

# Jewish food connects me to my family’s past

FIRST PERSON

Celebrating the holidays with delicious fare was my mom’s way of saying tradition was an important investment to pass on, **Ellen Kornmehl** writes

My mother never relished cooking. She wasn’t the kind to be found in an apron rolling out dough or much in the kitchen at all. But, each fall, when the air turned crisp and scented with apples, the recipe books came out in anticipation of the Jewish New Year. The spirit of a fresh start animated the house, and she’d buy us new shoes and outfits for synagogue and school. The pots came down from their shelves and, with renewed interest in cooking, her simple summer meals became more substantial fare.

Celebrating the holidays was an expression of her connection to her family’s past, one she made clear was an important investment to pass on to her children and they to their children. Tradition meant something, she signalled.

When December approached and our neighbours put up their festive lights, Mom went about humming the Hanukkah melodies she loved as she carpooled us around. The menorah came out still adorned with last year’s candle wax drippings. She rubbed its tarnished crevices with a kitchen cloth singing softly to herself, “Nightly, so brightly, the candles of Hanukkah glow. One for each night, they shed a sweet light.” Her housewife’s ennui lifted, and the holiday ushered into our young lives a certain energy that was hard not to be caught up in.

The kitchen table would be littered with spiral-bound Sisterhood cookbooks, worn and yellowed from year after year preparations, along with newspaper clippings and marked-up notecards. They promised crispier potato latkes and held confessions of shortcuts to the most tender brisket. Smothering a roast in onion soup mix, ketchup and beer, one recipe circulating in suburban kitchens guaranteed, could garner a compliment from the most overbearing of mother-in-laws. My mother experimented with each variation, ultimately settling on a sweet and sour version, carefully slicing the brisket after hours in the oven and lovingly laying the slabs back into their



ILLUSTRATION BY MARY KIRKPATRICK

flavourful juices to simmer hours more.

We’d pile into the faux-wood panelled station wagon and head to the market to stock up on Old World foods like kasha knishes and chocolate gelt coins, then on to the local bakery which seasonally turned out sufganiyot, jelly-filled doughnuts. We devoured these modern versions of oil-fried treats that Jews ate in the places they had been – Spanish bimuelos, atayef in Syria, Moroccan sfinj, and zoulbia in Tehran and Cairo – remembering the scant drop of oil which miraculously burned eight days. Each bite was neither too light nor too dense but ethereally satisfying.

I married the son of a Kosher butcher. He’d grown up on platters of Sabbath chickens and deckle beef long-roasted. He first brought me home one Hanukkah over Christmas break. Stepping into the foyer, I remember how his mother’s briskets perfumed the house, awakening our appetites as garlic and onions wafted from the tiny kitchen where she reigned.

My in-laws, both Holocaust survivors, having lived through meagre times, renewed their souls feeding their family and

neighbours and children’s friends. Each told stories of how sharing scant rations of dark bread and potatoes had bound them to fellow camp survivors and sustained them for work. In the haven of their adopted new home, they heaped the plates vigorously of those at their table with drumsticks and slabs of the best cuts of beef.

My mother-in-law would circulate with a ladle in hand, proffering second servings of soup and goading more eating. Food could soothe any pang of disappointment you might have carried with you that day, she assured. My in-laws wore expressions of those who have prevailed loss and uncertain futures but now felt satisfied as they took in the scene of a holiday table ample with chatter and family and grandchildren. We’d gather round to light the menorah, arm-in-arm, our foreheads aglow, reciting blessings for sustaining us and enabling us to reach this season.

Now in my own home, I bring out the recipes of my mother and mother-in-law as the holidays approach, tweaking them to suit our cleaner, greener eating. Each year, I’m more aware how they bind my own

family and connect my children to vapours of their past. We tell them stories and share flashes of what we remember. But, it’s the food that transmits a collective memory of what came before them through their senses and guts in ways far more reaching than I can with words.

In a brisket recipe, my daughter finds a connection to the grandmother she’s never met. “Keeping us well-fed is how parents show their love through the good and tough times,” she’s deduced. She’s currently in graduate school across the Atlantic, and I have a gnawing worry like all parents that she’ll find a home there, fall in love or take an international job that will carry her far from me.

I’ll have to keep faith in the allure of a brisket. “Eating these holiday dishes,” she assured me, “reminds us how lucky we are to be together.”

Ellen Kornmehl lives in Boston.

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## How TIFF Film Circuit is saving Canada’s underserved audiences and movies

BARRY HERTZ

The going assumption when it comes to the Toronto International Film Festival is that the party starts and stops every September. But for the past 33 years, TIFF has quietly extended itself outside the Toronto bubble with its year-round national grassroots screening initiative, Film Circuit.

