

Tablet

How Mustard Became the King of Jewish Condiments

Its delicious legacy stretches from the corner deli all the way back to Abraham

BY EDIE JAROLIM AUGUST 18, 2020



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Barry Levenson is serious about mustard—and also funny about it, in a borscht belt kind of way. The founder and curator of the National Mustard

Museum in Middleton, Wisconsin, Levenson is fond of telling stories like this one: “When I was in Katz’s Deli on the Lower East Side, I saw a woman ask for mayonnaise for her pastrami sandwich. I harassed her about it and got arrested. I was tried and acquitted because the court decided the real crime was the woman who wanted to put mayonnaise on a pastrami sandwich.”

Bada boom.

The story’s punchline depends on a universally acknowledged truth: Mustard is the unofficial condiment of Jewish deli, the only acceptable complement to corned beef and knishes. Its culinary clout is disproportionate to its sidekick status.

I discovered mustard’s superpowers when I was a teenager, meeting the mother of my high school boyfriend, Victor, for the first time. A divorcee, she was not inclined to like anyone competing for the affection of her only son. The three of us sat around a Formica table in Brightwater Towers, a soulless Coney Island high-rise, making stilted conversation over unadorned sandwiches of limp bologna on thin white bread.

The next day, I asked Victor what his mother thought of me. Sheepishly, he conveyed her only comment: “That girl uses mustard like there’s no tomorrow.”

No lies detected. I’d found solace in a Nathan’s Famous squeeze bottle, a welcome emissary from the hot dog emporium on the nearby Coney Island boardwalk. Liberally applied, the golden-brown elixir transported my tastebuds to a friendlier, more flavorful place.

But the link between Jews and mustard predates the Ashkenazi food traditions of Central and Eastern Europe. The word “mustard” never appears in the Hebrew Bible but it is mentioned more than 200 times in later Talmudic commentaries on the text. Thus we learn that the three angels who came to announce the birth of Jacob to Abraham were served tongue in mustard sauce (Genesis 18:6-7).

Why this particular dish? Susan Weingarten, food historian of the Talmudic era and author of *Haroset: A Taste of Jewish History*, says tongue with mustard sauce was a great delicacy, generally reserved for kings and priests. Abraham’s choice of main course meant he was conferring the height of desert

hospitality on his guests, even without knowing they were heavenly messengers.

“About 50 to 75% of the food in Talmudic times was bread, and it was boring,” said Weingarten. “You’d want something tasty like mustard to go with it.”

Mustard seeds were used as seasoning in many parts of the Old World for millennia. Cultivated mustard plants were found in China around 4000 BCE, for example, and the seeds were unearthed in Egyptian tombs. It’s likely they were chewed with meat in many ancient cultures to cover up the taste of less-than-fresh flesh, their tangy essential oils released when the seed hulls were cracked open with the teeth and mixed with saliva. As mustard maven Levenson put it, “In a sense, the mouth became a mustard factory.”

But the Romans were the first to popularize the process of grinding the seeds and mixing them with liquid—usually, wine or vinegar—to create a spreadable paste used as a condiment or cooking ingredient. And from the third to sixth centuries CE, when most of the Talmudic commentaries were penned, the land of Israel was a Roman province.

How would the mustard of Talmudic times compare to the type slathered on rye bread today? “It’s

difficult to know,” Weingarten said. Current classifications of the seeds derived from the plants of the *Brassicaceae* (mustard) family fall into three main groups, going from mild to hot: *B. alba/Sinapis alba*, white/yellow; *B. juncea*, brown; and *B. nigra*, black. The problem with matching the references in early texts with current recipes, Weingarten said, is that “the Talmudic literature uses different categories, wild mustard and cultivated mustard, and plain mustard and Egyptian mustard. There’s no consensus among modern scholars as to which varieties are which.”

That said, mustard mixed with honey is mentioned several times in the Talmudic literature, and Weingarten believes that the milder white seeds were likely to have been preferred over the hotter black or brown ones.

