

## Schlepping Across the Nile



**M**y nieces and I play a drinking game at our Passover Seder. As I am both wifeless and childless, in addition to lacking the requisite maturity, I sit in the children's section directly across from my brother who sits at the head of the table with the rest of the adults.

The Seder, as some of you may know, is actually a religious ceremony where drinking is not only allowed but mandated as part of the reading of the Haggadah. In fact, we are required to drink four glasses of wine—two before dinner and two after. But we decided to supplement the religious rites by adding a twist of our own. We would take a drink when triggered by specific words or actions of our fellow Seder participants. In other words, our family and close friends. I don't really want to throw any of them, or my nieces for that matter, under the bus by divulging any of those triggers but suffice it to say the word "colonoscopy" alone has gotten them drunk long before the pickled brisket is served.

I would like to think I am the cool uncle. At least I was until a few years ago when it became abundantly clear that I had, unbeknown to me, transitioned from playing the game to being one of the designated triggers.

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My drink-inducing utterance was complaining about how I preferred the Sephardic Egyptian/Syrian food which graced my parents' Seder table over the Ashkenazi swill I was now forced to eat.

Turns out, I said it a lot. Maybe not as much as colonoscopy, but a lot.

Chinese food is just food to the Chinese. The same can be said of the Egyptian food we ate growing up. For us, it was just food.

My nieces call it yellow food because much of it is made with saffron and turmeric.

It was food with strange names. Arabic names. The conversation was in French but the food names were almost always in Arabic.

“Ronnie, *tu veux un autre morceau de marshi?*”

Marshi.

Zucchini or large peppers stuffed with rice and meat. Flavored with lemon and garlic. It was my favorite. And my aunts knew it.

My brother loves *warak enab*—stuffed vine leaves. The Greek call them *dolmades*. But they serve them cold. Not the same. Not civilized.

Some of the pronunciations varied depending on whether you were from Syria, Lebanon, or Egypt. My Tante Nandi made deep-fried torpedo-shaped balls of bulgar wheat on the outside and minced meat on the inside. They were heavenly. Would make an atheist believe in God. Our family called them *kobbabah* but my cousin Tita and her family, who grew up in Lebanon, call them *kibbe*.

The delicious side dish of lentils and rice with fried onions then topped with yogurt is *megadra*—soft *G*—or *megadera*—hard *G*. Our family used the hard *G*.

One of the many traits I picked up from my mom is the need to tell strangers I know where they are from. That we are from the same place. Arabic could not be spoken without my mom piping up. “Yes,” she would say. “*Masri*,” using the Arabic name for Egypt.

A few months after she passed away, I was in Starbucks when I heard two people speaking to each other in French. It was French but it was with an Egyptian accent. For us, it is unmistakable. I would like to say my mother's spirit took me over when I addressed them but I think it was all me.

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“Let me ask you something,” I said. “Do you say megadra or megadera?” They were startled but didn’t miss a beat.

“Megadera,” she confirmed.

“Ah. Us too. Masri?”

“Iwa, yes, Masri.”

And then I left with my tall latte.

Vegetables are hard enough for kids to eat but made worse in Arabic. *Fasoolia* was a green bean stew. *Bizella* were peas. The harsh-sounding *charshuf* were artichokes. *Bamia*, never my favorite, was okra.

Those, and others, were the names of the food from my childhood. My Jewish childhood. But I never saw them in the works of the great Jewish writers like Bellow, Roth, and Richler. We were the other Jews. These were our words, our foods. Nobody else we knew ate them or had even heard of them.

My brother-in-law, Jamie, an Ashkenazi Jew from Montreal, tells the story of the speech he gave at his and my sister Danielle’s wedding. He listed the food his new mother-in-law had introduced him to. It wasn’t a bit. He wasn’t making a joke. All he did was repeat the names of the food in Arabic. He was amazed that each item elicited a huge laugh from my cousins and me. Because we never heard those words outside of our own dining room. Not in books, not in TV, not in film.

That’s not to say we lived in a totally insular bubble. We would very occasionally go for pizza—my father repeatedly reminding the waitress no pepperoni, and to please bring his beer with his food. On special occasions we might go to Ponderosa Steakhouse. And I remember when the first McDonalds, serving 22-cent burgers, opened in our neighborhood. But the Zevys, by and large, did not go out to eat. We ate at home. Or we ate at one of my aunt or uncles’ houses. If we ever ate dinner at someone’s house who was not an Egyptian Jew, I have zero recollection of it. I think because it never happened. Maybe my parents had friends. Maybe they went to their houses for dinner. But I don’t think so.

