

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

Since the artichoke, *carciofo* in Italian, is the cornerstone of Roman Jewish cuisine, it seemed an appropriate accompaniment to this issue's "Jewish Rome: Europe's Oldest Community" (see pages 52-53).

According to Greek myth, the artichoke owes its existence to the philandering Zeus. During a visit to his brother Poseidon, Zeus spotted a gorgeous young girl, Cynara, bathing on a beach. He fell in love with her at first sight, seduced her, proclaimed her a goddess, and took her back with him to Mount Olympus. Cynara, however, was lonely there; she missed her mother very badly and soon kept sneaking back home. Zeus was so infuriated that he banished her and turned her into an artichoke, hence the name *Cynar* for the Italian artichoke-based after-dinner liqueur.

Botanically-speaking artichokes are members of the aster *Asteraceae* family (also known as *Compositae*), which includes cardoons or thistles, various chicories and tarragon, along with sunflowers, chrysanthemums, and chamomile.

Historically we know that the ancient Romans ate artichokes, likely a native of North Africa and Sicily, pickled in honey and vinegar, and seasoned with cumin. Pliny the Elder (23/24-79 AD, when he died during the eruption of Vesuvius) mentions two types of these edible thistles. One was thicker than the other and had a single stem and purple flowers, so it's probably the progenitor of the modern globe artichoke. According to Pliny, it had several beneficial medical effects: cures for baldness and indigestion, a breath freshener, an aphrodisiac, and a guarantee to give birth to boys.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the artichoke seemed to lose favor, until the Moors began growing and eating them in Spain and on the Spanish-ruled island of Sicily during the Middle Ages.

When the Jews were expelled from Spain during the Inquisition, they had made their way to Sicily bringing the artichoke with them. Exiled also from there in 1493 by the Inquisition, they came to Rome. At first the non-Jews in Sicily, southern Italy and Rome avoided eating the artichoke calling it "the Jewish vegetable." However, after Pope Paul IV established the ghetto and the Jews lacked the finances to be choosy, they began frying vegetables in boiling hot olive oil and *carciofi alla Giudia* were born and became the cornerstone of *Kascèr*, but soon of Roman cuisine in general. They're also known as *alla romana* if cooked in olive oil

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with garlic, parsley and mint, but not fried.

In fact, in 1570 Bartolomeo Scappi (1500-1577), private chef to Pope Pius V (r. 1566-72) published in Rome the first recipe for artichokes in his six-volume illustrated *Opera of the Culinary Arts*. He suggested stuffing them with a mixture of veal, ham, cheese, eggs, spices, garlic and herbs.

Another Roman artichoke event took place in April 1697 when Prince Borghese organized a grand reception in honor of Pope Innocent XII (r. 1691-1700) at which 3,400 artichokes were served.

Still another amusing artichoke anecdote concerns Angelo Valiani, a farmer from southern Tuscany, who at the end of the 19th century made a name for himself in Rome as "the master of the cold buffet" for his specialty *carciofini sott'olio* or peeled artichokes preserved in a jar of olive oil. His invention made him a wealthy man so, out of thanks, when his son was born, he wanted to name him "Carciofino." When the priest refused to baptize the baby with a non-Christian name, Valiani protested: "Father, if our Pope Leo XIII has the same name as a wild beast [a lion], I see no reason not to name my son after a harmless plant," so the priest agreed.

Artichokes still continue to plant controversies. During Passover 2018, Israel's chief rabbinate declared that artichokes prepared whole could not be considered *kascèr* since

small bugs might hide among their leaves. The ghetto's restaurateurs and Rome's Jewish home cooks were deeply insulted since they'd been preparing *carciofi alla giudia* for over 500 years with no problems. To end the controversy Rome's chief rabbi Riccardo Di Segni made of video of himself preparing this Roman delicacy while wishing holiday greetings to his community.

Today, although artichokes are cultivated in Egypt, Spain, France, Peru, Switzerland, Germany and Austria with a worldwide production of 1.33 million tons annually, more are cultivated in Italy (367,000 tons) than anywhere else in the world and more artichokes are eaten in Rome than in any other city. It's said that Catherine de Medici (1519-89) brought them from Florence to France when she arrived at age 14 to marry the future French king, Henry II. From France their popularity spread to Holland and England, and then to the United States where George and Martha Washington grew them at Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson at Monticello near Charlottesville. ○



The artichoke is the cornerstone of Roman Jewish cuisine

From left to right: A Giudia style artichoke fried in boiling olive oil; Pliny the Elder (23/24-79AD) author of *Naturalis historia*, a naturalistic treatise; Bartolomeo Scappi (1500-1577) private chef of Pope Pius V; Rabbi Di Segni of Rome; and Cynar, the Italian after-dinner liqueur made from artichokes (Wikipedia images)

