

History in a Jar: The Taste and the Trauma of Gefilte Fish

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Abstract

In 2004, a character in Tova Mirvis’s novel *The Outside World* presciently remarked, “Gefilte fish can be the next sushi... Because people are hungry for something authentic... They miss the past. Even if they never had it, they still miss it.” Twelve years later, Liz Alpern and Jeffrey Yoskowitz released their cookbook, *The Gefilte Manifesto: New Recipes for Old World Jewish Foods*, to both popular and critical acclaim. The trajectory of Jewish food in America has changed dramatically in the last two decades, calling into question the ever-fraught relationship between “kosher” and “Jewish” food. While gefilte fish has its origins in medieval Germany, this recipe for stuffed fish evolved over centuries until it became the more recognizable fish quenelle popular among Eastern European and American Jews at the turn of the twentieth century. A laborious task to be sure, midcentury American manufacturing lightened this undertaking by mass-producing these gelatinous fish balls in glass jars – ultimately becoming a grocery store staple that stirs both nostalgia and nausea in American Jewish memory. An insider’s dish, gefilte fish – once a means of thriftily stretching a meal – has been elevated to an almost sacred, elegant addition to a Jewish menu, an appetizer that elicits both delight and disgust. By looking at gefilte fish as a historically significant part of Jewish cuisine, as well as its modern innovations in the United States, we can see changing Jewish narratives regarding acculturation, innovation, and the place of nostalgia on the Jewish American plate.

Keywords

Gefilte fish; Jewish; Judaism; Jewish food; Ashkenazi

In 2004, a character in Tova Mirvis’s novel *The Outside World* presciently remarked, “Gefilte fish can be the next sushi... Because people are hungry for something authentic... They miss the past. Even if they never had it, they still miss it.”¹ Twelve years later, Liz Alpern and Jeffrey Yoskowitz released their cookbook, *The Gefilte Manifesto: New Recipes for Old World Jewish Foods*, to both popular and critical acclaim.² The trajectory of Jewish food in America has changed dramatically in the

¹ Tova Mirvis, *The Outside World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 139.

² Jeffrey Yoskowitz and Liz Alpern, *The Gefilte Manifesto: New Recipes for Old World Jewish Foods* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2016).

last two decades, calling into question the ever-fraught relationship between kosher and Jewish food. While gefilte fish has its origins in medieval Germany, this recipe for stuffed fish evolved over centuries until it became the more recognizable fish quenelle popular among Eastern European and American Jews at the turn of the twentieth century. A laborious task, midcentury American manufacturing lightened this undertaking by mass-producing these gelatinous fish balls in glass jars – ultimately becoming a grocery store staple that stirs both nostalgia and nausea in American Jewish memory. Gefilte fish, certainly an insider’s dish, is a traditional appetizer that elicits both delight and disgust (a *New Yorker* essay once referred to it as “the red-headed stepchild of the Ashkenazi holiday table”).³ By looking at gefilte fish as a historically significant part of Jewish cuisine, as well as its modern innovations in the United States, we can see changing Jewish narratives regarding acculturation, innovation, and the place of nostalgia on the Jewish American plate.

Let us start at the beginning – what exactly *is* gefilte fish? If one were to answer that question today, the answer might be something like grayish fish balls served on Jewish holidays, usually garnished with a slice of carrot, a sprig of parsley, and some clear gel from the broth it was poached in (or the jar it came from). Depending upon your interlocutor’s experiences with this dish, the answer may be offered with great enthusiasm or a quasi-apologetic disgust. A more concise explanation may include a description of ingredients and process. Typically made with ground carp, pike, or perch, the fish is mixed with onions, spices, breadcrumbs or matzoh meal, and egg. Formed into balls, it is then poached in a flavorful broth made with the bones of the fish. It is inevitably served with prepared horseradish, often beet-flavored. A labor-intensive dish, many Jews choose to buy it jarred or frozen.

The history of this dish, however, is more complex. The term *gefilte* means “stuffed,” referring to the nature of this recipe before it became the aforementioned quenelles. A recipe for *gefuelten hechden* (stuffed pike), what we might recognize as gefilte fish, is first seen in a fourteenth-century German cookbook.⁴ This recipe involves a poached fish and spice mixture, stuffed back into the skin of the fish, and then roasted. As Catholics were prohibited from consuming meat during Lent, they frequently came up with creative solutions involving fish and these stuffed fish recipes provided both an acceptable and impressive dish for the upper classes.

