Amuse Bouche

Mandelbroit

By: Jillian Gould

Abstract: Using mandelbroit (aka "Jewish biscotti") as a springboard, this short personal history reflects on the life of the author's mother, in all her complexity.

Keywords: baked goods, baking, daughters, families, family narratives, Judaism, mothers, recipes

Mom had many regrets. From not going to university and pursuing a career, to not buying the house across the street on the ravine lot, to not marrying Joe Lebovic. Occasionally, she also would lament that she should have set up a business to sell her mandelbroit. In our circle of family and friends, she was known as a terrific baker: brownies and chocolate chip shortbread; banana cake and peach pie. Her mandelbroit, however, were legendary. Toasted almonds, coconut and dried cherries. Not too sweet, so nice with tea or coffee.

In our kitchen, the cookie jar was always full. *Mandel* translates from Yiddish as almond, and *broit* is bread. These biscuits also are known as mandel bread, mandelbrot, Jewish biscotti, or simply biscotti, but for us, they were always *mandelbroit*. Mandelbroit go into the oven as two logs (or "loaves"), which are cut into slices after the first bake. Mom's recipe has less flour than other versions I've seen, so the dough can be quite sticky, and it spreads; not really loaf-like. Nevertheless, the magic of heat changes all that, and sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar for the second bake, they come out toasty and crunchy and delicious.

My mother's parents, David and Rose (Kraft) Moran, were born in Eastern Europe—Bubby came from Kryzhopil, near Odessa, while Zaidy's town was closer to Poland. They came to Canada with their respective families as young teenagers, after the Russian Revolution in 1917. Both were employed in the garment industry in downtown Toronto: David was a tailor, and Rose worked in a factory. David and Rose had three children: Harry (b. 1927), Lil (b. 1930), and my mother (b. 1942). When my mother was born, Rose and David were approached by a neighbor who asked if they would name their baby after the neighbor's deceased relative. The request was in line with a Jewish naming custom to honor family members who had died. I imagine the neighbor and her husband either didn't have children, or they were not having more. Thankfully, my mother would say, Lil convinced her parents that Yetta was not a suitable name for her new little sister, and instead suggested Marilyn. Mom was forever grateful. Pretty and fun and open and carefree, the name Marilyn suited her. While she narrowly missed getting an "old world" moniker, I think her signature cookies, and the Yiddish name for them, kept her close to her parents' immigrant roots. Mandelbroit are *heimish* (homey) and unpretentious, just like she was.

When I think about my mother, I also think about her mother (my bubby), my aunts and cousins, and my sister – a chain of women who informed me: how I prepare for holidays, light Sabbath candles, set a Passover table, and also how I make mandelbroit.

Mom was all enthusiasm: parties and *simchas*[1], concerts, dance, and theatre. She loved being in new places, and experiencing life through many lenses. My dad said he was so impressed because she read the Russians. Also, because she was very beautiful. He said when he picked her up for their first outing—it was a blind date, Jerry Cooper set them up—that he saw Mom's picture on the mantel and thought: I hope that's her! It was, and as my dad told the story, it was love at first sight. My father was the only child of a fastidious father and a doting mother. Whenever he dated someone who wasn't Jewish, he'd lie about her name and tell his mother: "I'm going out with Rochelle Schwartzberg," even if her name was Peggy Wilson. But when he started to date my mother, he used her real name: Marilyn Moran. "That's not Jewish!" his mother yelled. "An Irish!" He insisted she was Jewish, but his mother didn't believe him. On their third date my parents went canoeing. When he told his mother, she raised her finger in triumph: "Aha!" she shrilled. "Jewish girls don't go in boats!"

My mother liked to do her own thing. She wore leather pants in the 1980s and insisted that a Pontiac Trans Am would be an acceptable car for our family of five. As the youngest, I had to sit on the bump in the middle—my older brother and sister on either side. I hated it, but for a few years anyway, it was how we rolled. My father would say: "Marilyn is a genius in the art of living."

Vilde chaye. Wild animal. Mom's hair in the morning was wild. Sometimes in the afternoon as well. Dad called her *vilde chaye* and said her father would say the same thing. Sometimes it seemed like Mom *was* a wild animal. She would yell and scream: "I'll break your neck!" "I'll break your head!" "I'll give you a lickin'!" I never got a licking, but her temper could rage. I pushed her buttons. And yet even though I remember these tempestuous moments, she had such warmth and love; she was my Mama Bird, laughing and talking on the phone with her many friends while she baked. The cord was pulled as far as it would go; she'd talk and laugh and listen and whisper. Always in the kitchen, always baking or cooking. Sometimes she baked in the middle of the night, or was it early in the morning? She baked while we were sleeping.

