

# The Latke Variations: Move over Potatoes

By Linda Morel

New York (JTA) — My brother-in-law asked me a surprising question: “How many different kinds of latkes do you make at Chanukah?”

“Just the potato kind,” I said. “Why?”

“Since you prepare eight different charosets at Passover, I figured you’d make lots of exotic latkes too,” he said.

While Robbie meant this as a compliment, he caught me off guard. Since he knows I enjoy cooking and inventing recipes, he set the bar high. Yet his question got me thinking.

Why are latkes usually made from potatoes? Why are they almost exclusively served at Chanukah parties or for dinner? What’s wrong with other times of day?

Everyone loves latkes, so I thought it would be fun to create a new latke recipe for each day of Chanukah. For years I’ve had a secret desire to eat latkes all day, starting at breakfast. I wondered why no one had ever created cocktail-hour latkes. I’ve had dessert latkes, but none worth eating again.

One cold October weekend, I decided to revamp Chanukah’s signature dish, experimenting with ingredients as far flung as bananas, salmon and chocolate.

Yet with a twinge of Jewish guilt, I questioned if it was right to take latkes so far from their roots, the lowly potato?

In Yiddish, the word latke means pancake. The definition doesn’t include a connection to potatoes. After consulting Webster’s Dictionary, I confirmed that a pancake is a thin, flat cake of batter fried on both sides on a griddle or in a frying pan.

Although Ashkenazi Jews are famous for preparing latke batters with grated potatoes, the tuber is a relatively recent addition to their culinary repertoire.

Originating in South America, potatoes were unknown in Europe until the 16th century, when explorers brought back tuber shoots from their travels. Once planted, these shoots grew abundantly throughout Eastern and Central Europe, where produce was sparse during harsh winters. Potatoes became an inexpensive crop to farm and arose as a staple of the Ashkenazi diet.

It didn’t take long for Jewish housewives to discover the wonders of grated potato batter sizzling in chicken schmaltz. At Chanukah, the shortening of choice was goose fat. The crunchy result is now history.

Although potatoes have proven to be a superior latke ingredient, I decided to see if other foods could enhance the Jewish pancake genre.

Since breakfast is my favorite meal, I began by dropping a dollop of yogurt into my basic flapjack recipe, creating a tender pancake as airy as a cloud. From that recipe I played around with ingredients, giving rise to three more early morning delights: fragrant Banana Latkes, dripping with maple syrup; Creamy Lemon Latkes, dusted with confectioner’s sugar; and assertive Tex-Mex Latkes,

spiced with chili and cumin.

My original pancake recipe was so delicate, so I turned my attention to dessert. Two sensational confections evolved: Pumpkin Latkes, flavored with cinnamon, nutmeg, and cardamom; and Chocolate Chip Latkes, smothered in chocolate sauce and vanilla ice cream.

Satisfied with my results so far, I had to admit I missed the texture of potato latkes. Noticing a package of fine egg noodles in my pantry, I remembered the zucchini in my refrigerator. Together these two ingredients fried up every bit as crisp as their traditional counterpart.

My husband thought I was crazy as he observed me fry everything inside of our refrigerator — except the bins and the shelves. But after weeding out a few wacky flavor combinations, he reaped the benefits of tasting some amazing latkes. Asian fusion ginger latkes dipped in soy sauce were a notable failure.

“What makes you think people want to try new latkes?” he asked, sampling the noodle pancake. “Wow. This is amazingly crisp.”

“A few days into Chanukah, potato latkes can grow tiresome,” I said.

Nibbling a salmon latke, he said, “This one is a keeper. I’d serve it with a crisp white wine or maybe champagne.”

“It’s possible there are people who’d like to entertain during Chanukah without making an elaborate meal,” I said. “They could throw an hors d’oeuvre party or just serve dessert. After attending a couple potato latke parties, some people might desire new recipes to surprise their guests.”

“I haven’t tried the Tex-Mex latkes yet,” he said.

“I thought brunch latkes would be good for people who can’t be torn from Sunday afternoon football games,” I said. “For people like you.”

