

A TAVOLA! ITALIAN-JEWISH CUISINE AND THE STORIES BEHIND IT

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of The College Commons Podcast and a real treat, literal and metaphorical to talk about food with Benedetta Guetta. Benedetta Guetta is an Italian food writer and photographer. In 2009, she co-founded a website called Labna, the only Jewish kosher cooking blog in Italy. She teaches the marvels of Italian Jewish food in cooking schools, synagogues and community centers in Italy and abroad. And her work has appeared in the Washington Post, Cosmopolitan, El la Tablo, Saveur and Tablet. *Cooking Alla Giudia* is Guetta's third book and her first in English. And it won the 2022 National Jewish Book Award in the category of food writing and cookbooks. Benedetta, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Benedetta Guetta: Thank you so much for having me, Joshua. I'm thrilled to join you today.

JH: In your introduction to *Cooking Alla Giudia*, you celebrate Jewish Italian food as a reflection of the great cultural crossroads of the Mediterranean. So while we all love to marvel at the idea that Italian food had no tomatoes before encountering the new world, who would've ever thought that *Orecchiette* the small southern Italian pasta came from the Jews? When we talk about cultural exchanges, what is the particular power of food?

BG: When I started to write my book, I wasn't really gonna focus on the intersection of Jewish-Italian cuisine because I didn't think there was any. I just assumed that there were Jewish dishes and Italian dishes. But as I started my research, I found that there were vastly underestimated points of encounter where Jewish cuisine influenced Italian cuisine and on the flip side where Italian life, Italian culture, Italian socio and economical situation influenced Jewish cuisine. So I was surprised, myself, to find in how many passages of history the two cultures really crossed and created really interesting. In my case, dishes generally, people don't know much about Jewish-Italian food. People barely know that there are Jews in Italy because we are a very small community, in terms of number. So I set out on this journey to try to educate

people, first of all about the existence of the Jews of Italy, as a community, but then to also describe their very specific identity and in particular their culinary history.

JH: What do you think it is about food that captures in general, not just with Jews in Italy, but just in life, the magic of cultural exchange?

BG: I think there are two things. One main aspect about food is that while there's a number of traditions that are hard to maintain, food is a relatively accessible one. Whatever your grandmother did and your mother did, you are likely to continue to do. And so in that sense, food really allows us to preserve traditions in an effortless way. On the other hand, food is obviously the ultimate common experience because wherever you go in time or space, people share food as a common element of humanity. Well, roughly every culture has bread. Every culture has figured out a way to prepare vegetables, it is just one of those really basic common elements that somehow bring us all together despite all of the different other aspects of a culture.

JH: Speaking about universal experience, I think you could argue that Italian as a cuisine dominates global cuisine more than any other. How does that dominance affect our understanding of this ancient but tiny Jewish minority within the story of Italian food that otherwise so, so dominates our imagination as one of the great cuisines?

BG: Funny that you ask that, I teach these Jewish-Italian cooking classes and a lot of the people that come to my classes, they don't know exactly what they're signing up for, and they're very excited because they love Jewish food and they love Italian food. And so they think, oh, this is gonna be, multiple spaghetti or any other random fusion combination of Jewish and Italian cuisine because people love Italian food and people equally, I wanna argue love Jewish food. So there's often this idea that these are two great cuisines. What I try to bring to the table really is the knowledge that there is a niche within the Italian cuisine as a whole that is really the Jewish contribution. And it is just vastly underestimated because it's very easy for people to just paint Italian food with a broad brush. It's the country of pizza and lasagna and all of those yummy things and nobody really bothers to dig into the history. Once you bother to dig into the history. The Jewish contribution is actually quite impressive.

BG: The Jews brought a lot to Italian food, a lot more than people generally know. Italians themselves don't know, the story of Orecchiette. For example, in southern Italy, there is this dish called Orecchiette. I mean, we're gonna just briefly describe it for those who might not know it, it's a pasta shape, which resembles a little ear, Orecchiette means little ears. And every time I present my book in... For example to southern Italians, they assume that Orecchiette are a Southern Italian dish. They're very proud of it. They think it has originated in the region of Apulia. And everybody is so shocked when they find out that this dish was actually not Italian in origin. It came from France and it was a Jewish specialty. When you think about it, there's pretty much only one religion that I know of where we celebrate a holiday eating the little ear of our enemy Haman. And that is the Jewish holiday of Purim. I don't know any other religion that has a similar name or a similar dish. So when I tell this story to Italians themselves they don't know,

they're shocked. It is not like anyone is trying to hide these stories, it is just that these stories have not come to the light yet. And that's what I've made my mission to tell these stories.

JH: Well, speaking of stories that we might make assumptions about. Many many people assume that Italian Jews are Sephardic, when in fact Italian Judaism is a bit of, as Italians would call it, a fruit salad of Jewish cultures. So share with us some of the different strands of Jewish culture that are represented in the Italian Jewish scene. And then if you're willing, share with us one food that you associate with each of those communities.