The brainchild of programmer Cam Haynes, TIFF’s Film Circuit program makes critical connections with film societies, performing arts theatres, and other partners in rural, remote and generally underserved communities across the country to offer a road show of the best indie and art-house cinema that would otherwise bypass those markets. The films – some of them Canadian and some international, some of which played the festival and others that are selected by TIFF in collaboration with local partners – screen in indie cinemas, libraries, community centres and everywhere in-between, coast to coast to coast.

And now Film Circuit is relaunching with its biggest outreach yet, with more than 100 locations set for 2024, including new programs on Fogo Island, N.L.; in Yellowknife; Qualicum Beach, B.C.; and Invermere, B.C.. Titles are set to range from the Canadian dramas *Solo* and *The Queen of My Dreams* to such foreign-language gems as *Fallen Leaves*, *Anatomy of a Fall* and *Monster*.



Director Chandler Levack speaks on stage during the promotional tour for *I Like Movies*. Distribution companies such as *I Like Movies* distributor Mongrel Media have come to rely on Film Circuit as an integral part of their release strategies. LOGAN SOMERS

smaller venues, whether that’s transferring a digital cinema package known as a DCP, or even Blu-rays.

The initiative is an easy win-win for distributors, whose titles get the windfall of a second life after their initial major-market theatrical runs.

“Normally, these are places that would only get to see our films at home on video-on-demand, so to have the ability to play a title theatrically and form a connection with audiences is wonderful,” says Rob Harrison, executive vice-president of distribution and marketing for Vortex Media, whose 2021 comedy *Peace By Chocolate* made \$60,000 from Film Circuit alone.

In fact, distributors have come to rely on Film Circuit as an integral part of their release strategies.

“Like every other distributor, when we acquire a film we project how much it will make in certain windows, and Film Circuit is baked into our plan,” says Tom Alexander, vice-president of theatrical sales at Mongrel Media, which has seen Film Circuit success with titles including the hit Canadian comedy *I Like Movies* and the British drama *Living*. “There’s also a dialogue between us and TIFF about movies that might perform well on the circuit that we might not have thought of.”

Each market also offers its own surprises, even if there are multiplexes not too far a drive away.

“In Ontario, Collingwood and Orillia have strong turnouts, in B.C. it’s Kelowna

– you sort of never know,” says Hilary Hart, co-president of Game Theory Films, whose 2022 drama *Riceboy Sleeps* is still getting Film Circuit requests long after it’s been made available digitally. “Our upcoming titles like *In Flames* or *Seagrass* would be great fits as well – these are all cinephile audiences who are interested and engaged, who we wouldn’t have the bandwidth to reach otherwise.”

Some Film Circuit partners even end up evolving into film festivals themselves.

“We were part of Film Circuit for 18 years and grew with them, learned from them about building relationships with distributors and filmmakers and how it all works, and now we’re here,” says executive director Vincent Georgie of the Windsor International Film Festival. “We then forged our own path forward, but absolutely with a debt due to TIFF.”

Next year will see Film Circuit reintroduce its guest-touring program, in which filmmakers and industry guests are able to travel to screenings across the country and engage with local audiences. The program’s overall expansion is financially supported by Telefilm, as well as Ontario Creates and the Ontario Arts Council.

“We’ve always said that we’re punching above our weight when it comes to the impact of the Film Circuit, especially when it comes to Canadian films. And we’d love to see more support,” says Bailey. “We want to keep people interested and curious in cinema across the country.”

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### BARBIE, OPPENHEIMER, SUCCESSION AMONG AFI AWARD RECIPIENTS

Barbenheimer is continuing into awards season. Both *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* are among the 10 films that will receive an AFI Award in January, the American Film Institute said Thursday.

The organization is recognizing a wide swath of the year’s best films, with blockbusters, an animated film, indies and movies released by both streamers and traditional studios. Honorees include Martin Scorsese’s *Killers of the Flower Moon*, Alexander Payne’s *The Holdovers*, Celine Song’s *Past Lives* and Yorgos Lanthimos’ *Poor Things*. The list also has two Netflix films: Todd Haynes’ *May December* and Bradley Cooper’s *Maestro*, as well as Sony’s animated *Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse*.

AFI also gives honours to 10 television shows. They are: *Abbott Elementary*, *The Bear*, *Beef*, *Jury Duty*, *The Last of Us*, *The Morning Show*, *Only Murders in the Building*, *Poker Face*, *Reservation Dogs* and *Succession*.

Winners will be celebrated at a private luncheon in Los Angeles on Jan. 12.

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