

Cook? They'd rather order out

By JOAN LEBOW
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"It's kind of like making meatballs," says Grace Balducci Doria, up to her elbows in a giant batch of gefilte fish.

She works her hands through the pale, gloppy mixture that has driven lesser cooks to buy the gelatinized stuff that comes in jars.

Ms. Doria is co-owner of Grace's Marketplace on the Upper East Side, where the pasta is al dente, the olive oil "extra vergine," and no one knew from kugel, brisket and compote. But then Ms. Doria, a 48-year-old "Italian girl" from Queens, decided to meet the demand in her neighborhood.

"My customers get a kick out of hearing me explain what's in a tsimmes," she says.

Is this kosher? Absolutely not. Traditional? Yes and no. But convenient? Grandma should have been so lucky—or so affluent.

A generation of hardworking city-dwelling men and women is accustomed to buying dinners at gourmet shops on the way home from the office. As the Passover holiday arrives, stressed-out urban Jews continue to ask why this night should be different from all other nights.

Expects 20% gain

Grace's, for example, expects a 20% gain over the Passover week last year when more than 40 customers ordered complete dinners for an average of six to 10 people. The price is \$25 per person from matzo ball soup to macaroons.

A number of stores offer kosher-for-Passover baked goods. The Big Kitchen in the World Trade Center concourse, for example, has added sponge cake, nut cake and macaroons for Wall Streeters on the run from office to seder.

In Brooklyn's Park Slope, those with good intentions and little time can order from New Prospect at Home. "We'll even boil the egg for them if they want!" says Steven Aronson, office manager. "We'll give them everything on the seder plate (the symbolic centerpiece of the Passover meal)." Run by a Jew, a WASP and a Greek, the two-year-old store has added a non-kosher Passover menu.

"Actually they're Marcia's grandmother's recipes," New Prospect's menu boasts. "Oy, can she cook."

Chef Marcia Bass recalls seeing carp swimming in her grandmother's bathtub that would later be hacked up for gefilte fish. "But now you can use a food processor," says a much-relieved 30-year-old Ms. Bass. Still, she says her grandmother's matzo balls were "light like feathers; I'm still trying to get them that good."

Coming close is probably good enough for a generation of seder-makers who were not to the kitchen born. Many don't care if the food isn't kosher, and lots of food shops prepare traditional but non-kosher Jewish dishes. In fact, by law the retailers can't even use the labels "Passover food" or "Jewish-style" without a "non-kosher" disclaimer.

And even if consumers do go to Jewish-owned businesses, tastes have changed. "People used to only go to traditional places like Russ & Daughters or Fine & Schapiro. They never thought to go to a so-called chichi gourmet store," says Stacy Bogdonoff, who, with her husband Paul Neuman, owns Neuman & Bogdonoff on Third Avenue and 79th Street.

Tradition being lost

Still, Ms. Bogdonoff claims, "Emotionally I think people like to know we're Jewish kids."

Maybe. Or else they just want speedy home delivery of food that tastes like what, in an older world, took a week to prepare.

"As the years go by, the tradition of making these things is lost," says Isa Jacoby, manager of E.A.T. on Madison and 81st Street. "It's easier to just come in and order." □ CNYB



Not Grandma's: Grace Balducci Doria, co-owner of Grace's, displays her potato pancakes made for the Passover season.

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