BG: It is important to really notice first and foremost that at least part of the Italian Jews we're not Sephardic nor Ashkenazi, they were neither. The original Jews of Italy were Jews that established themselves in Italy during the Judea-Roman war in the year 66 of the Common Era. And these original Jews came from Israel slaves and established themselves in southern Italy. The Jewish population on Italy is the oldest diaspora of the Israel in the world. Now, throughout history, there have been immigrations of Jews from other places. For example, of course, we need to consider the Alhambra Decree in 1492 when the Jews were expelled from Spain. Southern Italy was a part of Spain at that time. So there was quite a massive current of Jews moving through the peninsula from south to north at that time. So the original ancient Jewish communities, especially the ones in Southern Italy, slowly migrated up north.

BG: And there they were joined from all of the communities from northern and central Europe. So at that point we had quite the melting pot. We have to this day in a certain way, different communities across the country that still have different identity and different recipes to go with those identities that originated from those migration movements. One point that I like to tell, for example, in northern Italy, we used to have a very established tradition of making a lot of products with goose was a very German tradition. And the Jews picked up the ability to cook, with goose from the Germans and adopted the goose as an ingredient to their cuisine. And they found that substantially goose could replace pork. So in all of northern Italy, goose used to be a very Jewish ingredients, but if you cross towards the center of the peninsula and go towards the south, goose would be unheard of because these were really different types of Jews. Jews that came and had influences from different places.

BG: Now in present day Italy, there is Jews of all types obviously. But again, if you look at the history of present day, there's a lot to be said about the different contributions religious communities have brought to Italy. We have a lot of Iranian Jews who fled Persia. We have a lot of Jews from Libya, we have Jews from Lebanon, we have Jews from all over the place. So current Italy has pretty much a melting pot of Jews from many different places. Yet we are very proud of the fact that there is a core original identity that still lives on that was the specific Italian Jewish identity. So yeah, there's a lot of diversity within Italy but it's important to note that there's this core Italian identity that is really not Sephardic or Ashkenazi.

JH: In your introductory section, you ask a very scholarly question of yourself and your recipe choices. You ask what makes a dish Jewish? What were the criteria you used to include a recipe as a Jewish recipe or not?

BG: Excellent question. Thank you. One criteria pertains to ingredients. One criteria pertains to techniques. And I wanna say a third one, even more of a cultural aspect. So on the one hand, I tried to record the recipe that have Jewish ingredients, for example, the story of the Orecchiette that I told you about. Italians didn't have that pasta shape until the Jews brought it to them. Or for example, Eggplant Caponata, Jews substantially contributed to the diffusion of eggplant, as a vegetable. Italians were very skeptical of eggplant as a food, traditional Jewish recipes that we consider Italian today, but were really Jewish in terms of ingredients because Italians didn't cook with those ingredients, that was another criteria. So on the one hand, ingredients on the other hand, there's techniques. So for example, Italian would make Pasta Frolla, which is like a sugar cookie type of thing with butter.

BG: But this would not, because if they were gonna eat this as a dessert after a meal featuring meat they would not be able to enjoy it in the same meal. So the Jews started developing their own way of making pastries which rely on vegetable oil instead of butter. And that is specifically a Jewish thing when you find it in Venice, the way you find it in Torino, the way you find it in Rome. So that's not a dish itself that is Jewish, but it's the preparation of that dish that has become Jewish. And then there is the third category that I tried to record, which is one of the ones that I find the most fascinating, which is Jewish dishes that have an Italian history or that were shaped by life in Italy.

BG: So as you know, Italians have great historical things to them, but one of the negative historical aspects Italians are credited for inventing ghettos. The first one was created in Venice 1516. The second one was created in 1555 in Rome. The idea of a ghetto was obviously to force the Jews away from the Christians, to isolate the Jews. And together with life in the ghettos came a lot of restrictions and a lot of oppression that the Popes over time inflicted on the Jews. And a lot of those forms of oppression actually somehow pertains to food. It was very easy for the Popes over a time to attack the Jews to make their lives less pleasant by changing rules on them and making some food prohibited. Now, we have plenty of prohibitions in our diet as Jews as it is. But the Popes decided to limit the things that Jews could eat or sell in terms of food. At some point the Pope decided that the Jews could not afford to eat a really nice big fish. They wanted to allow Jews only to eat tiny little fishes. Imagine sardines, imagine anchovies, the stuff that usually comes in a can these days. So that was just an arbitrary abusive measure of the Pope to make the life of the Jews difficult. So what did the Jews do? They created a dish that today we think of as a local Roman specialty called Aliciotti Con Indivia, which is a really really humble pie of Indivia, which is a salad, like curly endives and Aliciotti which is anchovies.