Jews, a diasporic people, have a history of adapting the dishes of their neighbors to adhere to kosher guidelines. In the case of medieval German Jewry, these stuffed fish recipes—ultimately referred to as *gefilte fish*, filled needs that were both religiously and economically appropriate. Early rabbinic writings describe fish as steeped in symbolism, representing fertility, prosperity, and protection. Due to these

³ Rebecca Flint Marx, “Learning to Love Gefilte Fish,” *The New Yorker*, October 6, 2016 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-great-gefilte-fish-lie>.

⁴ Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 219.

attributes, fish is traditionally eaten on the Sabbath (*Shabbat*). (It is also considered a *mitzvah* for married couples to have intimate relations on Shabbat and, given its links to fertility, fish has a rabbinic reputation as an aphrodisiac.) Because of prohibitions against “sorting” or “selecting” on the Sabbath (known as *borer*), bones must be removed prior to sundown on Friday. This style of “filled” or “stuffed” fish allowed for Sabbath consumption and, with the adding of bread or matzo meal as a binder, allowed for the cook to stretch the fish to go further and feed more people. Some cooks later began to bypass the “filling” part and began to poach the spiced mixture as a sort of fish dumpling which, centuries later, would become the dominant form of gefilte fish (assumedly due to easier preparation) among Eastern European Jews – the dish having migrated well beyond Germany.⁵

Fish was a mainstay of the Eastern European Jewish diet and, among Polish, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Baltic area Jews, gefilte fish became more popular than it had in its birthplace.⁶ Notably, different Jewish communities had their own regional distinctions. Southern Poles, for example, served a sweet version; Lithuanians preferred a peppery fish.⁷ The type of fish was also dependent on availability. A classic example of *cucina povera* (the cooking of the poor),⁸ gefilte fish allowed poor Jews to fulfill the traditional Sabbath fish consumption shared by their more well-off coreligionists. And, as tends to happen with such dishes, it became elevated to an elegant – and almost sacred – addition to the Jewish menu.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a massive migration of European Jews to the United States. Naturally, these Jews brought their traditional foodways with them, adapting them as always. Gefilte fish was no exception. These poached fish balls show up in the first Jewish American cookbook, Esther Levy’s 1871 *Jewish Cookery*, as “Stewed-fish Balls.”⁹ The popular 1901 fundraising recipe pamphlet, *The Way to a Man’s Heart: The Settlement Cook Book*, offered the more traditional version:

⁵ Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 220.

⁶ Jonathan Deutsch and Rachel D. Saks, *Jewish American Food Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 14.

⁷ Elliott Horowitz, “Remembering the Fish and Making a Tzimmes: Jewish Food, Jewish Identity, and Jewish Memory,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 1 (2014), 61.

⁸ *Cucina povera* is essentially peasant cooking. Such thrifty adaptations can be seen globally. For more on this subject, please see Karima Moyer Nocci, *The Eternal Table: A Cultural History of Food in Rome* (Ilanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019) and Douglas Harper and Patrizia Faccioli, *The Italian Way: Food and Social Life*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁹ Esther Levy, *Jewish Cookery Book, on Principles of Economy, Adapted for Jewish Housekeepers, with the Addition of Many Useful Medicinal Recipes, and Other Valuable Information, Relative to Housekeeping and Domestic Management* (Philadelphia: W. S. Turner, 1871).

“Filled Fish”: Clean the fish thoroughly, remove the skin without breaking, and the flesh by scraping it from the bones. Begin at the neck. With care, the backbone may be removed with all of the small bones attached. Chop the flesh fine, add to a three-pound fish: one onion, medium sized (chopped); salt and pepper to taste; a few bay leaves, one-half cup bread or cracker crumbs, a little sugar, if desired; one egg; one tablespoon chopped almonds. Mix these ingredients well. Wash fish-skin, and fill with the mixture. Sew up with coarse thread; shape, and place in gently boiling vegetable stock. Boil slowly until the stock is nearly absorbed.¹⁰

The recipe is included as one of many that were used in cooking classes, taught by acculturated Jewish women of Central European ancestry to their Eastern European immigrant pupils. In a few later editions of this cookbook, the easier fish balls appear as “Lincoln House Fish Balls,” so named after the Milwaukee settlement house where they were a popular dish among Jewish residents. The 1965 printing finally names this dish “gefilte fish.” It is this version that becomes the standard—the poached fish balls that inspire such strong feelings by those who make it, those who eat it, and those who avoid it.

