

Soups and Stews in Jewish Life

Source Sheet compiled by Rabbi Shari Shamah
December, 2025

Facts about matzah balls gleaned from *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* by Gil Marks

True or False:

Matzah Balls have been a part of our staple Jewish diet for more than 500 years.

False, the first recorded recipe for ground matzah dumplings was printed in London in 1846. The first time they were referred to as matzah balls was in 1902.

- Matzah balls are called matza *knaidlach*. *Knaidel* is a dumpling.
- While matzah balls in Jewish cuisine are relatively new, the idea of the dumpling isn't as recent. By the 12th century the concept spread from Italy to Bohemia and then to other Slavic countries. This older version of the dumpling was made of bread.
- Over time, flour replaced bread as the main ingredient. German Jews (we can thank those early German Jews for LOTS of Ashkenazi staples such as potato pancakes, Mandelbrot, rye bread...) searching for something to make for Passover experimented with substituting matzah for flour.
- Crumbled matzah was the first iteration of this Passover delight. It wasn't until the 20th century that Manischewitz made the matzah dumplings go viral by offering packaged matzah meal.
- The boxed mix from Manischewitz offered a uniform, inexpensive, reliable alternative to the matzah cracker dumpling and allowed the iconic balls to become Jewish comfort food.
- "Matzah balls for soup", "Matzah Kloese", "Matzos-Marrow Balls", and "Cracker and Matzah Balls" were early names for these dumpling delicacies.
- Jewish comics helped popularize the matzah ball and garner them a home in Jewish delis.
- It didn't take long for Matzah Balls to rise in popularity and become a Jewish staple food; the 1946 Roget's Thesaurus included "Matzah Ball Soup" in its list of soups.
- Using matzah meal instead of flour and adding eggs makes for lighter dumplings.
- How one likes their Matzah Balls is subjective. Some add fat for more flavor; others add pepper or ginger for a little spice. 'Sinkers vs floaters' are also a topic of discussion at family meals.
- The most popular pairing for matzah dumplings is chicken soup. Though, if you cook the matzah balls directly in the soup it makes it cloudy, so they are frequently cooked in a separate pot of boiling water.
- *Knaidlach* can also be cooked in cholent, tzimmes, and pot roasts for a Shabbat treat.
- In a [2010 Forward article](#), trade secrets from Katz's deli, 2nd Ave Deli, and Zabar's mention the right ratio of oil, baking powder, and seltzer. (Note, baking powder makes them not-Kosher for Passover)
- Chicken soup, with or without matzah balls is often called Jewish Penicillin.

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Facts about Cholent gleaned from the Encyclopedia of Jewish Food by Gil Marks

- Cholent is a slow simmered stew frequently made from a bean base that is served on Shabbat.
- The name is said to have come from French Ashkenazi Jews. In Western Yiddish spelled schalet and in Eastern Yiddish tsholnt. With the word probably coming from the old French word for warm.
- Cholent is a dish that addresses the requirement to avoid cooking on Shabbat. If cholent was half-cooked before Shabbat, then it could be left to finish on a low heat overnight and would be ready to eat for a warm, hearty meal after Shabbat morning services.
- Centuries ago, on Friday afternoons some Jewish communities, after the loaves of challah were pulled from the ovens, women and children (primarily) would bring their large cholent pots to the bakery where they would sit undisturbed overnight, finishing in the remaining heat from the oven.
- The only known ingredient from the French cholent was fava beans, though it was assumed that they also contained meat, grains and onions.
- Once dried haricot beans were introduced from America in the 15th century, this opened the door for white, kidney, pinto and lima beans.
- There are regional variations in cholent with some being vegetarian, some having wheat or rice, beef, chicken or goose and duck. Potatoes in cholent were a 19th century Polish Jewish addition. German Jews often added root vegetables.
- Cholent can be dry or watery or somewhere in the middle.
- Cholent tends to evoke a strong reaction among Jews. Some love it, some strongly dislike it, and many associate it with old time Jewish foods.

The first mention of Cholent is said to come from Ohr Zarua, a 13th century Halakhic text that sheds light on the laws of Medieval European Jewish communities. In this reference, the Cholent, which had already been cooked and cooled, was kept near fires to keep it warm on Shabbat.

Ohr Zarua, Volume II, Siman 8	חלק ב' ח' אויר זריע
<p>I saw in France, in the house of my teacher Rabbi Yehuda, son of Isaac, that sometimes they refrigerate their Cholent, that is, they are hidden, and on Shabbat, before the meal, the slaves light a fire near the pots so that they warm up well. (Translation from Google translate)</p>	<p>ראיתי בצרפת בבית מורי ר' יהודה בר' יצחק שפעמים מקרים צלג"ט שלחם דהינו טמן ושבת טרם עת האכל מدلיקין העבדים אש סמוֹן לקדרות כדי שיתחמו בטוב ויש שמסליקין אותן וננותנים אותן סמוֹן לאש</p>

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Lentils are the seeds of a small annual shrub and could have possibly been the first legume to be eaten. Its origins stretch before recorded history. There are mentions of lentils in Tanakh, including this story of Jacob and Esau as well as when King David and the people were served lentils as sustenance (II Samuel 17:28-29) and with the battle of the Philistines. (II Samuel 23:11-12)

Genesis 25:29-34	
<p>Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open, famished. And Esau said to Jacob, “Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished”—which is why he was named Edom.</p> <p>Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” And Esau said, “I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?” But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So, he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.</p> <p>Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.</p>	<p>וַיַּזֶּה יַעֲקֹב בָּזֵיד וַיָּבֹא עַשְׂוֹ מִן-הַשָּׂדָה וְהַוָּעֵד: וַיֹּאמֶר עַשְׂוֹ אֶל-יַעֲקֹב הַלְּעִיטָנִי נֵא מִן-הָאָדָם הָאָדָם הַזֶּה כִּי עַזְּבָנִי אָנֹכִי עַל-כֵּן קָרָא-שָׁמוֹ אַדְוֹם: וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב מִכֶּרֶת כַּיּוֹם אֶת-בְּכָרְתָּךְ לִי: יֹאמֶר עַשְׂוֹ הַבָּה אָנֹכִי הַזֶּה לְמוֹת וְלַמְּה-זֶה לִי בְּכָרָה: וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב הַשְׁבָעָה לִי כַּיּוֹם נִשְׁבָּע לָוֹ וַיִּמְלֹךְ אֶת-בְּכָרְתָּו לַעֲקָב: וַיַּעֲלֵב נָמָן לְעַשְׂוֹ לְהָם וַיַּזֶּד עֲקָשִׁים וַיַּאֲכַל נִשְׁתָּה {פָּנִים נִילָּךְ וַיַּכְזֵב עַשְׂוֹ אֶת-בְּכָרָה:</p>

- What role does Matzah Ball soup play in your life?
- Cholent – love it or hate it?
- What would you sacrifice for lentil soup?
- Of these three, which is your favorite soup?
- What if any emotional connections or reactions do you have to these soups/stews?
- Are soups/stews a source of comfort? Can they offer healing powers, and in what way?