

The Ultimate Jewish Finger Food

By Tina D. Wasserman

When you consider Jewish law, history, and tradition, it's not surprising that little "pies" of dough filled with vegetables, cheese, or meat are ubiquitous throughout the Jewish diaspora. The prohibition against cooking on Shabbat encouraged the preparation of foods that could be made in advance of the day of rest. Also, these little dough-encased packets of vegetables (sometimes meat if the budget allowed) could be cooked when time permitted and later served as a family meal or snack.

In short, the dough pie is the ultimate Jewish finger food.

In North America, we have been exposed to many permutations of this genre. Long ago, the popular Eastern European and Russian version, the potato knish, was a bite-sized morsel served as part of a Russian *zakuski* (appetizer plate) or at special events such as a *bris*, bar mitzvah, or wedding. Today we know it as a 4-inch-square pillow of dense, crusty dough with savory potato-onion filling. Another version, from Poland, is the *piroshki* (otherwise known as *pirogen*), boiled, baked, or fried dough with sweet (cheese or fruit) or savory (meat or sauerkraut and mushroom) filling. A 17th-century medieval custom created the *kreplach* (meat-filled triangles of dough) we know today. At Yom Kippur Jews from Germany would place their New Year's wishes in a piece of dough to wear

around their necks as an amulet. Eventually these amulets made their way into chicken broth, and it is now customary to serve *kreplach* on erev Yom Kippur.

Sephardic Jews were also fond of filling dough with edible treats. In Turkey, Jews created *bolemas*, savory pumpkin-filled ropes of yeast dough rolled into small coils and baked. Jews from Bulgaria and other parts of the Ottoman Empire enjoyed *borekas*, baked half moons of pastry dough packed with eggplant or potato and cheese; and Jews from Iraq stuffed fried yeast dough, called *sambusak*, with spicy meat or chickpeas.

As you enjoy these delicacies—their preparation simplified with the use of modern cooking equipment—think back to our ancestors who lovingly made each dough pie by hand. And eat in good health!

Grandma Gussie's Potato Knishes

No family function at my grandmother's house was without Grandma Gussie's knishes, and you had to act fast or you got only one. Unfortunately, the recipe for her signature soft patties of potato dough with fried onions encased in the center was passed on to us in a rather imprecise oral tradition: "a *bissel*" (little) of this and "a *shiterein*" (throw in a handful) of that. Finally, one day I came across a recipe that reminded me of Grandma's knishes, close enough with a little tweaking to pass down to the next generation as Grandma Gussie's culinary inheritance.

- 4½ cups dry mashed potato (no liquid or fat added)
- 3 eggs, lightly beaten with a fork
- ½ cup flour or matzah meal
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 3 teaspoons salt, divided use

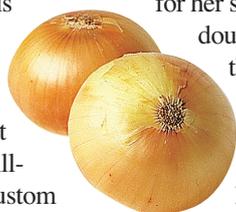


- ¼ cup olive oil or chicken fat
- 3 large onions, finely diced
- Additional flour for shaping knishes
- Additional olive or vegetable oil for frying knishes

1. Mix the potatoes, eggs, flour or matzah meal, pepper, and 2 teaspoons of salt to form a smooth but slightly sticky dough. Set aside for 20 minutes while you fry the onions.

2. Heat a 10-inch skillet over high heat for 20 seconds. Add the oil or chicken fat and heat for another 10 seconds, turning down the heat if the oil begins to smoke. Add the onions and sauté until they're dark golden brown (but not burnt). Remove from the heat and stir in the remaining teaspoon of salt.

3. Using flour or matzah meal, heavily flour your work surface and your hands. Using your fingertips, flatten 1 tablespoon of dough in your palm or on the work surface until you've created a 2- to 3-inch circle. If the dough is very



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