By mid-century, as more Jewish cookbooks became popular in the United States, various versions of gefilte fish – regardless of nomenclature – became standby recipes. Again, regional distinctions remained, as did the process of preparation. Janet Theophano notes, “every Jewish family has its own recipe for ... gefilte fish, which some claim should be sweet, and others insist it should be savory.”¹¹ As technology advanced, the process became easier. One need not chop by hand as was traditional, a mechanical grinder would do the trick (as would your local fishmonger if you asked nicely). Of course, many early twentieth century *balabustas*, Jewish housewives, insisted on perpetuating the habits of their grandmothers, chopping by hand in a wooden bowl with what is known in Yiddish as a *hokmesser* – a curved blade (think a *mezzaluna*). But economic and social changes led to fewer such women choosing to spend their time chopping and stewing fish. More people were purchasing prepared foods, eating out, or simply drifting from the old foodways and embracing new ones.¹²

Oyessen, a term introduced by *The Forward* in 1903, referred to the new Jewish practice of “eating out.”¹³ *Oyessen* could apply to a range of establishments, from

¹⁰ Simon Kander, *The Settlement cook book, comp. by Mrs. Simon Kander tested recipes from the Settlement cooking classes, the Milwaukee public school kitchens, the School of trades for girls, and experienced housewives* (Milwaukee: The Settlement Cook Book Co., 1901), 118.

¹¹ Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 50.

¹² Kerri Steinberg, *Jewish Mad Men: Advertising and the Design of the American Jewish Experience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 100.

¹³ Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America*, 200.

Jewish delis to Chinese restaurants – and opinions on the trend inspired anxiety about assimilation. Much ink has been spilled regarding the early twentieth century American Jewish love of Chinese fare – some going so far as to claim it as a “second cuisine.”¹⁴ Nathan Abrams, in his work on Jews in twentieth-century America, suggests, “gefilte fish was upheld as a method of prevention against assimilation as represented by the consumption of Chinese food.”¹⁵ This could be seen in the *Der Tog* Yiddish newspaper’s suggestion: “Down with chop suey! Long live gefilte fish!”¹⁶ Oyessen, however, did not lead to the demise of Jewish food and many American Jews liked an egg roll and lo mein in a restaurant and gefilte fish at home.

Non-Jewish American audiences were introduced to gefilte fish in a 1956 episode of the popular television show *The Goldbergs*. In “Molly’s Fish,” Molly Goldberg – the show’s Yiddish-dialected matriarch, played by show runner Gertrude Berg – deals with the marketing of “fish balls” (*gefilte* is not a term that makes it into the episode). After selling jars of her own fish at a local bazaar, a representative from a supermarket approached her with a lucrative proposal exclaiming, “This fish is commercial!” The rep explains that the recipe for success is “Fifty percent marketing, fifty percent product.”¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the process becomes comedically complicated when the family needs to drastically scale up their modest operation.

The year before, Berg and Myra Waldo published *The Molly Goldberg Jewish Cookbook* (written from the perspective – and in the distinctive language – of Molly). There is a recipe entitled “Dora’s Gefilte Fish (chopped fish balls).”¹⁸ The headnote recalls a story of Dora, the girlfriend of Molly’s son Sammy. She used to visit the Goldbergs’ apartment frequently and learned to make the dish from Molly – “and with her own improvements on the recipe it’s out of this world.”¹⁹ The published recipe is a traditional one, with onions and matzo meal.

The Goldbergs – a popular show that ran on American television from 1949 to 1956 after almost twenty years as a popular radio broadcast – featured Molly Goldberg and her Jewish family in the Bronx. Offering what in many ways what was a stand-in for a generic immigrant family, the Goldbergs nonetheless demonstrated their

¹⁴ Hanna Miller, “Identity Takeout: How American Jews Made Chinese Food Their Ethnic Cuisine,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 3 (2006); Gaye Tuchman and Harry Levine, “New York Jews and Chinese Food: The Social Construction of an Ethnic Pattern,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22 (1993).

