



In Search of *Kreplach:*



More than Just Jewish Ravioli



By **Kenneth D. Ackerman** with **Alice Chezar**

What ever happened to kreplach? You hardly see them anymore. Other Jewish foods like gefilte fish, matzah balls, kugels, and lox and bagels seem ubiquitous in America today. But not kreplach. If you want them, you really have to look for them.

This wasn't always so. Jews have been eating kreplach for over 700 years, since the 13th century, at least. Not long ago, they were a staple in every Jewish deli; most every family had its secret recipe. But like many "old country" traditions, kreplach has become increasingly scarce.

I recently went searching for kreplach—literally. It didn't go well. Even in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, where I live, I found only two restaurants with kreplach soup and a Maryland kosher supermarket selling two frozen types. That was about it.

Our family, like many, once had its own kreplach tradition, with memories of hot kitchens thick with aromas of fried liver and onions and faces of older relatives, but over the years it disappeared. My mission, with the help of my intrepid cousin Alice, has been to rediscover this Jewish essential.

Why So Rare?

Kreplach is hard to make. When I think of my mother making kreplach years ago, I remember an exhausting three-day affair: hours spent grinding meat, potatoes and onions with a big metal hand-cranked contraption, rolling dough with a big wooden roller that looked more like a weapon than cookware, then assembling and cooking the mixture—each step a full day of frying, beating and pressing. Modern food processors have eased the pain but, even so, fresh-made kreplach is rarely the answer to a spur-of-the-moment “What’s for dinner?”

Then there’s the competition, all the convenient Asian and Italian restaurants with their dumplings and ravioli, dim sum and gyozas, plus the closer Eastern European cousins like pierogi and pelmeni, all just a quick drive or delivery call away. So why bother?

In many ways, kreplach are the ultimate Jewish food, misunderstood, irritating to deal with, never respected. Typically, writer Nora Ephron, in her novel “Heartburn,” featured her main character’s signature recipe for kreplach complete with kreplach jokes. But for the movie, the scriptwriters changed it to lasagna.

Kreplach deserve better. Like a good book, good wine or good friend, they are originals that improve with age. Jewish tradition always reserved kreplach for special occasions. When you made them, you made plenty, enough for a big group with extra to share and save. Even the name denoted special status. Etymologists trace the name “kreplach” to French crepes or Middle High German *krappes* or *krapfes*. But Jewish tradition connects them with three Jewish holidays when they’re often served: Kol Nidre for the “K” sound, Hoshana Rabbah (the seventh night of Sukkot) for the “R” and Purim for the “P.” That gives you the “krep,” then add “lach” for a little bunch, *krepel* for a single.

Kreplach’s traditional three-cornered shape also was steeped with symbolism:



Cousin Alice’s kitchen in California functioned as an experimental kreplach laboratory.

Haman’s three-cornered hat from Purim, the three parts of the Jewish Tanach (Torah, Prophets and Writings), the three patriarchs, the Kabbalah’s three parts of the soul, among others. Even the exhausting cooking, the hours in a kitchen with mothers, daughters, even an occasional son, grinding meat and kneading dough, were a seasonal event, a bonding of generations and families.

Dumplings: The Universal Food

Pioneering psychologist Carl Gustav Jung theorized in the 1910s that certain myths and concepts common to all humanity formed a “collective unconscious” with roots deep in our psyches. So, it seems with dumplings, perhaps the most widely adapted food on earth, with origins as disparate as ancient China, ancient Greece, even ancient Egypt. Marco Polo is credited with carrying the idea of Chinese dumplings back from Peking during his famous travels in the late 1200s—likely the longest takeout delivery in history. The first modern ravioli emerged in Venice shortly thereafter, soon morphing into early versions of kreplach in nearby Jewish communities.