BG: This dish was really born out of poverty and oppression, but it has a very specific historical context because you wouldn't understand it without knowing the prohibitions of the Pope, that the Pope enforced. So there are quite a few of these stories that I tried to record and because I find them fascinating because of the way the historical and economical and social situation in Italy determined how Jewish cuisine evolved locally compared to the food of the Christians. Another one of those examples is that at some point the Pope decided that the Jews could not sell cheese. They could eat it, but they could not sell it. And if you had a pastry shop and one of your dishes was a cheesecake of sorts, that was taboo because you couldn't sell the dish anymore, you couldn't sell cheese. So they started to sell these cheesecakes that are encased

in a pastry shell so that on the window of their stores the guides of the Pope could not see that there was cheese in the pie. And today we think of this again as a local Roman specialty, it's the Ricotta pie, but it wasn't born like that. It wasn't a pie with a little salt. So let's go back to your original question. Besides the ingredients and the techniques, history and the Jewish history in particular crafted the birth of the recipe.

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JH: You describe this book as part of your mission to preserve this fascinating, beautiful, fun, culinary legacy. A legacy that is so often wrapped up in personalities and oral traditions as cooking often is. In this context where you're trying to preserve something, how does experimentation, how do new influences and innovation fit into your mission?

BG: When I started my blog, at some point I came to realize there's something really really valuable about preserving history. And in the particular case of the Jewish Italian history, it's probably more urgent than it is for other Jewish communities in the world. The Jewish community of Italy is very small. The numbers are minuscule. The population is aging. Young people are moving out of the country and they have left behind Italian life and Italian traditions. So when I started to research this book, it just came to my attention that there were a number of traditions that were really dying once they're gone, they're gone. It's like you see an endangered species, like a panda, and you're like, damn, I have to save the panda. I felt this responsibility more than anything towards these people to save these recipes, because I really truly believe that in a few generations they will be gone. The Jewish community of Venice for Passover gathered all of the old women in the neighborhood, not many, Venice itself has like, I don't know, 400 Jews? I want to say something like that. They gather and they make cookies for Passover.

BG: And these are very very very special Passover cookies because they do them with a special flour that is certified by a rabbi. So they're able to make cookies that are cultured for Passover. They're tricking the system. They don't do them with almond flour or with rice flour. They get to make real cookies. So these cookies are very, very special. They need some dish. You only get them in Venice, only for Passover, only if the volunteers gather. Now, I got really excited about it, and I go to Venice for Passover to make the cookies with the volunteers because I want to learn the recipe. I get there, and these lovely ladies, they were so excited about it. I swear, I wish them to live to 120 years, but we might not be so lucky. And if we're not so lucky, there's not going to be another generation of Jews that makes those cookies for Passover in Venice because the community of Venice is small and it's sinking and Jews, especially the young ones leave. So I just really felt a debt to them, not only of gratitude, but like a real sense of responsibility to try and preserve their stories. Because I do get a vivid sense that they're not going to last us very long.

JH: Well, I'm not going to ask you your favorite recipe. I'll play fair. But I do want to ask you what item or recipe or aspect of writing this book most surprised you? What did you learn that you never expected to discover?

BG: Probably surprised me the most is the variety of Jewish-Italian food. Because when I thought out to write this book, I picked recipes and recipes, and I just let them pile up. And at some point I sit and I look in my notes and I look at my files, and it's about 400 recipes that I have sitting there. And my editor says, forget about it, you can't put 400 recipes there, it's going to be the size of the Yellow Pages. So she had me narrow them down. So I think at that point it was 140. And as I was narrowing them down, the real struggle wasn't really picking favorites.

BG: But it was to give accurate representation to all of the different Jewish communities of Italy because Italy has historically been very fragmented. It is still to this day, actually divided in regions. Every region has its own cultural aspects. So, it has its own recipes, its own Jewish history. So the thing that was most surprising for me having grown up in Milan, was to find what great richness of Jewish traditions and of course Jewish food that is across the peninsula because wherever you go, in most bigger cities and in very many small villages as well, there were recipes and stories to be uncovered. So the hardest challenge and yet the most exciting finding has been to revisit how across the country Jewish food has a myriad of different spaces and different aspects to it. That has probably been the most rewarding aspect of the research.

BG: Now, in terms of my favorite food, I try to give a bit of representation to every region, but Rome is by far the winner in terms of richness of history and availability of interesting recipes. So I think Rome eventually is the most represented region, but I try to give everybody a tiny piece of cake. And in terms of specific dishes, I have very many favorites, but one that people really love and that Americans find very entertaining it is pizza they like. Originally what Italian called pizza was pretty much anything flat. So we have this dish, which is called pizza that people think it's gonna be a pizza, but it turns out to be a delicious cookie studded with like, raisins and nuts and other things. So that is definitely one of my favorite recipes. It's very yummy.

JH: Sounds great. And if we ever needed another reason to go to Italy, you've just given us a whole book of reasons.

BG: Yeah. One of the perks of the book is that I have a few pages in between chapters where I also try to give people a short introduction to Jewish life in the different cities of Italy. So if you ever do happen to go to Italy and you visit Venice or Trieste or Milan or Rome, or pretty much I covered all of the bigger cities, you also have my recommendations for places to visit and things to eat because people always ask me. So I figured it was better to already have it in the book.

JH: Well, thank you Benedetta Guetta for the book *Cooking Alla Giudia* and for the delightful conversation. Thank you so much.

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BG: Thank you so much.

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