

## *Olive Oil: A Testament to Assimilation*

Foods we eat and foods we avoid are so often tied to the cultures and traditions we come from. Culinary choices—in the kitchen and on the table—cue who we are. In today's world, they may signal lifestyle choices, environmental efforts, or allergens. But history's inclusion and exclusion of food groups often lies in religiosity. Using or consuming certain foods allows us to identify with, or identify out of, specific groups. When we eat the same dishes, we feel an affinity with one another. There is a shared lexicon, and, particularly in cultures that are stigmatized, community members find safety in spaces and groups that have an understanding of the qualities that set them apart from the dominant culture.

In fifteenth-century Spain, olive oil represented more than a cooking ingredient, trade, or cultivar. Olive oil, as opposed to the pork fat or clarified butter favored by Christians and Muslims respectively, was used by the Jews of Spain as a cooking fat. The oil is fragrant and left a potent smell that lingered in the streets of cities like Córdoba, Toledo and Seville. It was a symbol of identity that signaled belonging, or a lack thereof. Following 1481, the use of olive oil in Spain was an indictment of Judaism, a disclosure of otherness. The product became inextricably associated with 'secret Judaism'—until its presence turned ubiquitous, now an emblem of Spanish cookery (Roden, 2012). Olive oil's little-known history reveals the ways in which a people, often marginalized or persecuted, will employ certain food items in an attempt to escape that threat. Food, as an inherent object of identity, tells a story. Iberian Jews called on olive oil to tell the story of assimilation.

Consumption or avoidance of a certain food, in many cases, has a religious function. Most religions and many of their subjects contain a set of food allowances where deviation from these 'is grounds for expulsion from the temple,' a risk that is sometimes recalculated based on threat from outside groups (Brown, 1984). Pork, a staple *treyf* food, is prohibited by kosher law—as is the combination of meats and milk, rendering pork fat and clarified butter unsuitable mediums for Jewish Spaniards of the time. Therein lies the age-old choice that marginalized, and often migrant, religious groups face: do I hold onto my culture, or religion, and risk persecution? Or do I hide, bury, and compost it in the name of survival?

The Jewish existence as an ethno-religion entails a distinct sense of identity that can only be partially skirted by conversion to another religion. Jews, in their identification with or proximity to whiteness, occupy a liminal space that other races and ethnic-religions may not in the same way. That is, some Jews could hide in plain sight depending on their surroundings, while other Jews were singled out based on appearance only. Iberian Jews, many of Mizrahi ancestry that had fled the Middle East and emigrated to Spain and Portugal, could play the part of Catholic Spaniards, so many forewent their Jewish traditions as *conversos*, or converts. Tuchman et al. nod to a similar cultural agility that Ashkenazi Jews taking refuge in New York were also able to employ and pass as non-Jews, instead because of their whiteness. Their culinary signal? Chinese food.

Unlike the Jews of lower Manhattan seeking camouflage and adventure in Chinese restaurants, the Jews of the Iberian Inquisition *needed* a food that 'triggered revulsion' to prove their non-Jewishness (Tuchman et al., 1993). By consuming something that would be so prohibitive, so *repulsive* to the Jewish people, many conversos were able to shake off the labels that branded

them Jewish: ‘rebels can disavow the strictures of a food-oriented culture by eating forbidden food,’ and the rich, savory smell of pork fat was a plain disavowal that hung heavy in the air (Tuchman et al., 1993). Most Jews in the region during the Middle Ages were Orthodox and abided by *kashrut* laws, so the consumption of pork was a far greater reach for them than for the increasingly secularized Jews of Manhattan. But, publicly eating *treyf* as a demonstration of acculturation or assimilation is thematic of the Jewish experience.

Much like the influence of Ashkenazi delis in the American Northeast, traces of Jewish roots can still be found in Spanish foods today. *Adafina* is said to be the precursor to *cocido*, a version of which can be found in every region of Spain. Conversos added pork ‘to prove the sincerity of their conversion’ (Roden, 1996). Included in Jewish contributions to Spanish gastronomy are *empanadas*, a Sabbath dish, and the distinct smell of onion and garlic that was said to fill the homes of Jews. The combination of these aromatics eventually became the basis of *sofrito* and tomatoes were later added from the New World (Roden, 2012).

