

# sfinj!

by melody amsel-arieli

it rhymes with fringe  
and tastes delicious



*Jacqueline Alon, left, makes sfinj to serve at festive events year round.*



**ON** a cold, drizzly Chanukah morning, our bus slowly winds its way toward the farthest reaches of Jerusalem. As it empties out, a couple of elderly women draw together for both warmth and warm conversation. After dwelling on their children and grandchildren, their talk turns to Chanukah goodies.

When I catch the word "sfinj," my ears perk up and I inch closer.

Sfinj (rhymes with fringe) are North African Jews' answer to Ashkenazi potato latkes and Israeli jelly doughnuts. Like the latter two treats that commemorate Chanukah's miracle, sfinj are fried in oil. Like jelly doughnuts, sfinj are leavened. But here all resemblance ends.

Whether coaxed into plump pillows or sporting decorative holes, sfinj never contain jelly. Moreover, whipped up flour, yeast, a bit of sugar, and a splash of water make sfinj far less sweet and lighter than other traditional Chanukah treats.

Although all sfinj are as light as air, recipes vary widely. "I fry my sfinj in extra-hot oil," announces one bus passenger, "to keep them extra-light." "Try making them with soda water instead of plain water," observes her neighbor dryly, "and they'll be even lighter." At this, a bevy of women sitting across the way join the fray. "In Algeria, we made ours with milk ..." "We Tunisians add orange juice ..." As each woman reveals her sfinj secrets, feelings run high. Despite the cold, the conversation has turned hot and heavy.

sfinj are the  
moroccan answer  
to israeli jelly  
donuts.

The word sfinj, so strange to Western ears, is Mugarbi, the Judeo-Arabic dialect still spoken among Moroccan Jews. Although its meaning, as well as its culinary origins, have been lost over time, these Moroccan-style doughnuts remain popular. Who eats sfinj? Anyone blessed to light Chanukah candles at the homes of North African family members, friends, or co-workers.

Jaqueline Alon, born in Casablanca, Morocco, learned the fine art of pastry making at her mother's knee. Although she has spent most of her life in Israel, she still devotes long hours creating traditional Moroccan sweets.

Her family and friends enjoy an ever-changing assortment of homemade almond macaroons, elaborate piped pastries, nutted crescents, honeyed whorls, and miniature marzipan morsels, along with anise, cinnamon, and date delights. "In Jewish-Moroccan homes, everything revolves around food," she says smiling. "And sfinj are everyone's favorite, hands down."

Sfinj are not just reserved for the Festival of Lights. Alon prepares them year round, for britot milah, b'nai mitvah, Moroccan pre-nuptial henna rituals, weddings, Mimouna festivities, even post-nuptial breakfasts. And anytime in between.

By the time I reach my destination, I am inspired. With Alon's recipe in hand, by tonight I'll be enjoying sfinj by Chanukah candlelight. ▲

**JAQUELINE'S SFINJ** – Pareve

- 1-1/2 envelopes "fast action" dried yeast
- 2 T sugar
- 4-5 C all-purpose flour
- 1 T salt
- 3 – 3-1/2 glasses water
- Oil for frying
- Granulated sugar, maple syrup, or honey (optional)

Combine yeast, sugar, flour, and salt in a large bowl. Mix well. Gradually add just enough water to make a soft dough that is easily gathered into a ball. Knead the dough for about 15 minutes, stopping while it is still sticky to the touch. Cover the bowl with a damp dish towel or plastic wrap. Place in a warm place for one to two hours, until dough doubles in size. Punch down. With water-moistened hands, form walnut-sized balls of dough.



Alternately, punch a hole in the center of each with your finger. Fold each ring of dough outwards, thus enlarging the holes and creating decorative "crowns."

In frying pan, heat oil to very high heat, then lower it slightly. Deep-fry the sfinj on both sides in small batches. When golden brown, remove with a slotted spoon and drain on absorbent paper. Serve immediately, either dusted with sugar, gilded with honey or maple syrup, or plain, as is.

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