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Is This Artichoke Kosher? Rome Defends a Classic Jewish Dish

By Jason Horowitz

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Artichokes on display outside a restaurant along Via Portico d'Ottavia, in the Jewish ghetto in Rome. Susan Wright for The New York Times

LADISPOLI, Italy — As women wearing artichoke body paint caressed artichoke sculptures shaped like an owl, a snowman and a cobra at this seaside town's 68th annual Festival of the Artichoke, Ada Di Porto stood inside a tent, banging a peeled artichoke bud against a white plastic plate.

"Look at this plate! Do you see anything? Any worms?" Ms. Di Porto, a retired teacher at a Roman-Jewish school, asked as she gave a lesson about the preparation, cleanliness and kosherness of the carciofo alla giudia, or Jewish-style artichoke, a dish that for centuries has been the symbol, specialty and cash crop of the 2,000-year-old Jewish community in Rome, about 30 miles southeast.

An artichoke enthusiast wearing artichoke body paint posed with an artichoke sculpture of a cobra at the recent Festival of the Artichoke in Ladispoli, Italy.
Jason Horowitz/The New York Times

“If you want,” she volunteered, “I will pound another 3,000 of them.”

Ms. Di Porto can be forgiven for getting worked up. On April 4, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported that Israel’s chief rabbinate had put the kibosh on the Roman delicacy after a packaged version was found to contain worms and other parasites — creatures considered trayf, or nonkosher. The fear was that because the artichoke is fried whole, it cannot be opened and properly cleaned, and so pests can penetrate the petals and infest its tender heart.

“It can’t be kosher,” the head of imports for Israel’s rabbinate, Yitzhak Arazi, told Haaretz. “It’s not our politics, this is Jewish religious law.”

The dictate, coming as it did during Passover, was a bitter herb to swallow for Rome’s Jews. The dish — basically a peeled artichoke, fried in oil and then refried in more oil — dates back to the 16th century, and a stroll down the restaurant row of Rome’s Jewish ghetto shows that it is still very much a main attraction.

Restaurants display raw artichokes on tables out front to draw in customers. Menus, ornate signs and prominently presented testimonials from fans like Anthony Bourdain (“This artichoke is terrific”) proclaim carciofo alla giudia excellence.

Jewish-style artichokes served at Nonna Betta in Rome’s Jewish ghetto.
Susan Wright for The New York Times

Inside his acclaimed restaurant in the ghetto, Nonna Betta, the artichoke aficionado Umberto Pavoncello shook his head over the controversy. He speculated that the Israeli rabbi was perhaps not as “illuminated” as some of Rome’s rabbis, and had had the bad luck of cutting into an infested, and clearly non-Roman, artichoke.

Using what he called “a Talmudic type of reasoning,” Mr. Pavoncello said that if Jews had been following the ancient kosher rule for centuries, it is unlikely that they would have suddenly made an exception for fried artichokes in the 16th century. Rabbis back then must have determined, he said, that Roman artichokes were impervious to worms, and thus edible.

Watching his waiters carry out plates of gleaming artichokes, Mr. Pavoncello observed that “kosher is a big business” and expressed appreciation that his community’s leadership had rallied for what the Rome daily newspaper Il Messaggero called “the artichoke war.”

Nonna Betta, like practically all the other restaurants on Via Portico d’Ottavia in the Jewish ghetto, specializes in artichokes. Susan Wright for The New York Times

Not all cities have stood strong. A Milan branch of the kosher restaurant chain Ba’Ghetto heeded the orders from Israel and pulled the artichoke. (“Their rabbi is more rigid,” a waiter at the branch in Rome’s ghetto said with a shrug.) But in the face of a stiff-necked Israeli rabbinate, the city’s Jews reasserted what they say is a basic principle of kosher law: that Jewish communities around the world can decide for themselves whether their fruits and vegetables are cleaned in a way that keeps them kosher.

“There is no pope,” Mr. Pavoncello said.

Some argued that the hard overlapping petals of their preferred mammole, romanesco and cimaroli artichokes seal out insect eggs and other invasive species. One local rabbi, Umberto Piperno, said in an interview that “Jewish Roman women know how to inspect the artichoke, and better than the rabbis.”

But in order to keep the artichokes clean and kosher the world over, Rabbi Piperno hopes to patent an ultrasound flying-bug repellent he is developing; it works, he said, like a veritable “Iron Dome” for artichokes.