Lunch was a different matter. I walked to school and came home for lunch. *The Flintstones* were on at 12:00 pm. Sometimes a classmate invited me to their house for lunch. I almost always said no. In part because I did not want to feel obligated to reciprocate, and in part because I had a pretty serious fear of Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom Soup.

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The Jewish religion says a boy becomes a man when he turns 13. I think a boy becomes a man when he starts eating creamed soups; in my case, I was 27. Lunch was invariably soup and a grilled cheese sandwich. Crusts cut off.

The best possible soup was Lipton's Chicken Noodle Soup. It was a packet you put in a bowl and poured boiling water on.

Delish.

The second best possible soup was Campbell's Tomato Soup. It was not good but it was edible. Often it would include some sort of cracker.

The worst possible soup was Campbell's Cream of Mushroom (I am not going to talk about the time Mrs. Wilson served Cream of Asparagus. She left her husband a week later so am pretty sure she was just acting out). I would eat it and pray to God I did not throw up.

I had been to Stevie Sheen's house for lunch twice (Lipton's Chicken Noodle Soup—Mrs. Sheen is surely in heaven now), and once after school for chocolate chip cookies. I couldn't put it off any longer. I didn't want to be that guy.

I went to speak to my mom.

"I invited Stevie Sheen for lunch tomorrow."

She didn't look up from the TV.

"Okay."

I stood in front of the TV, blocking her view.

"Just soup and grilled cheese sandwich. Maybe some chips."

She waved her arms, imploring me to move away from the TV. My father, who was on the recliner reading a volume of Will and Ariel Durant's *Story of Civilization*, lowered his glasses and looked up to see what was the commotion disturbing his post-dinner tranquility. He looked at me. Then he looked at his wife. Then he looked at me again. But he didn't say a word.

"Mom, Lipton's Chicken Noodle Soup. Okay."

I saw my father smile. He was enjoying this.

"Lipton's?" My mother asked. "With the boiling water?"

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“Yes. It is very good. All the moms serve it. All the Canadian moms. The kids love it.”

But my mom wasn't buying it.

“Don't worry, Ronnie. You want soup. I'll make you soup. I'll make you a wonderful soup.”

This was not good.

My mom made a lot of soups. But she was talking about a “wonderful soup.” That meant, oh god, it meant one of three soups. All three were a problem. The least problematic was a Syrian chicken soup called *hamud*. Hamud means sour in Arabic. It is a chicken soup with celery, potatoes, lemon, garlic, and mint leaves. It often includes meat balls called *kibbe*. It is topped with white rice. To be clear, it is my favorite soup in the world. My nieces absolutely love it. My sister-in-law, who incidentally is a fantastic cook, makes her own and it tastes like it came from the streets of Cairo. I ordinarily frown on taking pictures of food but every single time I eat hamud I take a picture of the bowl and post it in our family chat. That is how much I love it. Most of you reading this are no doubt saying, that sounds yummy, why is this soup problematic? It is because you are not a 10-year-old Christian (yeah, I said it) boy living on the West Island of Montreal who has been weaned on a steady diet of Campbell's Soup. The problem with the soup is it mostly looks like chicken soup. So, even with advance warning, you take the first spoonful expecting chicken soup and are accosted instead with chicken lemon garlic soup. Believe me, it is delish. But tell that to Stevie Sheen.

The second most problematic soup was lentil. In Arabic it is *adz*. My mother's maiden name is Ades and it is a derivative of that word. Yes, yes, I know. Lentil soup is the bomb. I know that. You know that. But Egyptian lentil soup is a brown concoction which frankly looks like... well, I'd rather not say. I can say it makes Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup look like a walk in the park.

The most problematic soup is the nuclear option.

My mother would never. I mean she could never. But the thing was, it was her favorite soup. It was my father's favorite soup. But no, she could never. I am talking about *molokhia*.

To start with. Nobody can really agree on how to spell it.

*Molokhia.*

*Mulukhiyah.*

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*Mulukhiyyah.*

*Molohiya.*

*Mloukhiya.*

To be fair, it is a transliteration of an Arabic word. Think of the strong guttural “ch” sound common in that language.

