

TRADITION WITH A TWIST

Sarasota Chef Judi Gallagher brightens her Hanukkah feast with fresh, vibrant flavors.



Judi Gallagher knows a thing or two about dishing up a proper Hanukkah feast. She learned early about the richly flavored foods served each year during the Festival of Light. “My nana’s brisket and my mom’s latkes were the best ever,” she remembers—so good they helped inspire a lifelong passion for food. Judi eventually studied at the famed [Johnson & Wales University College of Culinary Arts](#), graduated with honors, and became host of her own televised cooking show.

Though she’s achieved success on-screen and as a consultant to renowned establishments such as Fleming’s steakhouses and Chef Roy Yamaguchi’s namesake restaurants, preparing meals for family and friends remains Judi’s favorite pastime. “During the holidays, cooking takes on even greater significance,” she says. “It does not matter where your beliefs lie; celebrating with the ones dear to you is what’s important.”

Today close friends have gathered for an intimate, updated Hanukkah dinner with Judi on Longboat Key, Florida. Tantalizing aromas waft through the garden and down to the water’s edge, where the group has pulled up chairs around an oval table. Like most holidays, Hanukkah comes with its own symbolic foods and recipes, such as potato pancakes and crunchy sesame candies. But the [pomegranate martinis](#) Judi has added to this menu are neither orthodox nor kosher. They’re just delicious. “The color is beautiful, and the juice pairs well with the orange-flavored vodka,” she explains. “It’s pure eye-candy, and the taste is just right.”

Another twist on tradition is the vibrant [vegetable latkes](#) (fried pancakes), which provide a tasty departure from familiar potato pancakes but come topped with customary smoked salmon. Judi came up with this variation to create visual interest and kick up the flavor. “The vegetables add colorful touches, and a few drops of hot sauce provide the zing factor,” she says. In a nod to history, the vegetable cakes are deep-fried in oil, “a reminder of the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days when the Maccabees purified and rededicated the holy Temple in Jerusalem,” Judi says.

Serving both beef (a tender [brisket](#) in a smooth-as-silk sauce) and poultry ([Cornish hens basted with a luscious Apricot-Chipotle Glaze](#)) might seem like another culinary surprise, but Judi attributes that choice to her own family. “I owe it to my mom,” she says. “She always had both on the menu in case some guests preferred one over the other. The poultry differed from one year to the next, but we always had brisket. It just would not be Hanukkah without it.”

[Pumpkin–Cream Cheese Napoleons](#) serve as the final delectable departure from tradition. “The goal was to come up with a dessert appropriate for this time of year,” Judi says. “They offer a light alternative to heavier sweets and correspond to the season.”

Unorthodox? Certainly. Scrumptious? Definitely. All of tonight’s guests can agree that Hanukkah has never tasted so good.

Judi’s Menu

[Tricolor Vegetable Latkes](#)

Served with Hanna Estate Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc

[Mesclun Greens with Dried Figs and Goat Cheese](#)

Served with Abadia San Campio Albariño

[Hungarian Brisket](#) and [Grilled Cornish Hens with Apricot-Chipotle Glaze](#)

Served with Campo Viejo Gran Reserva Rioja, Stoneleigh Pinot Noir, or Argyle Pinot Noir

[Pumpkin–Cream Cheese Napoleons](#)

Served with Quady Essensia Orange Muscat