



click here to **Subscribe Now!**
to J. the Jewish news weekly of Northern California

contact us about us

search

the **jewish news weekly** of northern california
formerly the JEWISH BULLETIN of Northern California

[Printer Friendly](#)

[Email to A Friend](#)



sign up for the **newsletter**
print edition **subscriptions**
change of **address**

Friday January 11, 2008

Bon appétit: Synagogue dinner the hottest ticket in town

by **joe eskenazi**
staff writer

Jonathan Hirshon is a high-tech guy. But not when it comes to pastrami.

“The stuff they make today is a shanda. It’s terrible,” says Hirshon, 41, a communications manager for high-tech giants by day and a kitchen ninja by night.

Several years ago, Hirshon had the idea of hosting “Diaspora Dinners” featuring the foods of Jewish communities around the world to raise a little cash for San Jose’s Reform Temple Emanu-El, where he is a member of the synagogue’s board of directors and Brotherhood.

Hirshon’s first gastronomic offering — Spanish Sephardic cuisine — was swamped with more than 120 enthusiastic diners. Since then, his quarterly fundraising events have transformed the synagogue socials from small gatherings into keeping-up-with-the-Schwartzes events fervently attended by Silicon Valley gourmards, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Indeed, the events are such a coveted ticket that Hirshon had to enact an 80-person cap.

While temple social hall dinners conjure up memories of challahs the size of a Coup de Ville and the ubiquitous odor of coffee brewed during the Truman administration, Hirshon has taken things in a different direction. At the Jan. 19 Diaspora Dinner XIV, San Jose Mercury News food editor Carolyn Jung will attend, drawn in by Hirshon’s mania for authenticity.

Take his pastrami, for example, which he whipped up for



news
features
columns
letters
views
the arts
calendar
lifecycles
torah

supplements
classifieds
web links
candlelighting
personals

back issues
homepage

the “Lower East Side” dinner last year.

Most people think pastrami and brisket are similar. Not so, he says. Brisket is meant to be cut lean. “There’s no such thing as lean pastrami. That’s a travesty.”

Hirshon tracked down a century-old recipe that called for a rarely used cut of beef — “the navel,” sliced from the belly of the cow. Nothing else will do. He smothered it with spices, added a smidgeon of sodium nitrate for that unmistakable pink tinge and left it to cure for a week.

After that, he smoked the meat over oak and pecan wood and hung it from the ceiling for a day to develop a “pellicle,” the hardened, glossy surface.

But he still wasn’t done. He snipped it off the ceiling, steamed it and cut it into razor-thin slices. Oh, and by the way: He used Kobe beef.

A 92-year-old congregant who grew up in the Lower East Side declared it the best pastrami he ever had. A pound of leftover scraps sold for \$60.

Why spend weeks smoking, curing, chiseling and sweating? “Because we can,” Hirshon answers forcefully and almost instantaneously.

“Somebody has to do it,” he continued. “At some point, someone used to make it this way. This is a time when we reclaim our heritage and make it the way it should be made.”

At \$49 a head (\$68 if you want a couple glasses of wine matched to the course), the Diaspora Dinners have become fundraising manna for the synagogue. Each of the quarterly events rakes in about \$2,500; a special dinner celebrating the food of New Orleans Jews raised \$1,500 for victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Although \$68 could pay for a lot of Big Macs, Hirshon considers the Diaspora Dinner to be a deal. “There’s no way in hell you could get a menu like this at a restaurant. It’d be \$100-plus.”

For one thing, restaurants would have to pay the chefs. Not so at these events, which are put together by Hirshon and half a dozen other temple members, including Rabbi Dana Magat, who Hirshon describes as a “damn good” dessert chef. Dinners also include a well-researched Hirshon lecture on the Jewish history of communities in China, India, Mesopotamia and elsewhere.



Get hard-to-find
Kosher Items!





01/10/2008 21:58
Olmert, Bush hold final tête-à-tête

01/10/2008 21:35
Police arrest right-wing activist at Jerusalem demonstration

Featured Jobs
powered by
JewishCareers.com

[More Local Jobs](#) [Post Jobs](#) [Post Your Resume](#) [Search Jobs](#)

For Magat, the dinners have presented an opportunity to overcome his “fear of baking,” which in turn led to conquering his “fear of phyllo dough” for the upcoming North African event.

Becoming a dessert ace has been a mere trifle for the rabbi — and indeed, a trifle is the dish he’s most proud of. That dessert debuted at the “Jews of the Commonwealth” dinner.

Hirshon insists he confines his obsessiveness to cooking. But for the Jan. 19 North African dinner, he admits he has outdone himself.

One of the most sought-after seasonings in Mizrahi cooking is “ras el hanout,” which translates from Arabic as “top of the shelf.” Decent versions are usually blended from six spices. Good ones may contain 12. Exceptional versions may contain 24. Hirshon, bless him, has crafted a mixture of ras el hanout with no fewer than 36 ingredients — including six different varieties of peppercorns and iris root imported from Morocco.

“This is one thing I do obsess about,” he confirms. “People are experiencing cuisine they probably never had before — or will again.”

For more information about Diaspora Dinners, visit <http://lists.templestsanjose.org> or call (408) 292-0939.

Did you find this article interesting? [Subscribe to our FREE newsletter](#) and you'll be notified each week when "J." goes online. We'll tell you about the most important stories of the week and give you a link to each one.

This page contains a BETA version of Amazon contextual links. They are marked by the dashed underline. Your purchases support our site. At times they point to items which are not related to the actual link. Please alert us by [email](#) if you discover objectionable links.

[Copyright ©2007](#), San Francisco Jewish Community Publications Inc., dba J. the Jewish news weekly of Northern California. All rights reserved.

[Advertise](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#) | [News](#) | [Features](#) | [Columns](#) | [Letters](#) | [Views](#) | [The Arts](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Lifecycles](#) | [Torah](#) | [Supplements](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Web Links](#) | [Candlelighting](#) | [Personals](#) | [Back Issues](#) | [Home](#)