

Beyond brisket: Israeli fare for holidays

By AMELIA LEVIN

Oh no! Not more brisket!" That was what Executive Chef Brett Stein exclaimed jokingly, when he first came to work at Catering by Michael's in Morton Grove.

Brisket, matzo ball soup and kishke are all traditional Jewish-American foods that the catering company will be delivering to roughly 300 homes in Chicago and the suburbs this Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur season. The company will deliver 3,000 pounds of the beef, actually.

But as a South African native and Israeli citizen for 20 years, Stein had not partaken in much brisket eating until emigrating to the U.S. Growing up, the chef ate more meals of Middle East fare that includes such ingredients as olives, garlic, paprika and other spices. Israelis rarely eat brisket because of its higher cost.

At the age of 21, Stein left Israel with years of cooking experience under his belt to travel and cook around the world. He eventually came to the U.S., where he graduated from Kendall College in Evanston, worked as a sous chef at Food for Thought Catering, and opened his own restaurant in Winnetka. Stein has been with Catering by Michael's for the past seven years, and is the recent recipient of the Jean Banchet award for Culinary Excellence as the Best Caterer in Chicago.

Catering by Michael's provides catering services for the entire Chicago area and parts of Wisconsin and Michigan. When asked how he manages this complex operation, Stein gives credit to having taught cooking to other soldiers during his service in the Israeli army. "My army background gave me the skills to orchestrate the planning, production, execution and delivery of our dishes," he said.

During the holidays, many Jews

spend most of their days in synagogue, and some find it hard to balance the time to cook large meals for their entire families and friends. On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Stein and his staff work feverishly so that their clients may continue holiday celebrations at dinnertime.

This hard work does not go without reward. "It's pretty cool to be able to cook for your grandma, your wife and kids and the entire North Shore," said Stein, who is Jewish. "It is important to eat foods from our history, because it is nostalgic, and also because it allows us to pass on our knowledge of history to future generations."

While most Jewish-American dishes originate predominantly from Eastern Europe and Russia, Israeli-Jewish cuisine reflects a "melting pot" of foods influenced by Jews who immigrated from Morocco and from other areas of Africa and the Middle East.

This holiday season, Stein offers two recipes from his childhood as an alternative to brisket: a Moroccan dish, his favorite, and one that makes his wife exclaim, "This is so, so good!" and a typical Israeli salad which has a



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Brett Stein serves a plate of Moroccan Chicken over Herbed Israeli Couscous.

Moroccan Chicken

1 whole chicken (3-1/2 to 4 lb.),
cut into 8 pieces
2 T paprika
1 T garlic powder
1 T salt
1 T white pepper
1 T seasoning salt
Vegetable oil, as needed
1 1/2 qt. Moroccan Chicken
Sauce (recipe follows)
1/2 C chopped fresh parsley
Herbed Israeli Couscous
(recipe follows)

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Season chicken with spices and sear in hot oil in a large skillet. Transfer the chicken to a baking pan with a high rim or a casserole dish; cover with sauce. Bake covered for one hour, or until the chicken is fully cooked. Garnish with parsley and serve with couscous. Makes 8 servings.

Moroccan Chicken Sauce

1/4 C olive oil
1 large onion, sliced
2 large cloves garlic, minced
1 green bell pepper, diced
1 red bell pepper, diced
2 large tomatoes, diced
1-1/2 C canned crushed tomatoes
3/4 C tomato paste
1 C halved pitted green olives
1/2 tsp. garlic powder
1/2 tsp. onion powder
1/8 tsp. red pepper flakes

Salt and pepper, to taste

Heat oil; sauté the onion until translucent. Add the garlic and cook until soft. Add remaining ingredients; bring to a boil. Reduce heat; simmer until vegetables are soft, stirring occasionally. If sauce is too thick, add chicken broth. Makes 2 qts.

Herbed Israeli Couscous

1 lb. Israeli couscous, uncooked
3 T olive oil
1 T chopped fresh parsley
1 T chopped fresh basil
1 T chopped fresh oregano
1 T chopped fresh thyme
Salt and pepper, to taste

Cook couscous according to package directions; drain well. Toss with remaining ingredients. Makes 8 servings.

Israeli Salad

1 red bell pepper, diced
1 green bell pepper, diced
1 tomato, seeded, diced
1 small cucumber, seeded, diced
1 small red onion, diced
1 small bunch parsley, chopped
1 T olive oil
2 T lemon juice or to taste
Salt and pepper, to taste

In a large mixing bowl, toss together all ingredients. Chill before serving. Makes 8 servings.



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Israeli Salad is presented with sliced tomatoes and cucumbers.