Before the Inquisition, Spain was a locus of acculturation. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities coexisted, each retaining their distinct cultures and traditions while stitching together a patchwork of Spanish society. *Convivencia* allowed all three groups to hold tightly to their cultural heritage and exchange with one another in harmony. But by the end of the fourteenth century, antisemitism demanded Jews convert or be killed (Forward, 2003). Once Catholic monarchs sought to purge the country of Jews and Muslims in the late fifteenth century, the process changed shape. The conversos stayed, many of which denounced their Judaism in order to assimilate, and the *Marranos*, who clung to their Judaism in secrecy, acculturating instead. Conversos were targeted, accused of heresy and subversion. During the Inquisition trials,

they were interrogated for their Jewish practices—a great deal of which revolved around food (Forward, 2003).

Because food is so effective in demonstrating identity, it was used as a diagnostic tool by inquisitors. Cooking in the Middle Ages was a learned practice, taught through experience and embodiment. Kitchen and dining customs are representations of ‘beliefs, ideals, ambitions, and a way of saying something about who one is and how one relates to others and to the world’ (Brown et al., 1984). A great deal of Judaism lies in food, particularly in Sephardic and Mizrahi traditions. Singer, of Brown et al. explores the process of conversion and how it involves ‘a total and usually sudden restructuring of a system of beliefs’ that ‘replace others once firmly fixed’ (Brown et al., 1984). Symbolism is essential to enculturation and those symbols must be ‘especially emotionally salient and intellectually potent’ in order for the process to take hold—food makes the perfect vehicle for shifting belief structures and tying in new associations. In the process of joining another group, symbols help define belonging. As conversos swapped out olive oil for pork fat, they dismantled and rebuilt belief systems that hinged on conversion. Preparation of each meal using a new and formerly repulsive ingredient broke down aversion and carved room for the acceptance and eventual embrace of once-forbidden ingredients.

Prosecutors of the Inquisition surveilled eating habits to catch conversos in Jewish acts. This power dynamic—one marginalized group being monitored and, for those who remained, subsumed by another dominant and power-holding group—tells a story of assimilation. Tuchman and Levine’s case study instead demonstrates acculturation and enculturation. They survey the relationship between two immigrant minority groups: Jewish Eastern Europeans and Cantonese Chinese. They have distinct immigration stories, languages, histories, and needs, but there is a

symbiosis between the two groups, even as one has a closer proximity to the dominant culture of American society—Ashkenazi Jews’ white skin afforded them privileges the Cantonese didn’t get. In contrast, the Jews of the Iberian Inquisition gained little from the Catholic majority in terms of material transaction, but the ability to remain in Spain was their reward for conversion. It is, in this way, an act of survival, not perceived conviviality.

Chronicler of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, Andrés Bernaldez, found the Jewish practice of frying meat in olive oil ‘nauseating,’ saying: “Olive oil with meat and other fried things leaves a very unpleasant odor, and so their houses and doorways always stunk with the odor of that food. The Jews too gave off the same odor, on account of those foods, and because they were not baptized...” (Gitlitz et al., 2000). Filth are concepts often used to fortify hatred or disgust towards a minority group. Thematic of the Jewish experience is an effort to distance the Jewish self from customs deemed dirty or unsettling by the pure and pious dominant group. Doris Witt’s analysis of diet within the Nation of Islam and its view on ‘cleanliness’ draws a parallel between Jewish Orthodoxy and the NOI in their avoidance of pork, a ‘filthy beast’ (Witt, 1999). Ideas like cleanliness, holiness, and purity are weaponized on nearly all minority groups. In a moment of desperation—one of many—Jews in Spain forfeited the historic staple ingredient of olive oil to claim belonging. They stomach a ‘dangerous’ ingredient to prove loyalty. And those who did not were expelled, or lived in life-threatening secrecy for generations to come. Food tells us, and others, who we are. But we can also use food to tell someone who we are not.

References

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