» Book Review

# *Jew-ish: Reinvented Recipes from a Modern Mensch* by Jake Cohen

***Review by Michael Gordon***

**What most impresses me about this review copy of *Jew-ish* is that it's a real-live, physical book with a cover, pages and a spine. It's been years since I've opened a cookbook, let alone purchased one. I haven't even consulted one of the many I have on shelves in my kitchen.**

Yes, I'm an inveterate on-line recipe explorer. If I have an idea in mind for a meal, I'll let Google be my guide. Those daily emails from Food & Wine or *The New York Times* food app have also inspired me to make countless dishes over the years.

For an overly practical guy like me, virtual meal planning has endless benefits. I can copy and paste the ingredients on my iPhone's Notes app without having to type or scan a page to make a shopping list. If I print out the recipe, I can do so in large font so I can read it easily while I'm cooking.

But what's most important to me is that I can read other people's reviews of those recipes because they often have valuable tips – like how it might be preferable to roast the vegetables rather than sautéing them or how you should reduce the amount of salt. I find it reassuring to know that others have tried a recipe and found it to be good as written or better with tweaks.

Notwithstanding my personal preferences, hard cover cookbooks are selling like hotcakes. According to one

article, sales have increased by 15% over the past few years (apparently spurred on by the pandemic). I assume that many who buy an actual cookbook are the same folks who prefer to hold a newspaper in their hands instead of scrolling on their iPad. They like the pages flittering through their fingers as they work their way from appetizers to desserts.

They must also like the context cookbooks provide for why the authors created the recipes as they did and their general philosophy toward cooking. That's something hard for me to appreciate. I press the "jump to recipe" button immediately because I'm not terribly interested in the chef's personal experience. To be fair, that's the same reason I've never been a Facebook devotee – I just don't care a whole lot that my second cousin three times removed had a bad day or might have a migraine coming on. I'm afraid I don't have much patience for digital narcissism.

Aside from the tactile benefits and narrative flow of a cookbook, why would someone purchase one? For me, it would be that the cookbook addressed a topic or provided recipes I couldn't find online. The recipe collection would have to offer a twist on cooking that was unusual and proprietary.

And that brings us (finally) to *Jew-ish: Reinvented Recipes from a Modern Mensch* by Jake Cohen. He's a young celebrity chef who got his start in the publishing world when he worked for Saveur magazine. His schtick is to take popular dishes and add a Jewish twist to them – mainly by finding ways to substitute ingredients that are staples of Jewish cuisine.

He's very clever at it. For example, he has a recipe for croque monsieur that uses challah instead of white sandwich bread. You'll also find "Pastrami Biscuits and Gravy," "Date-Roasted Brussels Sprouts," "Crispy Chicken Thighs with Tzimmes," "Tiramatzu (Matzo Tiramisu)," "Challah Panzanella" and several offerings that feature apples and honey.

All the recipes are easy to follow and generally simple to make. He does a good job of anticipating questions the cook might have and offering alternative strategies/ingredients, for example parsnips or sweet potatoes for latkes. He has a real talent for writing the recipes in a way that doesn't leave much room for apprehension, guesswork or slavish adherence to the ingredients list.

What I most appreciated about this collection were the detailed descriptions of how to prepare recipes that can often seem daunting: challah (he has 16 photos illustrating each step in the braiding process), rugelach (9 photos and several variations from sweet to savory) and babka (also 9 photos and 4 versions from sweet to savory). For the record, I overcame my skittishness around braiding dough and made the "Chocolate-Tahini Babka" – with good result.

*Jew-ish* is beautifully illustrated and has a modern, youthful feel to it. It also introduced me to ingredients I either hadn't known about or just never got around to using – like date syrup (excellent on roasted Brussel sprouts) and sumac (perfect on roasted fish or just about anything else that could benefit from some lemony tanginess).

Just be mindful that many of the recipes fall in the" kosher style" (hence the "Jew-ish") arena, mixing milk and meat or using *treif*. However, they all give you options for making the dish strictly kosher – a nice acknowledgment that many of us have our own preferences and practices when we set about to make a recipe.

Will I now start ordering hardcover cookbooks? Probably not. I am too wedded to the convenience of digital recipe hunting. However, this cookbook did motivate me to review some of my Kindle cookbooks, which I also hadn't looked at in years. And *Jew-ish* is available in that format. There might be hope for me yet.