It is an Egyptian soup made with the leaves of the *corchorus olitorius*—commonly, ironically, known as Jew’s mallow. It is very popular in Egypt and very much associated with the community of Egyptian Jews.

My community.

Go online and Google it. You will find videos on how to make the best Egyptian molokhia. You might even find it on the menu at a New York Egyptian restaurant. But, back in the day, nobody had ever heard of, much less tasted, molokhia. It existed only within the very close and closely knitted walls of the Egyptian Jewish community.

At this point, I have to try and convey how much my parents and my aunts and uncles and all their Egyptian friends loved (and still love) molokhia. It wasn’t a staple but rather a treat, because, like many of their favorite foods, it required lengthy manual preparation. I can’t pretend to know or remember but the leaves had to be cooked and dried? I really don’t know. Only that it was considered a special treat. And the argument and debate about who made the best molokhia is still ongoing. My late Aunt Fernande was generally thought to be the undefeated champion.

The other thing I need to tell you about molokhia is that it is—how should I say this?—well, let’s just say it is an acquired taste.

To begin with, it is visually unappealing. Today, it is de rigueur to be slurping down kale smoothies but back then nobody, except for my family, was eating what amounted to green leaf soup.

Then consider the consistency. Some of you will be comfortable with the use of the words viscous or glutinous. The rest of us will just say slimy. And not in a good way. The soup, heavily flavored with garlic, is tempered somewhat with a generous scoop of white rice. It is a concoction which, by all reasonable measures should elicit sounds of retching but, with my family, produced contentment and pleasure.

My suspicion is they are eating not soup, but nostalgia.

You can’t, in good faith, serve it to anyone who has never dipped a toe in the Nile.

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She couldn't.

She wouldn't.

I think my mom saw the panic in my eyes. She got up from her chair, went to the kitchen and came back holding a packet of Lipton's Chicken Noodle Soup. People think it is from my father, but I think I got my sense of humor from my mom.

I sighed a breath of relief and said thank you.

"Grilled cheese?"

"With the crusts cut off. Your mother is a Canadian."

My father went back to his book.

Crisis averted. I went to bed and then to school the next day without a care or worry in the world.

That was my mistake.

I let my guard down.

See, *The Flintstones* were on from 12:00 pm until 12:30 pm. Then lunch. Lipton's and grilled cheese. All good. What I hadn't accounted for was my mom would never allow a guest, even 10-year-old Stevie Sheen, to sit in her house for a half an hour without giving them a snack. I mean, we weren't Ashkenazis.

I had forgotten about the pre-meal appetizers.

In our house, in any Jewish Egyptian house, there were always three good options. All delicious. All tasty.

The first was *lahm bi ajeen*. It was a meat pie. The speciality of my Tante Odette. It was like a mini pizza. Delish. Not a problem at all.

The second is *sambousek*. Puff pastry which can be filled with cheese or with meat. My mom added pomegranates to her meat sambousek. Whether cheese or meat, her sambousek were unbelievable. Huge crowd pleasers. She served them to her dying day. She had them ready frozen and fresh all the time. Her grandchildren flocked to eat them. They were culinary rock stars.

No, sambousek would not be a problem.

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The problem was the third option. A circular savoury biscuit with sesame and coriander. It is delicious. It is addictive. A favorite amongst friends and family.

A fantastic treat with an unfortunate name.

Stevie and I were watching *The Flintstones* when my mom came out with a tray and pleasantly and innocently asked Stevie if he would like some *kaak*.

I don't know what became of Stevie Sheen. And I can't really blame him. He was a 10-year-old boy after all. But that year, I was known as the boy who served *kaak* for lunch. It would be many years before I invited someone over again.

This year for Passover I am sitting right next to my brother at the head of the table. My sister-in-law has made matzo ball soup, two different types of kugel, her mother has brought her famous pickled brisket, roast chicken, potatoes, salad, and she has even made rice for the Sephardics. The food is delicious. The guests are bestowing well-earned compliments. Dinner is buffet style and I get up and help myself to another piece of pickled brisket. Add a little mustard. It really is good.

Really.

But what I wouldn't do for just one piece of my Tante Nandi's *kobbebah*.

Looks like they will have to drink another glass of wine.

The end.