

## Central Synagogue of Chicago Two Gefilte Fish Stories & A Film

### **Marvin's Fish Story:**

Gefilte Fish was traditionally served on Shabbat and Jewish holidays in Ashkenazi households. In Yiddish געפֿילטע פֿיש is translated as “stuffed fish”. And, originally the mixture of chopped fish was stuffed back into the skin of a whole fish, which was then baked or poached. Gefilte Fish was to the fish world what hamburger was to the meat world. By chopping the fish and adding fillers such as matzo meal or bread, in the shtetel where people were poor, one could serve more people for less money. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the chopped fish mixture was made into balls and poached or baked without stuffing it back into a whole fish, but the dish retained its original name. The original stuffed tradition still exists in some households. I have occasionally seen someone at Robert's Fish Market purchase a whole trout to be used for that purpose.

Two versions of gefilte fish existed in Europe. Known as the gefilte fish line, those who lived west of the line, which included a significant part of Poland and Germany and the remaining part of Western Europe, liked their gefilte fish sweet. On the East side of the line, which included Lithuania, Latvia and Russia, people liked a more salty and peppery version of gefilte fish. The line also reflected a linguistic divide of what kind of Yiddish was spoken. Here is a link for the picture of the line on a map:

<http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/09/24/351185646/the-gefilte-fish-line-a-sweet-and-salty-history-of-jewish-identity>

When I was very young, my grandmother (on my mother's side) made gefilte fish every Friday for Shabbat. But she stopped making it, and so as I was growing up, what we had on Passover, Shabbat, and other holidays was the stuff that came out of the jar. Fortunately, every summer we visited Weinstein's resort in South Haven, which was established by my grandparents on my father's side. My Bubbie

made gefilte fish, which was served as the appetizer for Shabbat dinner every week. I have a very good food memory, and that gefilte fish is my reference standard for what gefilte fish should taste like.

I was interested in making my own homemade gefilte fish, but any time I discussed it with anyone I was discouraged from trying it. There was an attitude that it was an enormous and very difficult task. I have been purchasing fish at Robert's Kosher Fish Market on Devon Avenue for a long time, both for myself and for whenever we needed fish for a synagogue event. One day I asked Robert Z'L, about making gefilte fish, and I got a detailed lecture, including what he called his “world famous recipe.” He said it was not difficult, which I have found to be true. That Passover I tried it and my family said it was good. But I was not satisfied with the depth of the flavor as compared to my mental reference standard, so I continued working on it, and over time I developed a technique, not a recipe, that imparts a really good flavor to the fish.

In the Midwest, people tend to use fresh water fish, and on the west coast salmon is often used. There are thousands of recipes in cookbooks and on the internet. Put it in Google and you will see. Everyone who makes gefilte fish has their own formula for what fish they use, what they add to it and how they cook it.

My technique:

1) Kind of fish: I use half walleye, because walleye has a wonderful flavor. Then, for the other half, I use whitefish and trout.

2. The texture: I do not use a food processor for grinding the fish because you cannot get a consistent texture. It will come out differently every time. I have them grind the fish at Robert's. They use an industrial grinder that creates the perfect texture.

3. Fillers; If you get the texture right, there is absolutely no need to ever use matzah meal. It is not needed.

4. Flavorings: I add ground carrots and vidalia onions to the ground fish. Robert's recipe said that for every 4 pounds of ground fish, add 1 pound of ground onions. I have used that as a guide, but I do not weigh the onions so it's a "guestimate." I also add salt (but not too much for health reasons) and pepper. Pepper helps bring out the flavor of the fish.

5. Eggs: If the texture is right you can create fish balls that stay together without fillers or eggs. For up to 12 pounds of fish I have never used more than one egg or the equivalent in egg whites.

6. The broth: In order to enhance the depth of flavor of the fish, I have developed a broth technique that I have not found in any recipe I have seen. I start with the fish bones and heads, and add to the pot lots of fresh herbs including dill, cilantro, oregano, rosemary, thyme, tarragon, and basil. I also add whole vidalia onions, parsnips, and sometimes celery root. I let the broth simmer for about 4 hours: the longer the better!

