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Sephardic Leek Patties for Hanukkah

A traditional fried treat with a fascinating history.

BY SUSAN BAROCAS | DECEMBER 24, 2019

Remember when the Israelites left Egypt and were wandering in the desert, kvetching about their daily fare of [manna](#) and more manna? The Torah tells us one of the foods they wept for was leeks, a soft-spoken member of the onion family.

Leeks, native to the eastern Mediterranean, were on the tables of the Egyptians and later the Romans, who sowed them as they swept across Europe.

Fast forward a thousand years, and leeks once again play a leading role in Jewish history as a favorite of the Sephardim, the Jews of Spain, who came to Iberia around 250 BCE with the Romans. While leeks appeared in many [Sephardic dishes](#), Christians wouldn't touch them, thinking them, along with onions and garlic, to be low class. Sadly, leeks were so identified with the Sephardim that they became one of the foods that betrayed Jews during the Inquisition. As we know from Inquisition testimony, being caught cooking with leeks led to torture, imprisonment, and worse.

When the Sephardim left Spain, they took their [love of leeks](#) with them. A large number of Sephardim found a safe haven and expanded [leek repertoire](#) in the Ottoman Empire, centered around modern-day Turkey. One of the dishes the Sephardim adopted was the popular fried leek patties, called *keftes de prasa* in [Ladino](#). Fried in the requisite oil, *keftes de prasa* are a Sephardic favorite for Hanukkah.

Photo credit: Susan Barocas

Ingredients

- 6-8 leeks (about 2 lb)
- 1 large or 2 small russet potatoes (about 3/4 lb)
- 1 egg, beaten
- 3 Tbsp chopped fresh dill or 3 tsp dried
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1/4 tsp ground black pepper
- 1/2 cup crumbled feta (optional)
- 4-6 Tbsp bread crumbs or matzah meal (can be gluten free)
- vegetable oil, for frying — I prefer avocado but any neutral oil works
- lemon wedges, for serving

Directions

1. Prepare the leeks: Cut off the root end and dark green top (save them for stock), and split the remaining white and light-green part down the middle, removing the tough outer layers. Slice the leeks into 1/2-inch wide pieces. Place into a colander and rinse under cold running water, then set the colander into a large bowl filled with cool water. Use your hands to swish the leeks around in the water. Let the water settle a minute, then lift out the leeks. Empty the water, rinse the bowl, and repeat, washing the leeks until there is no dirt falling to the bottom of the bowl. Set aside to drain.
2. Peel the potato and cut into 1-inch pieces. Steam the leeks and potato in a metal colander or steamer basket for about 15 minutes, until they are soft.
3. In a large bowl, mash the potato and leeks with a fork until there are almost no lumps of potato. Let the mixture cool for a few minutes then add the eggs, dill, salt, pepper, and feta, if using. Add enough bread crumbs or matzah meal to hold the mixture together.

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4. Add a thin layer of oil to a large frying pan and heat on medium until shimmering. Drop heaping tablespoons of batter into the oil and flatten gently with a spatula until they're around 3 inches wide and about 1/4 inch thick. Fry until browned, then very gently flip to cook the other side. Press down lightly after flipping to make sure each patty is flat to the pan. Remove and drain on paper towels.
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5. Repeat with remaining mixture, adding more oil as needed.
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6. Serve warm with lemon wedges.

Note: The cooked patties can be frozen after cooling completely. To reheat frozen patties, allow them to defrost enough that they can lay flat on a baking sheet, then warm in a 325 degree F oven for about 15 minutes.

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