



# CROSS-CULTURAL FOOD CELEBRATION

Robin Van Creveld shares traditional festive recipes from around the world

**Spending solo time in the kitchen is good for contemplation.** As I tried the recipes for this issue, I followed a flow of thought that began with me thinking about why we eat turkey and cranberry at Christmas when Christ and his disciples certainly ate neither. I soon meandered into deeper philosophical waters wondering if eating food that has cultural roots connects us at a deeper level with that heritage and in turn helps us to feel part of a tribe or a deep sense of belonging.

I've no doubt that in my experience of growing up in a traditional Jewish household it certainly does, but I do wonder how true this is for my children. They are growing up in a multicultural, free-thinking family and enjoy a veritable smorgasbord of spiritual and cultural activities. They are also growing up in an age where technology and cultural cross-fertilisation have made hermetic traditions feel slightly arcane. Having said this I do feel it is very important to celebrate life and community through ritual, and this festive season I plan to use a pantheon of foods as an eatable platform for teaching my children about their own cultural heritage and also to celebrate some beautiful traditions from other cultures.

## Dhokra

A dhokra is a savoury cake made from fermented rice and lentil or chickpea flour. It is often served at Pancha Ganapati, a Hindu festival celebrating Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of benevolence and fairness. It is either steamed or cooked like porridge and then set. It is often flavoured just with salt, chilli and ginger in the batter and finished off with a spicy tarka or second fry. For this version I've added spiced leek and kale and a simple tarka dressing of oil and garlic. I buy dhokra flour at an Indian grocer, but you can also use equal parts rice and gram flour.

*Serves 6*

200g dhokra flour  
100g yoghurt  
150g water  
1 tsp salt  
½ tsp turmeric  
2 tbsp sunflower oil  
1 leek, washed and finely chopped >



> a handful of kale, washed and chopped  
 2 green chillies, finely chopped  
 1 tsp grated ginger  
 a pinch of asafoetida powder (optional)  
 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda  
 2 cloves of garlic, finely chopped  
 a small bunch of fresh coriander  
 salt and pepper to taste

1. Start with the batter – it will need 8–12 hours to ferment. Mix the flour with the yoghurt, water, salt and turmeric. Cover and leave in a warm place to ferment. You should see little bubbles appearing and it should have a slightly sour smell when it is ready. The fermentation encourages enzyme development, which aids digestion and in turn optimised nutrition.
2. Heat a little oil in a pan, stir-fry the leeks and kale until just soft, add the chopped chilli and ginger and cook for a moment more. Season with a little salt and pepper and mix it in with the batter. Add a pinch of asafoetida (if desired) and the bicarbonate of soda and mix well.
3. Oil a 20cm round baking tray and pour in the batter. It should come no more than halfway up the side of the tray.
4. Place in a large steamer, or in a large pan with something heatproof under the tray to raise it up, with 2–3cm of water underneath. Steam for 10–15 minutes until the batter sets.
5. Allow to cool slightly, then cut into squares or diamond shapes.
6. Heat the remaining oil and then quick-fry the garlic. Pour this over the dhokra.
7. Garnish with lots of fresh coriander.

## Stollen

The 'heavyweight' of Christmas breads, this traditional German loaf is enriched with fruit, nuts, citrus peel and marzipan. Stollen is served well dusted with icing sugar and is said to represent the infant Christ swaddled in cotton blankets. It is a very simple bread to make but it does need a little more proving time as all the enrichments slow down the fermentation. If like me you don't like marzipan, leave it out or replace it with something more to your taste – in my case, white chocolate.

150ml milk  
 2 level tsp dried yeast  
 350g strong white bread flour  
 50g caster sugar  
 ½ tsp salt  
 75g softened butter  
 1 large egg, beaten  
 125g mixed dried fruit  
 25g mixed candied peel, finely diced  
 25g almonds, chopped  
 150g marzipan  
 25g butter  
 icing sugar

1. Warm the milk to about 35°C and mix with the yeast, 100g of flour and a teaspoon of the sugar and leave to ferment for 30–60 minutes.
2. Sift together the remaining flour, salt and sugar into a mixing bowl. Pour in the milk and yeast and add the



softened butter and beaten egg.

- Mix well until the dough leaves the side of the bowl cleanly. Turn onto a floured surface and knead for 5 minutes until it is springy and elastic. Leave in a warm place, covered with cling film, until it has doubled in size.
- Turn the risen dough out onto a floured surface, roll or stretch it out to a rectangle 30cm x 40cm, sprinkle on the dried fruit, peel and almonds and fold over in thirds. Pinch down the open sides and allow to rest for 10 minutes. Gently roll out, making sure the fruit and nuts don't push through the dough. Repeat the three-fold and leave for a further 10 minutes.
- Roll out the dough to a rectangle 25cm x 20cm, with a long edge facing you.
- Using your hands, roll the marzipan into three sausage shapes, each about 16cm long. Place these at the bottom of the dough nearest you, 5cm apart, parallel to the long edge.
- Roll up the dough and place it seam side down, with the ends gently tucked under, on an oiled and dusted baking sheet. Leave it to prove in a warm place until it has doubled in size again
- Bake at 170 °C for 35–40 minutes. Be aware that the high sugar and fat content makes for a very dark crust. If the stollen is darkening too much, cover it with baking parchment.
- Allow the stollen to cool on the baking sheet for about 10 minutes before brushing with melted butter. Transfer to a wire rack to finish cooling and dust with icing sugar before serving.



## Apple and walnut borekas

Borekas are a savoury or sweet turnover made throughout the Middle East. Sephardic Jews serve them at Hanukkah, deep-fried and filled with sweet cream cheese, fruit or nuts. Some people use filo pastry and bake their borekas, but the olive oil pastry below is easy to make and more suitable for deep frying.

*Makes 16 borekas*

- 1 tbsp salted butter
- 4 firm dessert apples, peeled, cored and grated or chopped into very small cubes
- 50g walnut pieces
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- a pinch of salt
- 250g strong white flour
- 125g wholemeal flour
- 125ml olive oil
- 25g soft brown sugar
- 125ml ice cold water – you may not need all of this
- 1 egg, beaten
- sunflower oil for frying

- In a pan, gently fry the apple in butter until it just starts to soften. Add the nuts and cinnamon and a pinch of salt and allow this mixture to cool.
- To make the pastry, sift the two flours together and rub in the oil and sugar. Add the water a little at a time until you have a soft pliable dough. Knead for a few minutes to develop the gluten, then chill for at least 30 minutes before proceeding.
- Dust your work surface and roll out the dough until it is about 2mm thick. Using a 7cm round cutter or glass, cut out 16 discs. Place a dollop of apple and nuts in the middle of each, brush half the circumference with beaten egg and fold over to form a semi-circle. Crimp by hand or use a fork to seal, stack on a plate, cover and put back in the fridge for a further 30 minutes.
- Heat enough sunflower oil to fry eight at a time – approximately 500ml in a 2l pan. The oil should be at about 170 °C so that the pastry cooks fast and crisp without absorbing too much oil.
- Cook each batch until puffed up and golden brown, turning once.
- Drain on absorbent paper, dust with extra sugar and serve hot. ●

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