

Kosher for Winners

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Photo: Anna Stockwell

The heat was on last Thursday at the fourth annual [Man-o-Manischewitz Cook-Off](#)—particularly once the rabbis lit the stoves. Sponsored by the country's largest kosher-foods company, the contest brought five finalists, out of more than 2,000 entrants, to New York City, where they vied to create what would be deemed the best dish made with one of Manischewitz's ready-to-serve broths. On the line were their reputations as accomplished home cooks, as well as a \$25,000 General Electric kitchen.

All of the dishes were required to be kosher, and that's where the rabbis came in. "Not just the ingredients but the process has to be kosher as well," said Rabbi Yonah Hayum, one of the officiates, "so an observant Jew has to be involved." Hence, the rabbis revved up the row of electric ranges in the ballroom of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) on Manhattan's Upper West Side, and the finalists got down to cooking. With only one hour to whip up what they hoped would be a winner, they were remarkably unflustered as cameras swarmed and curious onlookers nagged them with questions mid-chop and mid-dice.

The judges—a ruthless pack of culinary critics presided over by the august chef [Jacques Pépin](#) and including yours truly—were seated on our dais, forks aloft, poised to rate the food in four categories: taste, originality and creativity, appearance, and ease of preparation. When the hour was called, the contestants plated their dishes and, one by one, presented them to us.

First up was Harold Cohen, a septuagenarian from Hollywood, Florida, who despite being legally blind had recently completed six weeks of global travel. His dish, an Ethiopian chicken stew, displayed his worldliness. It was followed by Jamie Brown-Miller's rosemary duck cassoulet. Among the ingredients provided to her to cook it were several tomatoes of less than impeccable character. When asked if she was disappointed with East Coast produce, the fourth-generation Napa, California, resident responded, "Um, no comment."

Julie DeMatteo, a 20-year veteran of the cooking-contest circuit from Clementon, New Jersey, offered a dairyless, and thus kosher, Hungarian chicken spätzle. For interest, and to make up for the absence of sour cream, she had added Manischewitz dill mustard to the noodle dough. Rachele Lapidus served us creamy tarragon chicken. A mother of six from Lawrence, New York, Lapidus said her kids were bummed out once the contest's entry deadline had passed and she stopped using them as testers for her multiple submissions.

The final dish—and the winning one—was a [Mandarin dumpling soup](#), created by Sarah Freedman-Izquierdo of Miami, Florida (pictured at left). Keeping in mind that 25 percent of her score was in the "ease of preparation" category, Freedman-Izquierdo made her ground turkey–and–water chestnut dumplings so basic that they're easily adaptable to innovation. Her most novel ingredient was dry sherry, which the rabbis poured for her in order to render it kosher. Her wonton wrappers were folded over once into triangles, but if you want to try a more sophisticated look, follow our [dumpling-folding instructions](#). As for the broth, you can jazz that up, too, with cilantro, scallions, carrots, and whatever else goes well in an Asian chicken broth.

Freedman-Izquierdo seemed thrilled to have won, and for good reason, i.e., the prize. Earlier, while she was cooking her dish, I'd heard her confess, "I really need a new refrigerator."



Photos by Anna Stockwell