Black seeds are rarely used commercially these days, but the brown and white varieties remain the basis for the myriad mustards now produced internationally; the National Mustard Museum showcases more than 6,000 examples. The annual World-Wide Mustard Competition hosted by the museum gives out prizes in 17 categories, including fruit, spirit, and classic Dijon (smooth). The mustards judged in the deli/brown group are

defined by the use of spicy brown seeds, coarsely ground and usually mixed with vinegar, salt, and a little turmeric, which gives all types of mustard their yellow color.

Within those basic guidelines, recipes vary. Levenson took an informal survey of New York Jewish delis and got conflicting opinions on the topic (surprise!): “Some places insisted deli mustard has to have horseradish in it, while others said it has to have garlic,” he reported.

Levenson notes that the taste can be deceptive in all styles of sharp mustard, including Dijon. “You may think a high-quality deli mustard has horseradish in it when it doesn’t,” he said. “That’s because mustard seed and horseradish root are in the same family and contain the same essential elements, a colorless oil that’s responsible for the kick and nose hit.”

Of course, it’s not only New Yorkers who have strong feelings about cured meat and condiments. Chicagoans, many with deep Polish and German roots, have plenty to say on the subject, too. As detailed in the book *Never Put Ketchup on a Hot Dog* by Bob Schwartz, a genuine Chicago hot dog must be topped with mustard as well as relish, onions, and pickles, with nary a trace of any paste

with a red tomato base. In 2018, the Illinois Department of Transportation installed an electronic traffic board on Interstate 90/94 in the city that read, “No Texting. No Speeding. No Ketchup.”

Chicago hot dogs are conventionally topped with mild American yellow mustard—the most popular kind in the United States, ubiquitous at ballparks. Made with white seeds and given its bright color from a generous use of turmeric, the creamy condiment was introduced by the French brothers at the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904.

So don’t be surprised to find mellow yellow mustard at Jewish delis in the Midwest alongside the sharper types, though the latter are held to be the far better match with pastrami. Manny’s Cafeteria and Delicatessen in Chicago, founded by Manny Raskin in 1942, bottles its own deli mustard, which incorporates horseradish. “We wanted to be able to provide the same product that we served in the restaurant for decades to other people,” said owner Dan Raskin, the fourth generation of the family to run the business. “It was trial and error, but we had the recipe produced for us at a mustard manufacturer. We sell a lot of bottles in the store and online from all over the country.”

One of the reasons for mustard's popularity, Raskin added, is that it's "one of the healthier condiments. Mayonnaise is obviously not good for you and ketchup has lots of sugar, so many people prefer mustard."

It's true. You can minimize the guilt of eating fatty meat or dense potato pockets by telling yourself that at least the mustard doesn't add calories. And with sharp deli mustard, your arteries may be clogged but your sinuses will be clear.

Although mustard doesn't play a major role in the lighter fare typical of Israeli and other Sephardic food traditions, there's one exception: Jewish French cuisine. The Roman fondness for the condiment remained particularly influential in the province that was formerly Gaul. The great biblical scholar Rashi was born in 1040 CE in Troyes, only about 100 miles from the city of Dijon, and he was a winemaker. It would hardly be a stretch to suggest that mustard played a part in his Shabbat feasts.

Ironically, it is 13th-century French rabbinical scholars who are generally credited with—or blamed for—the fact that mustard is banned from Jewish homes on Passover. Or at least from Ashkenazi Jewish homes. This stricture is based on

the principle of *kitnyot*, the notion that certain grains and legumes may be confused—or accidentally mixed—with the forbidden *chametz* (leavened bread).

How mustard came to be included in this group and why Sephardic Jews eschewed the *kitnyot* ruling is much too complicated to get into. And for some people, the prohibition was always a Halachic bridge too far.

As Levenson put it, “I’m originally of Ashkenazi stock, but for Pesach all of a sudden I become Sephardic so I can have my mustard.”