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Erik Jacobs for The New York Times

**POTATO COHORTS** Paul O'Connell's latkes include beets and celery root.

## At Hanukkah, Chefs Make Kitchen Conversions

By [JOAN NATHAN](#)

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GROWING up in Fredericksburg, Va., Todd Gray said, he could count all his town's Jewish residents on one hand.

So when Mr. Gray, the chef and owner of Equinox Restaurant in Washington, down the street from the White House, became engaged to Ellen Kassoff in 1994, her father decided to acquaint him with Jewish culture in a way they could both relate to — through food.

They traveled from Washington to New York, where they ate pastrami, corned beef, gefilte fish and herring at Katz's, the Second Avenue Deli and the Carnegie Deli.

"They bonded over food," said Ms. Kassoff, now Mr. Gray's wife and business partner. "I think chefs have more of an appreciation of Jewish culture than most intermarried couples. Since we live and breathe food all the time, my dad isn't so mad I didn't marry a Jewish guy."

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On holidays like [Hanukkah](#), which begins this year on the night of Dec. 11, gentile chefs with Jewish spouses bring epicurean interpretations to simple dishes, but also enjoy culinary traditions they've taken to heart.



Even since their divorce, the Austrian chef [Wolfgang Puck](#), a Roman Catholic, continues to hold a charity Seder at his restaurant Spago in Los Angeles with his business partner and ex-wife, Barbara Lazaroff, who is Jewish. "The food is so similar," Mr. Puck said. "My grandmother made potato pancakes, but they were rösti with cooked potatoes and then fried with onions. We had semolina dumplings like matzo balls."

For Hanukkah, Mr. Gray, who is Episcopalian, takes his father-in-law's 24-hour braised brisket and cooks it sous vide for 36 hours. He makes a citrus-infused gravlax, as well as the matzo ball soup of Ms. Kassoff's Aunt Lill.

"I dice the carrots, celery and onions into a mirepoix," he said, "rather than keeping them in big chunks."

On the couple's first Hanukkah together, he tried a recipe for sufganiyot, or jelly doughnuts, that Ms. Kassoff brought back from Israel. But the doughnuts turned out soggy and the dough didn't hold together. He has since redeemed himself with the apple cider sufganiyot with blueberry sauce on his restaurant's Hanukkah menu.



Michael Temchine for The New York Times

**OLD/NEW** Todd Gray's apple cider doughnuts and blueberry jam.

At the annual Hanukkah latke party that [Tom Colicchio](#) of "Top Chef" and the Craft empire holds with his wife, Lori Silverbush, he makes potato and sweet potato latkes that are crisp on the outside and soft on the inside.

"I kind of figured out the recipe myself," said Mr. Colicchio, who is Roman Catholic. "I didn't have a Jewish grandmother to show me. You take potatoes and onions, a little potato starch, you mash them

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together and fry them up. It's fun to do. A lot of kids come by. When we got married, we agreed to support each other."

For about a dozen relatives and friends, Mr. Colicchio conducts a latke assembly line in his home kitchen and serves the latkes with toppings like sautéed mushrooms, caviar, braised short ribs, smoked salmon, sturgeon and, of course, sour cream and applesauce.

Sometimes a marriage of tastes hits a rough spot. Paul O'Connell, the chef and owner of Chez Henri in Cambridge, Mass., likes crisp, lacy potato latkes. His longtime girlfriend, Suzanne Mermelstein, and her Jewish family are used to a heavier version.

"Suzanne's family won't let me do all the latkes because they use lots of matzo meal to make them thick," Mr. O'Connell said. This year, though, he can freely fry his red flannel hash latkes, with shredded potatoes, celery root and beets, when he and Ms. Mermelstein, a baker and owner of Mariposa Bakery in Cambridge, dine with friends.

Things can be frustrating, though, for someone whose job is to know what tastes best.

"I would love to cook the Seder meal," one famous non-Jewish chef said of [Passover](#) dinner with his in-laws. (He asked to remain anonymous to avoid their wrath.) "The food has got to be better."

But would he know how to follow all the kosher rules? When Mr. O'Connell, a Roman Catholic, offered to make grilled and roasted veal in a rub of smoked paprika and other spices for Ms. Mermelstein's Hungarian-born family in Los Angeles, her father told him to charge the meat to his account at a kosher butcher he had been using for over 40 years.

But the chef did not realize that only meat from the forequarters of the steer or calf is kosher. "When I called and mentioned the veal loin cut I wanted to use," Mr. O'Connell said, "the butcher said it wasn't kosher and yelled at me, asking, 'Who are you anyway?' as if to say, 'Why are you cooking for Steve Mermelstein?'"

With an appropriate cut from the rib rack, the dish turned out well and the family welcomed the innovations.

"But they're always trying to get me to put prunes or dried apricots in the brisket like they do," Mr. O'Connell said. "It's like, 'We love your food but do it our way still.'" For his brisket, he rubs the meat

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with spices, grills it and then braises it with onions, mustard and Worcestershire sauce, finishing the sauce with a wine and vermouth reduction.

Still, he said: “I see great compatibility with Irish and Jewish cooking. In both traditions you slowly braise meats and vegetables together so that toothless grandmothers can chew them.”

Some basic traditions cannot be breached.