But just as plausible are stories of dumplings crossing the Asian continent with Mongols or Tartars, taking root in early Russia. They called them *mantou*



Work in progress: Alice’s quest for perfect kreplach inspired by my mother’s recipe resulted in the production of numerous prototypes. Here’s one example.

(from “savage head”) by the time they reached northwest China. From there, the dumplings migrated to Turkey as *mantı*, then further north to become Polish *pierogi*, Ukrainian *uszka* and *vareniki*, and others. Still another line traces Russian *pelmeni*, or “ear bread” (for its shape), to Siberian hunters who froze them for long treks through northern forests—an easy way to carry meat over long distances. Just add sauce as needed.

Wherever people learned to raise grain and make dough, be it Europe, Asia, Africa, even pre-European America, they soon seemed to figure out how to stuff the dough with meat, veggies or some protein and yield a portable, storable food they could easily boil, bake, fry or add to a soup on short notice.

Peasant Food

Italy and France made them fancy—crepes, tortellini and ravioli. Germans made them delicate: dampfnudeln, germknodels. But in the cold, rugged backwoods of Eastern Europe where Jews began concentrating in the late Middle Ages, they evolved as peasant food, made from scraps or leftovers, with thick dough, often served in soups or stews to soften the edges. Germans called them maultaschen, literally “feedbags,” with schupfnudeln for potatoes.

Over decades and centuries, every locality developed its variations as cooks flavored them with available spices and vegetables. Pelmeni and vareniki kept the dough thin while pierogi grew it thicker.

For Jews, the requirement for kosher meat and separation of meat from milk added more complication. Without butter, kreplach dough grew harder. Fillings became seasonal, ranging from fruit and cheese to turkey, beef, onions, liver, lamb, schmaltz (chicken fat), whatever was at hand. Jews in Turkey and Persia added nearby favorites like eggplant and chickpeas, seasoned with a universe of local spices. Jews in the Central Asian Emirate of Bukhara developed their own unique form called dushpara, a kreplach-like dumpling with ground beef but crafted into a unique shape with connected ends and wing-like edges, and served with a special broth made from chickpeas, cilantro and fried onions.

So intertwined are the cultures today that, in Russia, frozen pelmeni sold in markets are often made with pasta machines imported from Italy, while many Jews in America are drawn to Chinese dumplings that evoke distant memories from their own past. Some Chinese restaurants in Jewish neighbor-



Photo credit: photos courtesy of Kenneth Ackerman

The ultimate kreplach: One picture may be worth a thousand words, but one taste is worth a million.

hoods have even advertised their wonton soup as “kreplach (with pork).”

Our Family

Our family used to have a special kreplach tradition, brought to America when my grandparents emigrated from southern Poland in the 1920s. My generation—the sisters, brothers and cousins born in America in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s—remember my grandmother cooking large batches in her small apartment in Brooklyn’s Borough Park, then my mother continuing the tradition in Upstate New York until she passed away in 2004.

We always fried them, never put them in soup. Sometimes adding ketchup or soy sauce. They were always a treat because we didn’t get them often. But, as with many Jewish families, the tradition stopped. My generation saw the hard work, discovered the convenient alternatives, and so it slid. Also, unlike most other families, my mother and aunts hated having kids in the kitchen, even daughters, considered them a nuisance and shooed them away, so family recipes didn’t always pass down.

My cousin Alice was an exception. She grew up in Brooklyn and, in the early 1970s, she co-authored a classic

counterculture food guide called “The Munchies Eatbook (Or How to Satisfy the Hungries Without Eating Everything in Sight).” In it, she captured several family recipes including my grandmother’s amazing Bubbie’s Chocolate Cake, but kreplach were a bridge too far.

Only after Alice had published her book did my mother finally relent and agree to tolerate her presence in the kitchen one time—only once! and not to touch anything but just watch and take notes—while she cooked kreplach. Alice wrote the recipe down, but then filed it away. The job seemed too daunting, so much struggle with Chinese take-out just around the corner.

