

PROFILE

Dahlia Abraham-Klein

BY DOREEN WACHMANN

Dahlia dishes up cookbook of healthy recipes



COOKERY author Dahlia Abraham-Klein has named her first Jewish cookbook *Silk Road Vegetarian* (Tuttle Publishing) because her family was always travelling the ancient trading route, the Silk Road, which linked China with the Mediterranean.

She said: "My family was typical of Jewish families weaving in and out of countries like Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Iran and the Mediterranean."

Dahlia's mother, Zena Abraham, was born in a Bukharan jail in Soviet Uzbekistan. Dahlia's pregnant grandmother had been imprisoned after the KGB failed to catch her diamond merchant husband, who managed to escape to Afghanistan.

Dahlia's grandmother was released from prison when Zena was six-months-old and mother and daughter joined Dahlia's grandfather in Afghanistan.

Zena lived in the Muslim country till she was 16 when her family made aliya, travelling to Israel on a mass migration from Kabul by camel, bus and plane.

Dahlia's father, Yehuda Abraham, was also born in Bukhara and left for Afghanistan when he was young. His family later moved to Pakistan and then India.

Aged 30, Yehuda left Bombay for Israel to find a wife, whom he took back to Bombay where his family owned a large jewellery business. Yehuda went with his wife and children to New York to set up an

I couldn't love an animal — and eat one

American branch. But the travelling did not end there.

Dahlia said: "My father and I hardly lived together. My parents moved to New York, but my father opened an office in Thailand. My father lived six months of the year in Thailand.

"He opened Bangkok's first synagogue in his home and he built its only mikva. He would go back and forth to New York. My mother would go to Thailand for a couple of months at a time and leave me with a nanny. Until I was 26, my father was in Thailand. Because my family travelled so much I travelled with them."

Dahlia inherited her family's wanderlust, becoming a travelling antique jeweller. But the travelling impacted greatly on her digestive system.

She said: "Maybe twice a month I would be on a plane to Thailand, Hong Kong, Italy or Israel. As a result of all the travel and living a single life in Manhattan, my diet was atrocious. I developed an ulcer."

Dahlia went to a gastroenterologist who told her to eat bland food, dairy and boiled chicken and gave her medication. But her condition

worsened. Her sister introduced her to a holistic nutritionist who told her to remove sugar, dairy and wheat from her diet. She noticed a marked improvement.

Dahlia said: "I had a food sensitivity. Celiac and gluten were not catchphrases then like today. I was extremely sick and debilitated when I had the ulcer. I became so much healthier as a result of how I was eating."

Dahlia was so impressed by the change in her diet that she studied to be a naturopathic doctor and opened up her own practice to help others eat more healthily.

She said: "That was when my cookbook, *Silk Road Vegetarian — Vegan, Vegetarian and Gluten Free Recipes for the Mindful Cook* first started to germinate."

She described her journey towards cookery as a "slow blooming process".

She said: "I had not cooked as a girl. I grew up in a very traditional home with a lot of cooking. But my mother had help with her constant cooking. As my father had so many international offices all over the world, we were constantly entertaining."

"There were always 20 people at the Shabbat table. It was very international."

But most of the traditional dishes with which she had grown up were naturally gluten-free because her family came from a rice-eating culture. Then one Shabbat, Dahlia decided to become vegetarian.

She recalled: "My son, Jonah, was an only child. Instead of a sibling, I got him a dog. I had made roast chicken for Shabbat. My dog was sitting at my side at the table. I was looking at the dog and at the chicken and my conscience struck me that I couldn't live with and love an animal and eat one."

So she adapted her ancestral dishes, which were made with meat to vegetarian. Then, she said: "It was just a natural progression to source my food locally."

She opened up a Community Supported Agriculture in her Long Island neighbourhood.

A local farmer brought weekly produce to her garage and CSA members would come to pick up freshly-picked organic produce.

Dahlia said: "It was 2008 when

the economy was very bad. One of the ways that I wanted to support the economy was by supporting my local farmer.

"Most of the people who signed up for the CSA did it for ideological reasons. But no-one knew what to do with a lot of the stuff that they received every week. So I started to write recipes for the CSA members."

Silk Road Vegetarian is an outgrowth of that first book for CSA members. Dahlia is now writing her second cookbook, *Spiritual Kneading through the Jewish Months — Building the Sacred through Challah*.

While *Silk Road Vegetarian* is full of historical allusions to her family's eastern gastronomic heritage, *Spiritual Kneading* is replete with spiritual inspiration.

With her roots in eastern cultures, it is not surprising that Dahlia was attracted to medita-

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tion, which she has adapted to Orthodox Judaism.

She told me: "Meditation was always practised in Judaism, but it got lost. The *Amida* was originally a Jewish meditation. It was supposed to be mouthed very slowly."

"Repetition is meditation. But it became very rushed. Meditation has become a lost art because we pray so much."

"The theme of my book is to stop, slow down, and bring divinity into food."

The book does this by providing a challa recipe for every Jewish month.