¹⁵ Nathan Abrams, “‘More Than One Million Mothers Know It’s the Real Thing’: The Rosenbergs, Jell-O, Old-Fashioned Gefilte Fish, and 1950s America,” in *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food and Meaning*, ed. Kathleen LeBesco (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 96.

¹⁶ Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 215.

¹⁷ *The Goldbergs*, “Molly’s Fish,” 1956.

¹⁸ Gertrude Berg and Myra Waldo, *The Molly Goldberg Cookbook* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955) 35-36.

¹⁹ Berg and Waldo, 36.

Jewishness through discussions of traditions, holidays, and yes, food. According to Donald Weber, “*The Goldbergs* performed the cultural work of... presenting, really re-presenting Jewish life to America.”²⁰ The classic 1941 guide *Jewish Home Beautiful* asserts: “If there is any one particular food that might lay claim to being the Jewish national dish, gefilte fish is that food.”²¹ And Molly Goldberg showed Americans how to make it.

The overwhelming majority of midcentury American Jews did not keep kosher, but many liked to “keep Jewish” and at least enjoy traditional Jewish recipes on holidays. But fewer and fewer lived with a full-time *balabusta* willing to put in the time – and stink up the kitchen – to make these beloved fish balls. And this is where the growth of prepared kosher foods comes in. In the late 1930s, the son of a fishmonger began selling canned – and later jarred – gefilte fish under the name of *Mother’s Gefilte Fish*. This brand still exists, offering several versions of fish balls – “Old Fashioned,” “Sweet,” and “Whitefish and Pike.” While *Mother’s* was the first to mass-produce gefilte fish in this manner, its product was quickly eclipsed by kosher food behemoth *Manischewitz*. Known widely for its matzoh and its sweet, sweet wine – both of which serve a sacramental purpose in Judaism, *Manischewitz* took a stab at the less Judaic but clearly Jewish gefilte fish. Its success and the mass-production of Jewish and kosher products, along with the corporatization of kosher supervision, allowed for greater access to “heritage” foods that might have been lost otherwise. According to Kerri Steinberg:

Kosher packaged foods offered the same ease of non-kosher prepared foods, while conveniently reinforcing the practices associated with Jewish observance. Their purchase carried with it a potential for the consumption of holiness not available in mainstream products. Moreover, the purchase and ingesting of kosher food products implicitly acknowledge the importance of choices in this world to Jewish continuity.²²

Manischewitz currently lists eleven types of gefilte fish on its website, suggesting that the desire for this ready-made product has not declined.²³ Nathan Abrams notes that consumption of kosher foods became “a way of affirming and celebrating tradition, Jewish identity, and cultural continuity.”²⁴

²⁰ Donald Weber, *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to the Goldbergs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 152.

²¹ Betty Davis Greenberg, Althea Osber Silverman, and United Synagogue of America. National Women's League, *The Jewish Home Beautiful, Written by Betty D. Greenberg and Althea O. Silverman* (New York: The Women's League of the United Synagogue of America, 1941), 126.

²² Steinberg, *Jewish Mad Men*, 100.

²³ https://manischewitz.com/product_category/gefilte-fish/

²⁴ Abrams, “More Than One Million Mothers,” 98.

While these ready-made kosher products offered the gifts of time and ease, not unlike the midcentury adoption of other canned and frozen foods as a means of allowing working mothers to get a hot meal on the table for their families, these specifically Jewish food items provided more for its Jewish clientele. Steinberg writes that “packaged and frozen products, could extend the life of Jewish foods from borscht to Gefilte fish, while enhancing the appeal of kosher cuisine by likening it to the latest advancements in non-kosher provisions.”²⁵ They also allowed for the cuisine of one’s grandparents to continue to bless a Sabbath or holiday table, to sustain Jewish culinary traditions at a time when such dishes would be so easy to abandon.