But recently—partly at my urging—she agreed to give it a try, becoming my partner in rediscovery. It was time to roll up her sleeves and get in the kitchen.

Rediscovery

Before all the chopping and grinding, making kreplach requires, first, a strategy and second, time. Alice had the plan, and the long COVID-19 shutdown gave us the hours and days.

Working in her kitchen in California, armed with her modern Cuisinart and 30-year-old notes from my mother, Alice decided to make the meat fillings first, a day in advance—pot roast, liver, onions and chicken fat. The dough would come next, rolled out in large sheets, then cut into three-inch squares for the shells. Finally, she would assemble the packages, filling each square, folding it in half, then boiling the result.

“After years of procrastination, I finally felt up to it,” she confided before starting. “But so much responsibility. I didn’t want to mess it up.” Alice began by cooking the pot roast using a simple recipe from her mother. Then came the liver and onions, which add a distinctive taste. Then into the food processor they went to grind, but carefully, she cautioned, “fine, not mushy.”

On day two she made the dough, then rolled it. Alice took turns at the counter with a friend. “We rolled and rolled. It felt like rolling the tide as it came in and

out. We rolled and it retreated, rolled and retreated. I began to appreciate the muscle needed for this.” But even after all that rolling, the dough came out too thick, making the kreplach rubbery and unwieldy.

For her second attempt, Alice shifted strategy, adding a pasta attachment to her standard mixer for the dough. This time the dough was perfect, but still the kreplach weren't right. “When these

were boiled and fried, I almost cried,” she explained. “We were almost there, but the size was wrong. Too small. Not enough filling.”

It took the third attempt finally to get it right. This time, Alice carefully cut the perfectly thin dough into precise 3-inch squares, filling each a bit more with the meat filling. She had it down, a batch of four dozen kreplach that tasted just right. She was ready to share.

I got my own shipment from Alice's kitchen in California delivered overnight to my house in Virginia in a shoebox lined with ice packets. I fried most and put the rest in soup. Soon the smell in the kitchen grew irresistible. I added soy sauce. They were amazing.

Some things are just too good to lose in the dust of time. Now, for the first time in print, I can present Alice's Kreplach, based on our own family's secret recipe. 📖

Alice's Kreplach Recipe: Yields 3-4 dozen

Filling:

- 2 ½ – 3 pounds pot roast, cooked stove top or roasted
- ¼ – ⅓ pound beef liver, sauteed until no longer pink inside
- 2 onions, sauteed until golden brown

Mix all three together in a food processor until finely chopped. Season to taste. When you add the liver, drink in the scrumptious aroma. Savor the moment and season to taste. Cover and put aside.

Dough:

- 4 cups sifted flour
- 4 eggs at room temperature
- 1 ½ teaspoons salt or to taste
- Approximately 5 tablespoons cold water
- 2 extra egg whites for sealing the kreplach

After preparing the dough, place on a lightly floured surface, knead with hands until smooth and elastic. Form a ball and wrap with plastic wrap to avoid drying out. Let rest for 20 minutes.

Rolling the dough

Unwrap one section of dough and place on heavily floured surface. Roll out with a rolling pin until as thin as possible. Then cut the thinly rolled dough into approximately 2½ to 3-inch squares.

Filling the kreplach

Place 1 heaping teaspoon of filling in each square. Brush a little egg white along two edges and fold over to make a triangle. Press edges together with fingers.

Boiling the kreplach

After all kreplach are made, drop each into a large pot of lightly salted boiling water, stirring gently with wooden spoon to keep separate. Simmer for twenty minutes. Remove from the pot, strain and shower with cold water and allow to cool.

At this point you have three options: (a) fry in a little vegetable or canola oil, (b) brush each with oil and bake at 350°F until golden brown or (c) serve in soup. Or else you can just transfer them into plastic freezer bags and share with friends. They are, after all, for special occasions.

Enjoy!