He nodded, indicating that I’d whipped up another winner. “But did you ever consider working with jalapeno peppers?” he asked. “Or chorizo sausage?”

“That sounds tempting,” I said. “It’s too bad Chanukah has only eight days. There’s so little time and so many foods to fry.”

## Breakfast or Brunch

**Yield: 8 latkes, 4 inches in diameter**

## BASIC FLOUR LATKES

### Ingredients:

3 T. butter for batter, plus 2 T., or more, for frying

1 egg, beaten

1 t. plain yogurt

1-1/4 c. 2% low-fat milk

1-2/3 c. flour

2-1/2 t. baking powder

1/2 t. salt

### Preparation:

In a small pot, melt 3 T. butter. Cool briefly. In a large bowl, beat egg, yogurt, milk, and melted butter, till foamy. Sift flour, baking powder, and salt into egg mixture. With a wooden spoon, stir ingredients till well combined. Melt 2 T. butter in a lg. (12” diameter) skillet, preferably the no-stick variety, till butter sizzles but doesn’t burn. Pour half a soup ladle of batter at a time into hot pan. When bubbles appear in batter and bottom surface turns golden brown, flip pancakes. Turn only once. Gradually add more milk to batter if it thickens while first batch cooks. Add more butter to pan, if needed. Serve pancakes immediately. If making several batches, pile pancakes onto an ovenproof dish and keep warm in a 200 degree oven till ready to serve.

## BANANA LATKES

Mash 1 banana (preferably over-ripe) with a fork till mushy. Add banana to liquid ingredients of Basic Flour Latke recipe and follow remaining directions. Serve with maple syrup and chopped walnuts.

## CREAMY LEMON LATKE

To liquid ingredients of Basic Flour Latke recipe, add 1/2 c. whipped cottage cheese, 1/2 t. vanilla, 1/2 teaspoon lemon zest, and 1 t. sugar. Follow remaining directions. Sprinkle confectioner’s sugar over top of latkes and serve with black cherry preserves.

## TEX-MEX LATKES

To liquid ingredients of Basic Flour Latke recipe, add 1/2 c. canned cream style corn, 2 minced garlic cloves, 1 T. minced roasted red pepper (from jar), 1/2 t. ground cumin and 1/2 t. chili powder. Fry latkes in peanut oil and follow remaining directions. Sprinkle freshly minced cilantro on latkes. Serve with sour cream.

## Hors D’oeuvres or Light Bite

**Yield: 10 latkes**

## SALMON LATKES

### Ingredients:

2 lbs. salmon, skinned, boned and ground. (For convenience, ask your fish monger to grind the salmon.)

1 sm. onion, chopped fine

2 T. dill, finely minced

1/4 c. flour or matzah meal

1 egg, beaten

Kosher salt to taste

Ground pepper to taste

3 T. olive oil

### Preparation:

In a large bowl, mix together with a wooden spoon the salmon, onion, dill, flour, egg, salt and pepper till well combined. Form salmon mixture into latkes, 3” in diameter. Heat oil in a large skillet on a med. flame. Fry latkes in oil till bottom surface browns, then turn latkes and brown the other side. Fry for about 6 min. per side, or till latkes are cooked through. Serve immediately with sour cream.

## ZUCCHINI BIRDS NEST LATKES

### Ingredients:

12 oz. package fine egg noodles

4 T. peanut oil, or more, if needed

1 onion, chopped

3 zucchinis, grated. If grating with a food processor, squeeze out excess liquid that forms

2 eggs, beaten

4 T. flour

Kosher salt to taste

Ground pepper to taste

### Preparation:

Prepare noodles according to package directions. Drain and place in a lg. bowl. Mix in 1 T. of peanut oil. Cool briefly. Mix in remaining ingredients. Form batter into 3” latkes. Heat 3 T. of oil in a large skillet. Fry latkes in skillet. Turn over when bottom surface is well browned. Continue frying till top is well browned too. Drain on paper towels and serve immediately.



Pumpkin latkes.

