

The B'nai Israel Temple Bake Sale

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The temple grounds bustle with activity. Customers crowd tables lined with pastries, cakes and strudels, gazing longingly at the magnificent spread of sweets. A few wait patiently to pick up goodies that they have purchased via the Internet. Each year, more and more people from the largely protestant city of Spartanburg, South Carolina flock to this Jewish temple to stock up on their famous fare. Held on the first Thursday in November, the B'nai Israel Temple's bake sale has become one of their largest fundraisers.

This tradition first began 30 years ago, when it was nearly impossible to find ethnic or kosher foods in Spartanburg. The fundraiser evolved when women in the temple were forced to make all their traditional Jewish foods from scratch. Realizing the unavailability of traditional Jewish foods in the area, the cooks decided that their dishes just might make for a hot commodity. People who are unfamiliar with Jewish fare would find it a tasty novelty, and those within the temple itself might welcome the chance to try someone else's cooking or to save themselves the trouble of preparing food themselves. Today, a variety of kosher and ethnic foods can be found in local Publix and Fresh Market grocery stores.

Despite this fact, the annual bake sale has continued to thrive. One of the main organizers, Dot Frank, notes, "We used to make between twenty and thirty cheesecakes for the bake sale. Now the average number per sale is one hundred or more."

Cheesecakes are only one of about a hundred different items offered for sale. Other popular offerings are Sabbath bread, kugels, strudels, and rugalachs. Ironically, the dessert most in demand, sour cream coffee cake, is not traditionally Jewish. One reason for this anomaly may be that in this community, the Jewish bake sale has become synonymous with Jewish identity to outsiders who once considered kosher foods to be representative of Judaism.

While all of the foods sold at the bake sale are still kosher, most families in the area have abandoned the strict dietary laws required to keep kosher in favor of the less-stringent "kosher-style" preparations of modern reformed Judaism. Thus, non-Jews have come to identify the Jewish community with their bake sale and its offerings rather than their dietary laws – even if the food offered there is not traditionally Jewish. Even the Jews themselves, however, seem to have assimilated Southern foods such as coffee cake into their collective identity, as the food is both prepared and purchased within the temple as well as by outsiders. Those that have lived in the South for a long time or have grown up here now identify with being both Southern and Jewish, and this is reflected in the foods that they prepare.

"Kosher-style" preparation involves a more relaxed, give-and-take approach to food preparation. Usually the cook will try to comply with the more basic dietary laws and use at least some official kosher product. For example, a cook might substitute parve margarine (made without dairy products), for butter when cooking. Everything sold at the bake sale is "kosher style," and cooks do not necessarily keep strictly kosher kitchens. Cooks also try to be sensitive to the needs of diabetic and lactose-intolerant customers as well by providing them with a variety of healthy alternatives.

About a month before the bake sale, some of the elder women of B'nai Israel arrange for all the cooks to meet at the temple to begin preparing for the event. The older women supervise the younger members of the group, which is known as the "Sisterhood." The older women, such as Dot Frank and Helen Price, pass on to the younger members recipes, memories and traditions as they cook. These "Mothers of Israel," as they have been nicknamed by a member of the congregation, have become pillars of their community, helping to hold together the congregation through their culinary traditions. Almost everything they sell can be frozen, so the women bake and then freeze their fares. This way, the women can take their time and carefully prepare the food well in advance. By preparing food together, the women of the Sisterhood bond as they share their lives with each other in conversation and work towards a common goal. All of the money raised by the bake sale is kept by the Sisterhood to use as they see fit.