

## Jewish Comfort Food is the Creative Canvas for the Annual Latke Festival

By CHRISTOPHER KOMPANEK | December 5, 2015



Christmas pageantry may be flooding the streets and storefronts this month, but Jewish comfort food is a part of the city's lifeblood year-round. From Katz's pastrami sandwiches to Russ and Daughters' fine herring, to be a New Yorker is to be at least a little Jewish.

One of the most iconic and comforting of these dishes is the potato pancake, or latke. "The simplicity of the latke itself leaves so much room for creative interpretation," explains Liz Neumark, creator of the Latke Festival, which will celebrate its seventh year at the Metropolitan Pavilion (125 West 18th Street) on Monday night.

Hosted by her catering company, Great Performances, chefs from the restaurants Bustan, Taboon, Veselka, and sixteen others will put their spin on the classic dish. Attendees should expect a lot more than the usual sour cream and applesauce accompaniments for these starchy treats, which will be served in the pavilion's expansive space.

Saul Bolton, the godfather of the Smith Street restaurant boom, is making a cassava latke with chana masala, coconut yogurt, and cilantro that he describes as "inspired by Brooklyn's Trinidadian community and cuisine with ingredients that are vibrant with spice, earthiness, tang, and herbal notes. It sings of Afro- and Indo-Caribbean

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influences and flavor.” The dish will represent his flagship namesake restaurant, Saul. His gastropub, the Vanderbilt, will also be represented with a yet-to-be-announced creation by its chef Mike Calderon.

Efraim Nahon of upscale “middleterranean” Taboon is using spaghetti squash in his latkes, topped with deviled egg yolk, dill pollen, and maitake mushroom. “The latke is such a traditional dish, but I am a lover of thinking outside the box,” Nahon enthuses.

A slightly less outside-the-box creation comes from Jacob Hadjigeorgis of Jacob’s Pickles, the Southern comfort food spot on the Upper West Side. He’s using sweet potato for the starchy base and topping it with Cajun and scallion crème fraîche, which he says is inspired by “Southern ingredients and the Hanukkah spirit.” He says the sweetness from the potato is balanced by the savory

creamy topping, with a hit of salmon roe to add a “delicious burst of savoriness.” It’ll be garnished with pickled mustard seeds “because we’re Jacob’s Pickles.”

Jimmy Carbone, who organizes some of the city’s most festive food and drink celebrations — like Pig Island and Battle of the Belgians — (which celebrates its sixth anniversary at Jimmy’s No. 43 today), calls the festival “the ultimate in NYC holiday celebration.” He’ll be on hand to serve up his own take on the classic.

For Neumark, a self-described “Hanukkah girl,” the event is a meaningful gathering for those who can’t make it home for the holidays. “Instead of having Mom making them latkes, they have nineteen New York City chefs doing the job.”