Those who embraced the jarred gefilte fish did so in several ways. Some served it right out of the jar, some would heat it and serve in a broth, some garnished it with its trademark slice of carrot, and still some took the opportunity to improve upon it. In 1965, *The New York Times* printed a series of recipes: “Gefilte Fish Foo Yong,” “Azur Gefilte Fish,” and “Spiced Gefilte Fish Kachori,” all requiring the aid of the jarred fish.²⁶

Midcentury cookbooks are rife with variations on prepared gefilte fish. A 1978 community cookbook put out by the Har Zion Sisterhood in Pennsylvania included a traditional recipe containing carp and whitefish, as well as a “mock gefilte fish” recipe which substitutes canned tuna—bypassing cooking the fish altogether. But, in the Appetizer section, this creative spin exists:

Gefilte Fish Mold

- 2 packaged lemon Jello
- 2 c. boiling water
- 1 c. fish liquid
- 1 (1 1/2 lb.) jar gefilte fish
- 1 small jar red horseradish

Dissolve jello in water. Add fish liquid. Add horseradish and mix well. Cover bottom of fish mold with thin layer of jello mixture. Chill until set. Slice fish (about 5 slices to each piece) and arrange some slices on top of chilled jello. Add enough liquid to cover; chill until set. Repeat process until fish and liquid are used up. Chill until firm. Unmold and garnish with green peppers, radishes, and olives. Serves 8-10.²⁷

²⁵ Steinberg, *Jewish Mad Men*, 108.

²⁶ Jean Hewitt, “Gefilte Fish Finds Place on an International Menu,” *New York Times*, April 3 1965, 20.

²⁷ *The Cook Book: Har Zion Sisterhood* (Penn Valley, PA: Har Zion Sisterhood, 1978) 45-46; Barbara Cohen and Joan Halpern, *The Carp in the Bathtub* (New York: Lothrop, 1972).

Variations on this type of mold in other cookbooks contain canned beets in addition to horseradish. Such Jello molds were popular at this time and such gefilte fish creations demonstrated longstanding Jewish adaptation of contemporaneous foods.²⁸

That same year, the West Orange Chapter of Mizrahi Women distributed *Passover Feast II*. This community cookbook includes five traditional recipes, two mock gefilted, and three recipes utilize jarred gefilte fish. The “Lazy Man’s Gefilte Fish” calls for simmering jarred fish in a broth containing carrots and onions.²⁹ The “Gefilte Fish Supreme” begins with heating the fish and its liquid but improves upon it by serving it smothered in a sauce of sautéed mushrooms, cream, egg yolks, white wine, margarine, salt, and paprika – instructions suggest plating it with mashed potatoes.³⁰ And then there is this:

Gefilte Fish Fluff

4 egg whites
 4 egg yolks
 4 pieces gefilte fish, mashed
 1 tsp. chopped parsley
 2 T. margarine
 1/2 tsp. salt
 1/8 tsp. pepper
 1/4 cup gefilte fish liquid
 1/4 cup matzo meal

Beat egg whites until stiff. Beat egg yolks with seasoning, adding fish liquid. Add mashed gefilte fish, matzo meal and parsley. Gently fold in egg whites. Heat margarine in a skillet, and add gefilte fish mixture. Let cook for 5 minutes or until golden brown. Place this mixture in a pan under a low broiler and let top of the puff brown. Serves 4.³¹

These recipes containing prepared foods were certainly not unusual for the time. A classic midcentury culinary practice combined previously processed and packaged foods together to create a new dish. Some of these recipes called for shaping food to look like other foods (like a fish), what Roland Barthes dubbed as “ornamental

²⁸ J. Michelle Coghlan, “Cold War Cooking,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food*, ed. J. Michelle Coghlan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 102.

²⁹ West Orange Chapter of Mizrahi Women, *Passover Feast II* (Union City, NJ: Gross Bros. Printing Co, 1978), 170.

³⁰ West Orange Chapter of Mizrahi Women, 170.

³¹ West Orange Chapter of Mizrahi Women, 170.

cookery.”³² Ironically, these “convenience” foods led to increased pressure on women to demonstrate innovation in utilizing them – ostensibly claiming ownership of the domestic process.

Despite these creative culinary detours, gefilte fish (in its now traditional fish ball form) remained a starter for Sabbath and holiday dinners. Steinberg observes, “Even in their packaged form, the ingestion of prepared kosher food ascribed sanctity to the mundane act of eating. More than incidental, the food products ... acquired some of the status of the rituals to which they were tied.”³³ Unlike food and beverages with actual sacramental purpose – such as wine, challah, or matzo, a connection to holiness (and Jewishness) can be seen in consumption of gefilte fish – even when served from a jar. The link to holidays, particularly Passover, is strong.

