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Expect kosher controversy at Toronto conference on food and Judaism

Shoresh Food Conference at Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre in Toronto will explore food and Judaism and try to square the faith's ancient traditions with Jewish values



By: Michele Henry Food Reporter, Published on Wed Jan 23 2013

There's no question Andrea Most is a good Jew.

She observes Shabbat, attends synagogue and practices Tikun Olam, aiming to make the world a better place.

But one thing she does — or doesn't do — seems out of character. Most, like many Jews striving to live meaningful Jewish lives in the Diaspora, does not keep Kosher.

At least, not in the traditional sense.

“To me, there are other, more important Jewish values,” she says. “But the way I eat is very much rooted in my Jewish self. I just prioritize differently.”

That shift, from strict observance of the Kashruth laws to a more personal, values-based approach to eating, is one of the most polarizing issues in the Jewish community today, globally and locally.

Jews across North America are joining a call to action, unofficially dubbed The Jewish Food Movement, that's aimed at redefining the way they eat, drink and think about food.

This weekend, Jews, secular to orthodox, local rabbis, farmers and activists will converge on Toronto's

Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre at Bloor St. and Spadina Ave. for the second annual Shoresh Food Conference to discuss and debate how to square thousands of years of tradition with modern-day food ethics.

Discussions will cover a range of topics from the light — how and why honey is Kosher despite originating from an insect, a forbidden food, to the heavy. Kosher vs. organic meat, sustainable Jewish farming, and the ins and outs of Kosher certification will be debated. And why it's challenging for niche purveyors of some fresh food products, such as bread, cheese and fish, to obtain a “Hechsher” (certification as kosher).

“We're questioning the boundaries of Kosher,” says Risa Alyson Cooper, executive director of Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs. “Do we need to expand our definition? Can something be Kosher if it's grown with chemical pesticides? Do we need to re-evaluate the Kosher certification?”

Long ago, in the Shtetl, when Jews knew personally their butchers and bakers, there wasn't a worry about whether or not food was Kosher, Cooper says. But today, since cows are slaughtered and products packaged out of sight and mind, the Kosher certification has gained significance and, in many ways, has become synonymous with the entire concept of “keeping Kosher.”

That is irksome to some Jews who believe the “Hechsher” has become a commodity, bought and sold to leverage the interests of the certifying body, rather than a vehicle to uphold the spirit of Jewish traditions — health, animal welfare, proper working conditions, environmental sustainability.

The symbols, which include KOR, COR and OU, adorn all manner of packaged goods, such as granola bars, frozen spinach, Coke, even flour, which doesn't need a certification because, like produce, it is already pure, but often has one because companies that can afford it, request it. Recently, the kosher certifying body has extended its directives to some fresh fruits and vegetables, such as strawberries, ruling that they are not fit for Jewish consumption unless washed thoroughly with vegetable rinse to make sure any visible traces of insects are gone.

“The label kosher doesn't mean (the food item) is fair trade, ecological, chemical, anti-biotic and hormone-free,” says Michael Schechter, a Toronto dentist who has chosen to become vegan because sacrifice is, for him, the only way to align his Jewish self with his views on food.

“A bag of Lays chips is Kosher but I can't eat a fresh vegetable (prepared at a non Kosher) restaurant. These are issues. And they're hard. I grapple with these issues.”

Finding a caterer to prepare kosher meals with fresh, local ingredients for this weekend's conference was a headache, organizers say, so Schechter's wife Laurenn is doing the cooking. Her kitchen is kosher, but not certified Kosher. Some who strictly follow the current rules will not partake in the vegan meal, which includes endive and fennel salad and seven-layer dip made with cashew butter instead of cheese.

“It's a line we had to draw,” Cooper says. “It's not going to be kosher enough for some people in our community.”

Inclusion, eating together around the same table, is a big part of the spirit of Kashruth, says Richard Rabkin, spokesperson for COR, the trademark used by the Kashruth Council of Canada, the country's

largest certifying agency and a not-for-profit organization.

Kashruth laws not only connect modern day Jews to their ancestors who followed the same practices, but to the Jewish people of today who live in all corners of the globe.

“The Jew who comes from Argentina, say, he knows he can come and eat at my house,” Rabkin says, speaking to how gravitating away from the accepted Kosher rules can fragment the Jewish population.

“With all due respect, who's the one doing the fragmenting — who's the one who decided not to keep (kosher)?”

Jonathan Persaud Abrahams, who grew up in a strictly kosher home, has decided not to keep kosher because he believes Kashruth today goes against laws intended to keep people healthy before refrigeration and pasteurization. Persaud Abrahams, chef and director of operations at The Healthy Butcher, says kosher meat is exemplary of all that is backward about Kashruth.

Instead of grass fed and anti-biotic free, kosher cows are feedlot animals, he says. They are raised on corn and chicken-bone meal, injected with antibiotics and killed in vast, industrial abattoires that have only a perfunctory level of care for animal and worker conditions, if that, says Persaud Abrahams.

Kosher meat is inspected thoroughly by a mashgiach, a trained Kosher scrutineer, to eliminate animals with deformities, illness or other health issues that would have claimed their lives within a year — if not for being slaughtered. A stringent process, only 30 per cent of the cows pass muster.

Only five per cent of cows pass the test for glatt kosher meat, which takes kosher to another level, says Ronen Shnaider, owner of Burgy's Gold Burger Burger Bar, a glatt burger joint on Bathurst St. The meat at his shop was chosen from cows with completely smooth lungs, an even greater indicator of an animal's overall health and, to the general population, an indicator that the meat is high quality.

The kosher style of kill is seen as humane — one swift slash across the jugular by a trained “shochet.” The animal's blood is drained and the carcass packed in salt to remove any impurities. But critics say the certifying process, for regular kosher or glatt, does not take into account how the animal lived or how its handlers were treated.

Persaud Abrahams and Rabkin, who will speak at the conference, agree that because of the logistics and expense of certifying meat as Kosher — and the already high cost of Kosher meat (a kosher steak in Toronto often costs more than an organic steak), it is challenging for it to be organic as well. Currently, in Toronto, there is no source for sustainable, organic, kosher meat.

“Times have changed,” Persaud Abrahams says. “The rules have to change too.”

Most, 46, is certainly an advocate for change and lives her life, at least her gastronomic life, actively pushing for Jewish food rules to include what she believes are core values around Jewish eating: shmirat ha goof (health), environmental stewardship, proper treatment of animals, feeding the hungry, conserving — and not wasting — natural resources, and fair treatment of workers.

She, like others in the food movement, started reevaluating her culinary inclinations after the 2008 Agriprocessors scandal — the giant U.S. producer of kosher meat was in egregious violation of human rights and animal welfare laws.

“It really made me think,” says Most, a University of Toronto professor in the Department of English and Centre for Jewish Studies and a panelist at this weekend's conference, along with Rabkin.

“It made Jews across North America say ‘what do we mean by Kosher?’ They were upset by the response.”

It's been a long process of discovery for Most and it's taken time to develop her current schedule of eating: farmer's market fresh produce, grown without earth-raping pesticides; bread and cheese from small, local bakeries; groceries with ingredient lists that don't include chemicals, bought at local stores where she knows the employees by name. Most buys her meat from a farmer she knows through a Community Supported Agriculture program, so she is sure the animals, and those handling them, are treated well.

Rarely do any of those items bear the “Hechsher.”

“It's a choice,” she says. “But I believe in it very deeply.”