish, she eventually found a savory recipe to call her own: Kugel's kugel.

The evening's original purpose was to attract new members to the 700-family congregation. A respectable number of people responded, but a weekend snow canceled the event first planned for January. That allowed enough additional time for a blizzard of interest to develop, and 47 contestants signed up.

Tandem brisket-kugel winners were also announced, in the categories of best appearance and most innovative. (A five-pound helping of braised meat can look handsome? Again, who knew?) Among them, Kingstowne resident Ted Exstein displayed his platter next to his family's Sabbath wine cup and candlesticks on an heirloom tablecloth. It turned out to be a sentimental favorite among the six judges, who were mostly congregation members.

The mother-daughter team of Doris Mela and Yonie Dow of Alexandria won the innovative honors for their kugel, made with matzoh, eggs and cottage cheese. They've served it at their Passover table for 20 years.

"The night brought all ages together," said organizer John Polis. Was it just about the power of brisket and kugel? Polis believes there was more.

What each dish brings to the table has been aptly described by the weekly Forward's "Food Maven" columnist, Matthew Goodman. In his new book, "Jewish Food: The World at Table" (HarperCollins), he explains that boneless beef brisket is taken from the front and forequarters of the animal, as required by kosher law.

But it is among the toughest cuts and requires transformative cooking. European Ashkenazic Jews have done so since the Middle Ages, he writes.

A Jewish-style brisket starts with a searing, some sort of aromatic vegetables and a minimal base of tomato, stock, coffee or even cola to build a luscious gravy. However, not every Jewish brisket recipe yields succulent success.

Whole briskets weighing 10 to 12 pounds are available at the few kosher butcher shops in the Washington area. The brisket found prepackaged at the grocery store most likely has been cut into sections. Some brisket recipes call for the flat "first cut," which is leaner and usually weighs five to seven pounds. The pointed "second cut" has more marbling and weighs a few pounds less. In America, kugel means a baked noodle or potato pudding, either sweet or savory. Goodman's explanation will prompt a knowing smile from those who understand Yiddish: *Az me est Shabbes*

kugel, iz men di gantseh vokh zat. Goodman has chosen to interpret that phrase with a generosity of spirit: To eat a delicious kugel on the Sabbath will fill you with a sense of warmth, comfort and joy -- a feeling that, ideally, will remain with you until the next Sabbath, and the next kugel. A day after the cook-off, brisketeer Barsky had a chance to savor the victory with his family and put together his prize, a Weber smoker. "I knew it was pretty good," he said modestly. "I wondered whether my win might have upset all those congregation ladies who are great cooks. But it was a good-natured event."