Kosher Mexican Food

It’s Cinco de Mayo! Which, by the way, is not Mexico’s Independence Day.

Cinco de Mayo is a big celebration in Mexico. It marks the Battle of Puebla, when a small group of Mexican soldiers defeated a much larger assembly of French invaders on May 5 (obviously), 1862.

Kosher Mexican Food? ¡Claro!*  

Mexican food is really popular. I recall reading a few years ago that salsa is now the Number One condiment in North America. COR, the Kashruth Council of Canada, has certified several commercially-available salsa products. We make our own, of course, to serve with our tacos.

Our kosher tacos are muy sabrosa.

Yes, we cater kosher Mexican food. It’s one of our most popular requests, particularly for Bat and Bar Mitzvahs and family-oriented events. We also make empanadas (sort of like an enclosed taco) and other Mexican dishes upon request. Frankly, I am fully confident that our Executive Chef can create a kosher version of just about any recipe, regardless of where it originates.

We also turn to Mexico for dessert inspiration. Mexican wedding cookies are lightly sweet on the palate. Those who want something sweeter will love our Mexican flan.

*Of course!

Mexico’s Unusual Jewish History

Jewish conversos, who converted to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition, are thought to have first arrived in Mexico in 1519. A larger emigration occurred in the 1530s. For the next several decades, some rose in Church ranks, while others returned to Judaism. A Mexican Inquisition began in the 1570s and ended in 1601. Thankfully, it never reached the intensity that it did in Spain but some 325 “Judaizers” were prosecuted, including 29 who were executed.

During the 1860s, the new Republic of Mexico ended official discrimination against non-Catholics and in the 1880s, announced it would accept Russian Jews if they agreed to live in unsettled, government-owned land. However, very few Jews knew how to farm—most European nations would
not allow Jews to own land—so few, if any, took up the offer in spite of encouragement from European Jewish leaders. By 1900, the Mexican census identified just 134 Jews in the entire country.

After 1900, however, Jews began to arrive from Eastern Europe to Latin and South America. More than 21,000 were in Mexico by 1930. There was even a Jewish bullfighter in Mexico, Sidney Franklin, who was born in Brooklyn and emigrated to live his dream in 1922. Ernest Hemingway wrote about him in *Death in the Afternoon*, which discusses how Franklin’s innovations ended human fatalities in the bullfighting ring.

As Nazism spread into the 1940s, Mexico’s Jewish population reached about 40,000. Most lived in Mexico City, which remains the center of Jewish life in the country.

As for Independence Day? Mexico’s is September 16 and was first observed in 1810. Obviously, the French—along with the Spanish—had to learn this the hard way. On that day, patriotic Mexicans shout “¡Grito de Deolores!” (Cry of Deolores), named for the town where the battle for independence began.

**Mexican Flan for Mother’s Day**

Mother’s Day is this Sunday. Make Mom a flan this year with this recipe from AllRecipes. All ingredients are available in kosher food stores.

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**Passover Traditions from Around the World**

Passover is a pretty amazing holiday. As we celebrate it well into a sixth millennia, it’s remarkable how little the main event has changed over time and throughout the world.

Here at Mitzuyan Kosher Catering, we try to honor both Ashkenazic and Sephardic foods in our regular kosher menus and Passover specials, but even we were unaware of some traditions that
developed throughout the diaspora. We also rediscovered practices that have sort of fallen by the wayside. I figured it would be entertaining to let you know about a few so you might decide to put in your Seder.

**Passover Demands More From Males**

The story of the Exodus is a pretty grim one, starting with Pharaoh’s order to kill all firstborn Jewish males to a similar plague on Egyptian households.

It’s gotten better for firstborn males since then, but the Torah does command them to fast the day before Passover to remember how Gd saved them from certain death. For the most part, it’s observed in Orthodox communities and some Conservative ones.

Many communities exempt the guys from the fast, on the principle that Passover is a joyful holiday and fasting kind of goes against the celebration. So synagogues will host a special siyyum, a ceremony used to mark the ending of a section of the Talmud. The siyyum is held the morning before Passover (Erev Pesach), and firstborns are invited to have cake and schnapps afterward.

According to My Jewish Learning, some Sephardic communities include first-born women in the siyyum, particularly those of Syrian origin. And sometimes poor couples would wed on Erev Pesach, inviting firstborn children to attend to exempt them from fasting.

