



Photograph: Nick Murway | Jason Vincent (in plaid) leads his chefs in a game of dreidel.

Jewish cooking inspires Nightwood chef Jason Vincent

Nightwood chef Jason Vincent leads a team of cooks in reinventing traditional Jewish foods.

Wednesday December 12 2012



Put six Jewish women in a room and ask them who makes the best brisket, and each one will claim her own. Ask good Jewish sons or daughters the same question, and they'll vouch for their matriarch's recipe—even if only to avoid the guilt trip. As a member of the tribe, I make no secret of the fact that I worship my grandma's cooking (I weep for gentiles who aren't blessed with a Jewish grandmother), and it was during a recent gushing session that I found a fellow enthusiast: Jason Vincent, the executive chef of [Nightwood](#).

As it turns out, the Nightwood kitchen staff includes five Jewish cooks, and they've been experimenting with dishes that showcase the pride (and sometimes the shame) of Jewish cooking. It started with the idea to add brisket to the menu around Rosh Hashanah. "When we decided we were going to try [brisket], everybody piped up with 'my mom does it this way,' my mom does it *this* way," Vincent says. Vincent's own family brisket was made the old-fashioned way: brown sugar, potatoes and carrots tossed in a Crock-Pot. But initially the staff used the family recipe of another cook, Aaron Kabot—a traditional method that calls for prunes, which disintegrate to add sweetness and body to the sauce.



Having mastered tradition, the Jews of Nightwood started experimenting. They roasted a brisket until it was juicy but chewy, then sliced it thin. Customer feedback was not exactly positive.

"We were trying to soften the blow, calling it 'Not Your Aunt Ruthie's Brisket' to make people understand that this wasn't going to be some brisket braised to shit," Vincent says. "We *do* know how to cook brisket. This was just a different way to do it." (To the shock of no one, it was Nightwood's older clientele that was most adamant about how brisket should be prepared.)

So onward the Jews trekked, and after some experimentation, they stumbled on the current iteration: the six-hour brisket. It starts by being rubbed with a tomato sauce. Then the brisket gets smoked for an hour—a period during which the tomato sauce gets caramelized. Finally, the brisket is set over steaming whey (leftover from Nightwood's housemade ricotta) for five hours to tenderize.

Would the Jews of Nightwood stop there? No. They've taken the weekly changing brunch menu as their canvas for additional Jewish experiments. Now, what they come up with is almost never kosher (Vincent was crowned the Prince of Porc at the 2012 Grand Cochon, after all). But the dishes are unmistakably Jewy. There's housemade matzo for the matzo-meal pancakes with "gelt butter" (melted Hanukkah chocolate coins mixed with butter); brisket latkes; and the very unkosher McMatzo Cubano: a breakfast sandwich with ham, pork, cheese, pickles and mustard wedged between matzo *brei*. "We start with an idea and find out what makes it interesting," Vincent says (though he admits no amount of experimentation could make Manischewitz palatable).

In typical Nightwood fashion, menu items are dependent on what comes in from the farm that week, but the brisket usually makes an appearance on Shabbat (Friday night) for \$22. Not coincidentally, that's the same night a (slightly better) version can be found at my grandma's house.



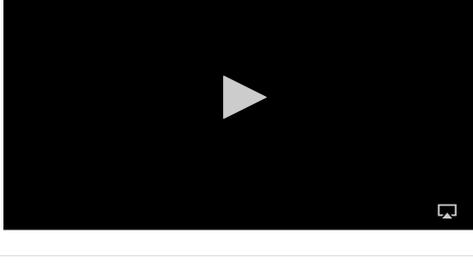
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