According to Leah Leonard in her 1948 *Jewish Cookery*: “One thing is certain. Gefilte fish is Jewish.”³⁴ As if to solidify these Jewish associations, there are multiple children’s books about gefilte fish, the most famous being *The Carp in the Bathtub* published in 1972. This book draws on a weekly tradition of keeping a live fish in a bathtub until its final hour of reckoning comes, when the mother would bludgeon the poor fish to make gefilte fish for the Shabbat family meal.³⁵ As noted by Jonathan Deutsch and Rachel Saks, “countless American Jews have been traumatized by the sight of their mothers and grandmothers killing a carp in the bathtub and grinding it in the kitchen.”³⁶ This book led many readers – who may not have experienced that trauma in real life – to reject gefilte fish for all time. A more celebratory story, *Five Little Gefiltes*, follows the adventures of a clan of jarred fish balls as they set off to see the world.³⁷ Perhaps it is easier for children to rationalize the pre-made gefilte fish than the slaughter of an actual fish.

While the success of brands like *Mother’s*, *Manischewitz*, and *Rokeach* point to the love of jarred gefilte fish, it is impossible to deny the disgust felt by many toward the supermarket staple of gray balls suspended in a jar of jelled broth. For some, it is because they love homemade gefilte fish and are offended by this shelf stable version. Jeffrey Yoskowitz, of the *Gefilte Manifesto*, reports, “I grew up eating fresh, homemade gefilte fish from my grandma. I always had access to the good stuff... But my friends knew gefilte fish and so many other Jewish foods as these things that

³² R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 79. Cited in Jessamyn Neuhaus, “The Way to a Man’s Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s,” *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (1999): 534.

³³ Steinberg, *Jewish Mad Men*, 102.

³⁴ Leah W. Leonard, *Jewish Cookery, in Accordance with the Jewish Dietary Laws* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949) 166.

³⁵ Barbara Cohen, *The Carp in the Bathtub* (New York: Lothrop, 1972).

³⁶ Deutsch and Saks, 28.

³⁷ Dave Horowitz, *Five Little Gefiltes* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2007).

came in boxes from the supermarket."³⁸ Professor Miriyam Glazer of the University of Judaism asks, "Here where we have 5 million fresh fish available to us, why do we always go back to it?"³⁹ Some just accept it, as Doba Tiefenbrun explains, "Do I like the taste? Not really," she said. "But do I like the tradition? Absolutely."⁴⁰

Ellen Scolnic and Joyce Eisenberg, in a *Forward* essay lament the sad differences between the French *quenelle* and the Jewish fish ball:

Quenelles are fancy; they can be served with lemon sauce and nestled next to a grilled scallop. Gefilte fish are dumped from the gel onto a lettuce leaf and dressed up with a carrot curl. We found a recipe for quenelles in *Larousse Gastronomique*, a bible of French cuisine; our recipe for gefilte fish is scrawled on a food-stained 3x5 card that Aunt Miriam pressed into our hand at Passover in April 1986.⁴¹

There is just something, culinarily and aesthetically, displeasing about gefilte fish. Nevertheless, it is ubiquitous among Ashkenazic Jews, whether loved or loathed, fresh or jarred. In 2014, *The New York Times* reported on a gefilte fish shortage due to the polar vortex. A reader wrote in, "Scarcity of gefilte fish! This is the best news since the Red Sea parted."⁴²

For many, there exists an inherent loathing that extends beyond the taste, the smell, and the visual. It is an aversion. A 1994 episode of *Picket Fences* featured a teenager trying to talk his younger brother out of converting to Judaism by tying him to a chair and force feeding him jarred gefilte fish – literally practicing aversion therapy.⁴³ The suggestion here is that one could not possibly enjoy this foodstuff unless one was raised with it. One such Jew from birth sarcastically notes, "One or two cousins will claim to enjoy it. I assume this is part of our long Jewish obligation to suffer, much like our ancestors did when they fled Egypt thousands of years ago."⁴⁴

³⁸ Rebekah Lowen, "Gefilte Fish Haters: Here's Why You Should Reconsider Your Stance," *Food & Wine*, October 19, 2022.

