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Interview with TV Chef Joan Nathan

F&W talks to Joan Nathan, host of PBS's *Jewish Cooking in America with Joan Nathan*.

By **Melissa Denchak** | Updated March 31, 2015



What was your first big break on TV? How were you discovered?

"I started out doing a PBS documentary on Passover traditions [*Passover: Traditions of Freedom*]. I wasn't supposed to be on-air, but then when they put me on the show, the producer said, 'We're going to do a show with you.' It aired for years."

What are some of the best recipes you've made on-air, and why?

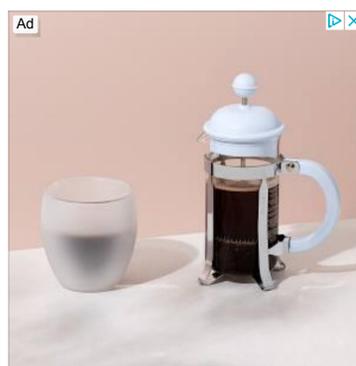
"There were a few that I really loved. One is a Sephardic brisket recipe: You make it a day in advance so that you can skim off of the fat and then cut it and reheat it, so it's much easier. Another one that I love is the sweet-and-sour pickled lox that you can make ahead. There was also a roast chicken stuffed with challah and peppers that was really good. One of the best recipes was a *palacsinta*, which is like a layered Hungarian blintze or crêpe. And there's an old, old Roman-Jewish recipe for artichokes where the leaves are spread apart and then deep-fried. It's delicious and crunchy."

Of all of the guests you had on *Jewish Cooking in America*, who would you say was your favorite?

"I think my favorite was 95-year-old Dora Falganik from Cleveland, Ohio, who had never been on TV before, was born in Russia, spoke English with a Yiddish accent and was an absolute natural. She got the timing of television, she was funny, she was instructive, and she was so good that she got on *Live with Regis & Kathie Lee* the next week. I knew her grandson, who told me about her. I had interviewed her over the phone about gefilte fish; she made gefilte fish for every Jewish holiday, and she came and made it for the show. She was very funny. I wasn't sure how she would be on television because of her accent, but I had my producer talk to her on the phone, and he said, 'Let's go with her.' And she came, and she was the star. Then when she went on *Live with Regis & Kathie Lee*, she wanted to make her Russian cheesecake, but they thought there were too many ingredients. She said, 'If you won't let me make it my way, I won't make it.' So, she made it her way. She just died this year at 101. I can tell you the highlight of her life was being on television. There was also another woman named Eva Young who was a Holocaust survivor. She was in five different camps. We got all of her survivor friends, who weren't so old, together in the Catskills, and she cooked for them. So that was a good one. And there was a woman in Vermont who I thought was pretty good, too. She's 97 and still cooking a lot."

Have there ever been any disasters or show that just went awry?

"Well, once we wanted to do the Sephardic community in Seattle. For some reason, Seattle was a bomb for us. One of the women who was cooking, we thought these were real old-time cooks, but she wasn't so old. She was from the Turkish- or Greek-Jewish community. She made these potato-cheese blintzes, and she had frozen or dehydrated potatoes. We couldn't use that. We couldn't use anything from the trip."



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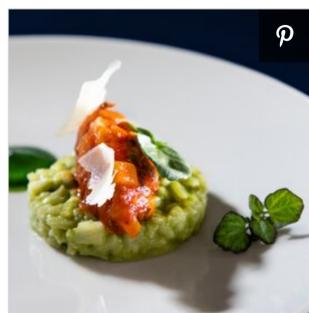


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