## Dessert

## PUMPKIN LATKES

To liquid ingredients of Basic Flour Latke recipe, add 1/2 c. canned pumpkin, 1 T. brown sugar, 1/2 t. cinnamon, 1/4 t. nutmeg, 1/4 t. ground cloves and 1/4 t. cardamom. Follow remaining directions. Serve with butter pecan ice cream.

## CHOCOLATE LATKES

To liquid ingredients of Basic Flour Latke recipe, add 1/2 c. chopped semi-sweet morsels and 1 T. granulated sugar. Follow remaining directions, but fry on a med.-low flame so chocolate doesn’t burn. Serve with warm chocolate sauce (or melted semi-sweet morsels) and vanilla ice cream. ✨

# The Gift of a Miracle

By Marla Feldman

New York (JTA) — Each year at Chanukah we spin the dreidel, reminding ourselves that “a great miracle happened there.” With faith and activism the Maccabees led our people to a great victory and assured the survival of the Jewish people in ancient days. With faith and activism, we, too, can make miracles happen in our own time. We can assure the survival of millions of children in Africa who unnecessarily fall prey to the deadly bite of malaria-infested mosquitoes. We can make a great miracle happen there for the cost of a \$10 bed net.

The global challenges we face are staggering. Around the world, more than 800 million people go hungry every day — 300 million of them children. More than 1 billion people lack access to clean drinking water and 2.6 billion live without decent sanitation. And every 30 seconds a child in Africa dies of malaria.

In an age of unprecedented prosperity, science and technology, there is no excuse for the

ongoing plagues of starvation and famine, illiteracy and diseases borne of ignorance. And yet, the amount of aid flowing to Africa from all the nations of the world totaled less than the amount of annual bonuses Wall Street gave to itself this year.

Determined to do better, the Reform movement is working to bring relief to the millions of African refugees who face not only the threats of continuing violence and hunger, but also the threat of malaria that rages in refugee camps.

Around the world, malaria infects nearly 500 million people each year, kills more than 1 million of those and is the leading killer of children in Africa. The economic impact of this illness — \$12 billion annually — undermines the capacity of impoverished nations to climb out of debt and overwhelms their medical infrastructure. Yet malaria is entirely preventable. The use of insecticide-treated bed nets alone can reduce malaria rates by 90 percent in areas with high cover-

age. One bed net can keep an entire family safe from malaria for up to four years.

So in partnership with the U.N. Foundation’s Nothing But Nets campaign, the Reform movement has made a commitment to provide 50,000 nets to save 50,000 families from the anguish of malaria.

Soon we will make our first delivery of nets to a refugee camp in Uganda, completely “covering” the camp of 18,000 victims from Sudan, Rwanda and, most recently, victims of the current crisis in Congo. This is a critical time, as the rainy season makes malaria-infested mosquitoes insidious. The sad truth is that there would be no nets delivered to this camp if it were not for the Reform movement’s Nothing But Nets fund-raising efforts.

Much attention has been devoted to malaria in recent years, with billionaire philanthropists such as Bill Gates and the World Bank pouring funds into the cause. They are focusing on combating this particular disease because it is an achievable goal. We actually CAN eliminate malaria deaths

around the world — we’ve already done so in this country and in most other western nations. In Zambia, Ethiopia and Rwanda, when they instituted a comprehensive plan that included the use of insecticide-treated bed nets and both indoor and outdoor spraying, they reduced malaria rates by 50 percent in just two years. In Sri Lanka, malaria rates were reduced from 400,000 cases per year to fewer than 200 cases that resulted in no deaths last year. A great miracle really can happen there.

Cynics may claim that one individual cannot save the world, yet Judaism obligates us to try, reminding us that saving a single life is the equivalent of saving the entire world. At the bargain price of just \$10, every one of us has the capacity to save a life. There is no better gift to give this Chanukah season than the gift of a miracle. Send a net; save a life. ✨

(Rabbi Marla Feldman is the director of the Joint Commission on Social Action of the Union for Reform Judaism and Central Conference of American Rabbis.)