



Personal chef Samantha Garelick sheds light on Hanukkah favorites

BY NATALIE HAUGHTON, FOOD EDITOR

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"Kosher can be great," and the dietary restrictions can work in your favor, says Samantha Garelick, a modern Orthodox Jew, who has an upbeat take on Hanukkah and other Jewish fare. "I try to take the restrictions of keeping kosher and use them to my advantage," notes the enthusiastic Los Angeles personal chef, caterer and cooking teacher.

She's constantly looking for new ways to make kosher creations more imaginative, tasty and accessible - and with California flair and style - since she moved to the Pico-Robertson area with her husband, Jeremy, a screenwriter ("The Break-Up"), just over a year ago.

Garelick cooks and eats seasonally, buys local produce when possible and reinvents old traditions with new twists.

For Hanukkah, which she'll be celebrating with family and friends, she's created an updated crisp sweet potato-leek version of latkes that's topped with applesauce or

sour cream and a few fresh herbs.

Garelick uses canola oil and shreds the potatoes with ease in a food processor, but if you're pressed for time, pick up a bag of preshredded frozen potatoes. While the latkes are best served immediately after cooking, it's feasible to make them a day in advance and refrigerate or freeze up to a month, then simply reheat in a 400-degree oven.

Although some cooks serve latkes as a main course, Garelick prefers to offer them as appetizers at a festive meal with a fish or meat entree and a salad.

She also shares fried Apple Ring Doughnuts for a Hanukkah dessert, but doesn't serve them in the same meal as latkes.

"You can't really make latkes healthy - that defeats the purpose. They need to be fried in oil."

"Hanukkah is really about the miracle of oil," adds Garelick, who is featured in the cover story in the new November/December issue of Jewish Living magazine, noting that "through the lighting of the candles, we celebrate the miracle of oil."

If a Hanukkah party is in your plans, Garelick shares these tips:

"Keep a list of everything you've made - all the food you're planning on serving to make sure you didn't leave something in the

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fridge."

Take advantage of what grocery stores have to offer to shortcut some prep steps and save time. For instance, buy preshredded carrots instead of shredding them yourself. Dig out and attach sticky notes to serving pieces so you know what dishes will be served in them.

"I think simple is better. If you're making one or two fancy dishes, keep everything else simple."

Garelick's love affair with food began while growing up in a kosher home in New City, N.Y. Her father is a cantor, and her mother, a teacher, loved to entertain and cook. "We very rarely ate out. My mother is a great cook."

Garelick's passion for food continued to evolve. Although she majored in business at Cornell University, she sandwiched in food and nutrition classes whenever possible. She spent her junior year in Italy, immersed in the country's food and culture.

After graduating, she took a financial analyst job at Goldman Sachs in Manhattan. But after a couple years, she traded finance for food. "I got more joy out of walking through the farmers market on Sunday morning, glancing at the heirloom vegetables, wondering what dish they could be added to, than I did walking into work every day."

To hone her culinary skills, it was on to a six-month cooking course at the Institute of Culinary

Education in New York, short stints at New York restaurants and then an internship at Frontera Grill in Chicago.

"It's always a lot of fun but definitely challenging lugging around 10-gallon pots full of hot, spicy sauce. That was my first restaurant kitchen experience, and I learned the ins and outs of the dance behind the closed doors of a restaurant kitchen."

It was full throttle ahead in the food world. She married along the way (her husband grew up in the same town, and their families shared Passover Seders over the years).

"I was inspired by my husband to apply what I learned to the world of kosher cuisine. It was never in my realm of thinking that I would do something so creative with my life," she reflects. I was self-programmed to work in business."

Although she didn't keep kosher in college or while working, it was after culinary school "that I sort of reconnected with my Jewish observance," Garelick says, adding that her and her husband consider themselves modern Orthodox Jews.

"To me, it means I live in a close-knit modern Orthodox community where we share Jewish traditions and values with our neighbors. We keep Shabbat," meaning they walk to synagogue, don't drive from sundown on Friday to after sunset on Saturday, don't use electricity and don't cook. "We keep kosher.

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"There are a lot of little intricacies, of yeses and nos, of being a modern Orthodox Jew. But really it's more about my sense of identity and community, where I live, how I spend my week. I don't think about the restrictions all the time. I think more about the beauty it brings to my life."

Garelick likes to share and celebrate her kosher lifestyle with the community - through teaching, preparing meals and starting the Kosher Wine Society of Los Angeles. She considers the kosher meals she cooks for people - a maximum of 30 - often in a person's home - more personal chef cooking than catering.

"I like to do anything in the kosher food world to make it better." She's also planning events at Mamash, a new high-end Asian fusion kosher restaurant, on Pico Boulevard that is scheduled to open in December.

For more information, check out Garelick's Web site, www.thekoshergirl.com.

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