Other Romans deferred to the higher authority of the city's chief rabbi, Riccardo Di Segni, who prepared the Jewish-style artichokes in a "Happy Passover" video message, and once said, "We are the people of the artichoke, not only the people of the Holocaust."

At the end of artichoke season, in mid-April, Rabbi Piperno sent Ms. Di Porto and other people of the artichoke to promote Jewish-style artichokes (and his ultrasound idea) in the heart of artichoke country.

In Ladispoli, which in the 1970s and '80s became a temporary harbor for thousands of Russian Jewish immigrants escaping persecution in the Soviet Union, Ms. Di Porto, eyeglasses hanging on a string around her neck, methodically prepared for a cooking demonstration.

Rabbi Umberto Piperno buying Roman-style artichokes, or carciofi romaneschi, in Rome.
Susan Wright for The New York Times

"It starts at 4 Italian time, not German time," Ms. Di Porto, 64, said when she was asked when things would actually get going. "Pass me another one," she said as she poured a fifth bottle of extra-virgin olive oil into a big pot on a hot plate.

After being expertly cleaned with a paring knife in a climbing spiral motion that removes all the peel and external petals ("You don't want to eat and spit, as they say in Rome," Mr. Pavoncello explained) the artichokes are submerged in hot oil for about 10 minutes. Drained, dried and sometimes salted and peppered, they

are, just before serving, refried in hotter oil that renders the outside crackling and the inside soft.

Standing between the prep table and a poster of “the violet artichoke of Sant’Erasmo,” Ms. Di Porto and Claudio Nardocci, the president of an association promoting local Italian foods, deftly peeled artichokes over a black garbage bag. Mr. Nardocci spoke of the volcanic activity 600,000 years ago that gave the local fields, and the artichokes that grew there, lots of iron.

“It’s for this that it assumes such colors — look at what a work of art it is,” he said, holding the artichoke up for appreciation like a fine wine. Ms. Di Porto instead emphasized the structural assets of the Roman artichoke; one reason women in the Jewish ghetto had used it for centuries, she said, was that “insects can’t get in because it’s entirely closed.”

“At the most, a little ladybug,” Mr. Nardocci added.

Ada Di Porto at her local produce market in Monteverde Vecchio, Rome. She was one of the “people of the artichoke” whom a rabbi dispatched to the artichoke festival to demonstrate how to clean and cook the vegetable. Susan Wright for The New York Times

Minutes later, he officially began the event with more remarks about artichoke history and geology, including the update that recent bad weather had increased iron levels, a fact he said he had verified by walking the fields with a magnet.

He introduced Rabbi Piperno, whose forehead appeared on a large screen via a terrible Skype connection, and who attempted to read a statement titled “The Dilemma of the Jewish-Style Artichoke.”

“Part of the Jewish community,” the rabbi began, before fading out. His voice returned to say “2,000 years,” then vanished again. Another awkward silence, then: “super kosher artichoke.”

“No one can understand a word,” Ms. Di Porto called out as she squeezed lemon juice on the stripped artichokes to keep them from turning black.

The hot plate under the oil stopped working, and Ms. Di Porto took a cigarette break outside the tent. There, artichoke enthusiasts read posters about the “Great Personalities” who had enjoyed past fairs (“Rossellini came with his lovers”) and about “The Artichoke Between Myth and Reality.” (Zeus, the poster explained, had punished Cynara for rejecting his advances by turning her into a “green artichoke with hints of violet like her eyes.”)

Ms. Di Porto’s husband, Amedeo Marino, fixed the hot plate and she went back into the tent, where she rinsed her hands with lemon juice. With two forks she fished the artichokes out of the oil to prepare them for another, hotter oil bath.

“This is the first Jewish-style artichoke to come out,” Mr. Nardocci announced dramatically. “Thus it is refried. The Jewish-style artichoke is refried!”

Making carciofi alla giudia, or Jewish-style artichokes, requires a lot of peeling.
Susan Wright for The New York Times

“Lengthens life,” Rabbi Piperno could be heard saying over Skype, then “value of our identity,” and then “the Jews.”

As the event ended, a woman handed out bouquets of long-stemmed artichokes to fair participants from around the country, who lined up like potbellied beauty pageant contestants. In the meantime, Ms. Di Porto started handing out the fried artichokes.

Anna Benedetti, 70, one of the dozen or so local women in the crowd, devoured her artichoke and shook her head at the mention of a foreign power's daring to mess with the jewel of Roman Jewish cuisine.

"Exceptional. Delicious. What tenderness," she said. "Good things should be eaten!"

Recipe: **Fried Artichokes**

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