For example, the challa for this month of Sivan is shaped like a wheat sheaf and topped with Parmesan cheese to represent the dairy aspect of the festival.

She said: "Sivan was originally an agricultural festival. The theme of the month is the divine partnership between God and His people. God gives us the wheat. We finish the process by making the dough and baking it. Sivan is the start of the wheat harvest."

"The challa takes the shape of a wheat sheaf. When you bring the wheat sheaf-looking challa to your Shabbat table, it starts a conversation about the theme of the month."

"This is a way to engage the entire family in the Torah."

■ <http://silkroadvegetarian.com>

Bukharian Pilaf

PREPARATION time is 30 minutes plus 12 hours for soaking the beans and one hour for soaking the rice. **Cooking** time is two hours plus 90 minutes for the beans.

INGREDIENTS

- 200g dried red kidney beans
- 450g basmati rice
- 750 ml boiling water
- 2½ teaspoons sea salt
- 75g raisins
- 3 large onions, finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 10 large carrots, cut into thin matchsticks
- ¼ teaspoon ground cardamom
- 1 head garlic
- 160 ml oil
- 6 cardamom pods
- 750 ml water
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

METHOD

Wash the rice until the water runs clear. Drain and pour the rice into a large bowl with one teaspoon salt and pour boiling water over it. Mix well and let it soak for one hour. Drain and set aside.

In a small bowl, plump the raisins in warm water. In a large saucepan set over medium-high heat, heat four tablespoons of the oil. Sauté the onion, stirring, for seven minutes, or until softened. Then add the kidney beans, season with a teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon pepper and cook for five minutes, stirring occasionally. Pat down the mixture with the bottom of your spoon to form a fairly even layer.

Make another layer with the carrots and season with remaining salt and cardamom. Make sure not to combine the carrots with the onions. Spoon the rice over the carrots, distributing it evenly all over the top.

Bruse the cardamom pods: Place the pods on a flat surface, place the flat blade of a large chef's knife on top of them and press down on it with the heel of your hand to crush them lightly until the outer husk cracks. Poke some holes into the rice and place the bruised cardamom pods into the holes. Pour 750 ml water and remaining oil

over the rice in a circular motion. Drain the water from the raisins and season with cinnamon.

With a spoon, form a pocket in the rice around the side of the saucepan, and place the raisins into the pocket. In the centre of the saucepan, firmly push into the rice, the whole head of garlic.

Place a paper towel large enough to cover the pan on the surface of the rice. The ends will extend outside the pot. Cover tightly with a lid. Reduce the heat and simmer, covered, for two hours or until the rice is fully cooked. (The towel will absorb the steam, preventing the rice from getting too sticky). Check the rice periodically to make sure that the rice did not dry up. If the water has dried up during the cooking process and the rice is still not done, add 125ml water.

When the rice is done, use a skimmer to gently transfer each layer onto a serving dish. First, remove the garlic and set to the side of the platter. Then transfer the rice, then the carrots, and finally the beans. Scatter the raisins over the top for a sweet accent. Serves six.

Chickpea Curry

ADAPTED from a chicken curry dish introduced to Dahlia by her South African mother-in-law. A large population of Indian slaves were taken to Durban and influenced South African cuisine. The toppings of banana and coconut are typically South African.

INGREDIENTS

- ¾ cup dried chickpeas or 2 tins of chickpeas
- 2 tablespoons coconut oil
- 2 teaspoons mustard seeds
- 1 teaspoon turmeric powder
- 1 heaped teaspoon curry powder
- 2 tablespoons grated ginger
- 1 small chilli (seeds removed)
- 1 diced onion
- ½ teaspoon chilli powder
- 4 cloves crushed garlic
- 2 diced tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons mango or other chutney
- Sliced banana for topping (optional)
- Shredded coconut (optional)

METHOD

Soak the dried chickpeas overnight in a large bowl with plenty of cold water. The following day, drain and rinse. Place in a large saucepan and cover the chickpeas with cold water, an inch above them. Bring to boil and simmer, skimming off any foam, for about an hour or till tender. Drain, rinse and skin the chickpeas (optional).

Heat coconut oil in a frying pan over a medium flame, add mustard seed, turmeric, curry powder, ginger, chilli and chilli powder. Stir for two minutes. Add onions and garlic, stirring to stop onions browning. Cook until onions are translucent, about seven minutes. Add tomatoes and cook until they have liquified, about 10 minutes.

Add the cooked chickpeas and let simmer, covered for 30 minutes over a low heat. When cooked, add chutney. When ready to serve top with sliced bananas and shredded coconut with a side dish of basmati rice.

BORN: New York, 1969.

EDUCATED: American College, London; Tel Aviv University; New School for Social Research, New York; Naturopathic School of Medicine; Queens College, New York; Natural Gourmet Institute, New York.

WORK: Antique jeweller, naturopathic doctor, science teacher, cookery writer and teacher.

BOOK: *Silk Road Vegetarian — Vegan, Vegetarian and Gluten Free Recipes for the Mindful Cook*.

FAMILY: Parents Yehuda and Zena Abraham, husband Mervin, son Jonah.