7. I remove everything from the pot, and add the fish balls into the broth. Then I drop a pot cover into the pot that is smaller than the pot to keep the fish balls immersed in the liquid and let them simmer in the broth.

I am not sure what my bubbie or grandmother, or other Jewish woman of that generation would think about my herbal broth - I don't think most of them ever heard of some of those herbs, but it does produce a flavor that makes a very good traditional style gefilte fish. While it does take some time, it is not at all difficult. And, the results leave you with the inability to ever think of what comes in those jars as gefilte fish.

### **Floras Fish Story:**

#### **Not my grandma's Shifra Gefilte fish**

What I am going to serve you is not my grandma's gefilte fish, as I don't have a recipe for it and never did. Call it Shifra's Fake Gefilte, or just Flora's rendition.

I remember my grandmother's big pot filled with jellied, slightly brown, almost transparent bullion. Floating elegantly inside were white patties of fish, and bright big pieces of carrots and halved potatoes alongside.

I remember my grandmother explaining to me that a layer of dried skins of red onion should cover the bottom of the pot and the upper layer of the patties at the top to give the bullion an amber-like finish.

I only vaguely remember a taste of the dish - fishy, but just slightly, with a hint of sweetness. I can't even remember whether we ate it hot or cold.

Nor can I recall the taste of my grandmother's horseradish, or *chrain*— just a downpour of our tears as we took turns manually grating the horseradish.

Everything about making gefilte fish was fun for me: Going to the fish store early in the morning to check whether fresh fish had been delivered, and especially having a number written on your hand with a special "chemical pencil" that had to be activated by licking—an early prototype of the modern marker. I even liked standing in line, sometimes for hours... For me, standing in line with my grandma was sheer joy; for her, it was a strategic way to buy a double ration of fish.

Even though Kherson, the town where I was born, is situated on a bank of the mighty Dnepr River, by the mid 1960s when I was a child the hydroelectric power stations built on its shores prevented fish from moving freely. As a result, there were always long lines at the fish store. Because of the shortage, only two or three kilograms per person were allowed, but my five-year-old self was kindly considered to be a

full person, which meant that my grandma would get five to six kilos for the both of us—as many as four large, still beating white fish!

Perhaps my grandma felt good walking back home with two *avos'kas* (light tote bags) filled with live, beating fish. As for me, I was just happy to walk hand in hand with her, knowing that I was of some use today and that more fun is awaiting me home. Have you ever experienced the pleasure of exploding a fish swim bladder by stepping on it with all your might? I have. Picture this:

The moment we would enter the courtyard of my grandmother's building, local cats run to greet us and to smell grandma's *avos'kas*. She would leave me under the old *platanus* tree by the wooden table with attached benches to watch our *avos'kas* while she went upstairs to fetch old *newspapers*, her knife, a sharpening stone, a cutting board, and a few bowls of different sizes. By the time she came back, the cats were all lined up, impatient—no cat ever dared to approach the table with fish too closely.

The newspapers are unfolded, the knife is sharpened, and the first fish is placed on the cutting board: the scaling begins. A fountain of scales, an explosion of sparkles. Next, a cut and the giblets come out. Fish roe, if any, goes in one bowl, the giblets in another, but the swim bladder stays on the cutting board. I and the cats are motionless. Everybody knows what will happen next: my grandma will take the swim bladder, throw it on the ground next to my feet, and say: "This is yours, Florinochka!"

The cats don't move, they don't even breathe, as I lift my right foot and, with all my energy, step on the swim bladder. Boom! The chamber is flattened. The cat who's first in line picks it up and runs away with it.

Another fish, another swim bladder explosion, and another cat picks it up and runs away. When all the fish is cleaned, the cats who didn't get a swim bladder will feast on a big bowl of giblets.

The party is over, everybody is happy: the cats because they were fed, I—because I am more important than they are.

### **A Film Titled: Gefilte Fish**

This is a 10 minute comedy film produced in Israel, in Hebrew with English subtitles. It's very funny and if you have 10 minutes you can view it online on YouTube. Here is the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2mhx1C-ZIM>