Another Syrian practice is to wrap the matzos in a kind of knapsack, and give it to a male in the family who should throw it over his left shoulder. He then has a Q&A with the other Seder celebrants:

**Q:** What are you carrying?

**A:** Matzos.

**Q:** Where are you coming from?

**A:** Egypt.

**Q:** Where are you going?

**A:** Israel.

Given the gruntable, one-word answers, I’m betting that this tradition started as a way to prod the teenagers into participating.

**Passover Traditions to Contemplate: Scallion Whippings, Wet Floors, and Floured Foreheads**

Some traditions sound fun and might be worth popularizing or reviving. What do you think?

- Jews from Afghanistan continue to observe the tradition of whipping each other with scallions in remembrance of how slave drivers in Egypt whipped the Hebrew slaves.

- Hasidic Jews in Poland used to spill water on the floors of their homes, lift up their coats, and cross
over in remembrance of the Red Sea Crossing. As they reached the “other side,” they drank a glass of wine.

- Seder leaders from Tunisia, Morocco, and Turkey walk around the table three times with the Seder plate and tap it on the head of each person. This dates back to 14th century Spain to prompt everyone to remember the great exodus. Or to wake up anyone who needs it after drinking the second cup of wine.

- Three passages in Exodus mention Egyptians giving gold and silver to the Hebrews. Hungarian Jews traditionally display gold and silver jewelry at the Seder table.

Jews in Morocco celebrate Mimouna, the day after Passover by participating in these activities:

- They go into the ocean and throw pebbles behind them to scare off evil spirits.
- They bake up a storm, invite everyone over, and hand out bread and cake.
- Some mark their foreheads and their guests’ with flour to wish them a successful year.

It’s too cold in Toronto to even think about going near the ocean before June, but baking is always worth the effort. Here’s a nice Passover treat for chocolate matzah, from Saveur.

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**My Kosher Valentine**

I was distracted planning Passover catering (which we will blog about—watch this space!), I nearly forgot that Valentine’s Day falls on Shabbos this week.

Personally, I believe Valentine’s Day should be for kids, but it’s very possible that your significant other feels otherwise. I believe in telling one’s beloved how much he or she is treasured several times a week, in deeds if not in words. So if you’re so moved, take your kosher valentine out for dinner or dessert after sundown and shower with love.

**Delicious Kosher Desserts Do Exist!**

Of course you don’t need a special reason to indulge in a little sweet now and then. Life is sweet (or should be) and if it isn’t, I fully believe we owe it to ourselves to find ways to sweeten it. Of course I mean this literally and figuratively.

We were recently named one of Toronto’s best kosher caterers by blogTo! I’m sure this is partly because we don’t mess around when it’s time for dessert. We get rave reviews for the Trio of
Homemade Gelato Ice Cream with Fresh Fruit that come with our Standard Menu. We’ve seen people get googly-eyed over the Crème Brûlée and Apple Cranberry Tart, Molten Chocolate Cake, and other special treats on the Elite Menu—which also features a Late Night Sweet Table.

Love is Kosher, Even on Valentine’s Day

But is it acceptably Jewish to note, if not outright celebrate, Valentine’s Day? After all, it’s named for a saint isn’t it? But it seems the history of this Hallmark holiday is murky and perhaps not so clearly-cut nonsecular. I wrote about the issue of celebrating potentially Gentile customs a few months back when I discussed celebrating the Jewish and secular New Years and applied those criteria to Valentine’s Day:

1. Does it require idol worship?

This can be tricky for besotted teenagers but in general, this kind of “idolatry” is entirely voluntary and can end on a whim. So Valentine’s Day passes this test.

2. Does it require adopting Gentile customs?

I don’t think so, and neither does Rabbi Mike Uram, writing for MyJewishLearning.com. No one really knows how Valentine’s Day came to be associated with a saint who may not have existed. It’s possible that the saint is based on legends about several early Christians. Some scholars think Chaucer created him. I note that February 14 is a minor feast day for Anglicans and Lutherans; the Eastern Orthodox Church notes St. Valentine in July.

3. Does it add to mitzvoth?

This is where it’s tricky. I guess you could say Yes if you give a nice card or treat to someone who feels left out of all the lovey-dovey goings on—or spare them any commentary at all. There have been times I’ve felt it got out of hand. But, it is good for the restaurant business, which is very important in Toronto.

The main idea is to consider if the holiday in question requires you to do things you believe are wrong. There’s certainly nothing wrong with going out of your way to express your love for someone, unless it amounts to unwanted attention.

A Kosher Sweet for Your Sweetie!

Many rabbis, says Rabbi Uram, tell their congregations that’s it’s OK to celebrate Valentine’s Day. Here’s a ridiculously easy recipe from Feastie.com you can whip up for your very own kosher valentine treat.

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