Sara Moulton, the cookbook author and former Food Network host, prepared a cocktail party at her parents’ Manhattan apartment to celebrate her engagement to Bill Adler in 1981. She was trying to be sensitive to her future Jewish in-laws, who were not thrilled with the impending marriage. But she didn’t fully take into account a fundamental rule of Jewish parties: serve lots of food.

“We had lots of wine and booze — we are WASP’s — and I made all the food,” Ms. Moulton said. “The only menu item I am absolutely sure of is the gravlax. I cured several sides of salmon for three days, following my favorite recipe from the Time-Life Foods of the World series, and served it with pumpernickel toast points, chopped red onion, mustard dill sauce and capers.”

But three of her husband’s aunts from Brooklyn complained that there was not enough to eat — not even any cream cheese and bagels — and they wondered about the strange salmon “stuff.”

The Mexican-born chef Julian Medina converted to Judaism from Roman Catholicism when he married Annie Sigal five years ago.

He serves a Hanukkah menu at his restaurants Toloache and Yerba Buena in Manhattan, including sufganiyot with dulce de leche.

Cooking, for him, is a way to get closer to his wife’s family.

“Now at holidays, my mother-in-law is so happy,” he said. “It changed her life completely because I do the cooking. I make her life so much easier, and even she will admit that the food looks prettier and it tastes better.”

Randee Sigal, his mother-in-law, agrees.

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“He’s raised the bar for food in our family,” said Ms. Sigal, of Manhattan. “His potato latkes are great and traditional, but sometimes he adds jalapeños. He respects our culture and we respect his. I love the blending of the two at the holidays.”

## **\* *Citrus-Cured Gravlox With Toasted Fennel Seeds***

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**Time:** 10 minutes plus overnight refrigeration

3 to 4 tablespoons Cointreau or other orange liqueur

1 1/4 pounds salmon fillet with skin

3/4 cup sugar

3/4 cup coarse salt

1/2 tablespoon fennel seeds, toasted and crushed

Zest of 1 lemon, grated

Zest of 1 lime, grated

Zest of 1 orange, grated

2 thyme sprigs, leaves crushed

1 dried bay leaf, crumbled.

Citrus crème fraîche, for garnish. (See recipe.)

1. Rub Cointreau over flesh side of salmon. In a half-gallon zip-top plastic bag, combine sugar, salt and fennel. Add zests, thyme and bay leaf; mix well.

2. Put salmon in bag, gently roll to coat, then press sugar-salt mixture into meat. Place plastic bag on a plate, put a weight on top (like a heavy skillet) and refrigerate overnight or for about 12 to 14 hours.

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3. When ready to serve, remove bag from refrigerator and thoroughly scrape off citrus-salt mixture, dabbing with a damp cloth if necessary. Before serving, slice gravlax paper-thin on a diagonal and serve on crackers, with a dollop of citrus crème fraîche with tarragon.

**Yield:** 8 to 10 servings.

## *Apple Cider Doughnuts*

**Time:** 40 minutes plus 30 minutes' chilling

1 cup apple cider

5 1/2 cups all-purpose flour, more for rolling dough

1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder

1 teaspoon baking soda

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

1 1/2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

4 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature

1 1/2 cups granulated sugar

1/4 cup packed brown sugar

2 large eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1/2 cup buttermilk

1 medium Honeycrisp apple or other tart cooking apple, peeled and cut into 1/4-inch dice

Vegetable oil, for frying

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Blueberry ginger jam, for serving (see recipe).

1. Place apple cider in a small saucepan over high heat and reduce to 1/2 cup; remove from heat and reserve. In a large bowl, sift together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, nutmeg and 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon.
2. Using an electric mixer fitted with a paddle, mix together the butter, 1 cup granulated sugar and the brown sugar, until creamy. Mix in eggs one at a time. Mix in vanilla, buttermilk and reserved cider.
3. Scrape down bowl and add sifted flour mixture. Mix just until blended. Remove bowl from mixer, add apple, and mix well by hand. Cover and refrigerate for 30 minutes.
4. On a lightly floured work surface, roll out dough to a rough disk about 1/2-inch to 3/4-inch thick. Cut dough using a 2 1/2-inch doughnut cutter. Reserve "holes."
5. Fill a wok or deep fryer with oil and heat to 300 degrees. Putting three or four doughnuts in at a time, fry until deep golden brown on each side, about 5 minutes total. Drain on a platter lined with paper towels. Fry "holes" separately. In a small bowl, combine remaining 1/2 cup sugar with remaining 1 teaspoon cinnamon. Dust doughnuts with cinnamon sugar and serve warm. If desired, serve with blueberry ginger jam for dipping or spreading.

**Yield:** About 2 dozen.

## ***Blueberry Ginger Jam***

**Time:** 35 minutes

4 cups blueberries

1 cup sugar

1/2 teaspoon peeled, finely grated fresh ginger

Finely grated zest of 1 lemon

1 tablespoon port wine.

1. In a medium saucepan, combine all ingredients.

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2. Place over high heat to bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low. Simmer until thick and shiny, about 30 minutes. May be served warm as a sauce, or allowed to cool completely (it will thicken more upon cooling) and served as a spreadable jam.

**Yield:** 2 cups.