³⁹ Laurie Winer, "The Fish We Love To Hate," *LA Times*, April 20, 2015.

⁴⁰ Matt A.V. Chaban, "Gefilte Fish is Scarce this Passover. Taste Buds are Ambivalent," *New York Times*, April 14, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/15/nyregion/gefilte-fish-is-scarce-this-passover-taste-buds-are-ambivalent.html>.

⁴¹ Ellen Scolnic and Joyce Eisenberg, "You say Won Ton, I Say Kreplach" *Forward* (June 25 2015) <https://forward.com/food/310742/you-say-won-ton-i-say-kreplach/>

⁴² "No Shortage of Thoughts on Gefilte Fish," *New York Times*, April 17, 2014, A2.1.

⁴³ "Picket Fences," "Paging Doctor God," Season 2, Episode 10, January 7, 1994.

⁴⁴ Jacob Margolis, "I Unpacked the Horrors of Gefilte Fish Just in Time for Passover," *LAist*, April 19, 2019, <https://laist.com/news/food/can-gefilte-fish-be-redeemed>

Jeffrey Yoskowitz asserts that this disgust “felt like a sad way to think about one’s own food tradition.”⁴⁵ So he, along with Liz Alpern, decided to do something about it, creating the Brooklyn-based Gefilteria. They produce small batch, artisanal loaves of gefilte fish – essentially terrines. And again, as if to shake off the shackles of those grey fish balls, the loaves have a layer of pink salmon gracing the top. Niki Russ Federman of New York’s *Russ & Daughters* explains that gefilte fish “has the ability to transport you in time and connect you to your lineage.”⁴⁶ It is an icon that serves as a shibboleth for the Jewish people. And while nostalgia is a clear motivator, Alpern and Yoskowitz are quick to note that “Gefilte is not just about your bubbe.”⁴⁷ As Svetlana Boym notes in *The Future of Nostalgia*, “nostalgia is not necessarily opposed to modernity... rather it is coeval with modernity itself.”⁴⁸ These culinary entrepreneurs, along with others of their generation such as the Bernamoffs (of *The Mile End Deli Cookbook*) and the prolific cookbook writer Leah Koenig, actively seek to redefine specifically Ashkenazi Jewish food within the contemporary values of seasonal, local, and sustainable eating, and at the same time change hearts and minds. Some of these hearts may not even be Jewish.

The vaunted (non-Jewish) chef Eric Ripert has written somewhat approvingly of gefilte fish, “It’s not as bad as it’s made out to be” – a ringing endorsement that Jews should embrace.⁴⁹ Reaching back in time, before the jar, there is an actual fish in gefilte fish. And these gastronomic innovators are attempting to rescue the reputation of gefilte fish by embracing what they see as Old-World inspiration coupled with a modern ideology of radical fermentation and seasonal eating. But will it ever replace the jar? In an essay for *Food and Wine*, Rebekah Lowen writes of the jarred fish, “I like its cartoonish blob shape. I like how it tastes (plain and un-fishy). Most of all, I like that it’s familiar and nostalgia-inducing, reminding me of Passovers spent at my childhood home.”⁵⁰ Although some may not like the taste, they like the tradition found in a jar.

⁴⁵ Rebekah Lowen, “Gefilte Fish Haters, Here’s Why You Should Reconsider Your Stance,” *Food & Wine*, October 19, 2022 <https://www.foodandwine.com/news/gefilte-fish-haters-heres-why-you-should-reconsider-your-stance>.

⁴⁶ Matt A.V. Chaban, “Gefilte Fish is Scarce this Passover. Taste Buds are Ambivalent,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2014.

⁴⁷ Yiddish for “grandmother.” Jeffrey Yoskowitz and Liz Alpern, *The Gefilte Manifesto: New Recipes for Old World Jewish Foods* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2016), ix.

⁴⁸ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), xv.

⁴⁹ Alana Newhouse and Gabriella Gershenson, eds., *The 100 Most Jewish Foods: A Highly Debatable List* (New York: Artisan, 2019) 114.

⁵⁰ Lowen, “Gefilte Fish Haters.”