She was a wonderful baker and host—parties and people and food, so much food. Her cooking matched her baking skills: quiches and meatballs and brisket and chicken soup. Her kitchen, though, was always a mess. Papers everywhere: *The Toronto Star*, *The New Yorker*, grocery flyers, *The Bayview Post*, *The Canadian Jewish News*, bar mitzvah and wedding invitations, letters and bills long overdue. Recently my friend Hanna remarked on how she appreciates the practice of cleaning up as one cooks, "the way our mothers taught us," she said. But my mother never taught me that. I learned so much from watching her, but not how to clean up.

I think of her life and all the contradictions. The love we saw between our parents, as well as the way they fought and yelled. They were married for nearly fifty years, and it was all

there: deep love and vicious words, support and anger, exasperation and despair. The parties and friends and hosting, as well as a kitchen in chaos —every counter covered— shoving papers in bags before the guests arrived; moving the mess into the laundry room, so full you could barely shut the door. I think of a fridge with chopped liver and pastrami and pickles sharing shelf space with bacon and bologna. I recall screaming and slamming doors, and I recall love and hugs and my thoughtful, caring mother. When I was pregnant with my first child, I called my mom to share the ultrasound news. "It's so nice your first baby will be a girl," she said. "That way you know you'll always have a daughter." I think of those words now, as I reflect on our lives—so grateful for the value she placed on the mother-daughter relationship, and also what might be in store for me: the drama, the shouting, but most of all, the love.

Mom didn't make other cookies often: "Too much patchekerai" (too much fuss), she'd say. I also don't like to make cookies but I love to make mandelbroit. Now they are my signature cookie. Anyone who knew my mother knew her mandelbroit, and I wanted them to be my recipe as well.

I bring them to class and meetings and parties. I bring them on airplanes. I make them weekly. Each step of the recipe, there she is: my mother in all her complexity. I wonder, what did Mom think about when she made these biscuits? Did it mean something? Did baking Jewish connect her with her mother? Her Yiddish roots?

My recipe is different from hers. In my mother's version, chocolate chips were negotiable, but not in my house—chocolate chips are the only way my kids will eat them. As I think about this difference, I also think about change: family dynamics and relationships, families over time, lives lived and remembered, windows into mothers and mothering, life without a mother. Baking mandelbroit is something I do because it's a part of me. Some weeks they are stacked in the cookie jar and I'm the only one who eats them, other weeks they are happily devoured by family and friends. I continue to make them however, even if no one wants them. I make them to remember.

Here are the recipes. Hers and mine:

Marilyn Gould's Mandelbroit
(The original)

1 cup of vegetable oil or canola oil
3 eggs
1 cup of sugar (or a little less)
2 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
3/4 cup chopped almonds or walnuts
1 cup of coarsely crushed "Special K" cereal
1/4 cup of shredded coconut. (This amount can be adjusted to taste.)
1/2 cup of cranberries, dried cherries, or chocolate chips

1 teaspoon of vanilla extract
Cinnamon

Beat the eggs, add the sugar, then add alternately the dry ingredients with the oil. Add vanilla extract, coconut, almonds, dried fruit, and cereal. Using your hands, shape the mixture into two thick rolls and line them on a well-greased cookie sheet. Leave room because they spread. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes. Take it out of the oven and slice it diagonally—the slices are half an inch thick—and place on their sides, cut side up. Sprinkle cinnamon and put back in the oven for 15 minutes until they are a little golden. Cool and enjoy!

My version:
1 cup of vegetable or canola oil
3 eggs
1 cup of sugar (or a little less)
2 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
3/4 cup chopped almonds or walnuts (optional)
1 cup chocolate chips
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
cinnamon sugar (ratio ¼ cup sugar + 1 tablespoon cinnamon—will make plenty for next time)

Beat the eggs, add the sugar, then add alternately the dry ingredients with the oil. Add vanilla, almonds and chocolate chips. Using a spoon and a rubber spatula, shape the mixture into two thick rolls and line them on a cookie sheet with parchment paper. Leave room because they spread. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes. Take it out of the oven and slice it diagonally -- the slices are half an inch thick (maybe more) -- and place on their sides, cut side up. Sprinkle liberally with cinnamon sugar (about 1 tablespoon) and put back in the oven for 15 minutes until they are a little golden. Cool and enjoy!

Notes:

[1] (Yiddish) – joyous lifecycle events such as weddings or baby namings.

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