

Bumuelos: Hanukkah's Crunchy Fried Fritter of Flavor

By Susan Barocas

Although many of us avoid fried foods most of the time, things are different when Hanukkah comes around! For Sephardim that often means indulging in a dessert of deep-fried fritters called bumuelos that are drizzled with a honey-sugar syrup flavored with lemon, cinnamon, cloves and/or orange blossom water. Bumuelos actually go by several names including bimuelos, birmuelos, burmuelos, buñuelos and boñuelos, and are sometimes even called the Sephardic or Turkish beignet.

Bumuelos probably came to Spain in the eighth century with the Moors as they conquered all but the northern kingdoms in Iberia. Since Spain's Jews shared many culinary exchanges with the Arab Muslims, bumuelos became the perfect Hanukkah treat, symbolizing the miracle of the oil at the heart of the Hanukkah story.

In the centuries that the Jews were forced to leave Spain, they moved eastward across Europe, mostly to the Ottoman Empire, and westward across the ocean to the New World, bringing their foodways with them. Bumuelos became very popular throughout Ottoman Empire and still today in Turkey and throughout the Balkans. Conversos (converts) and Crypto (secret) Jews carried the treat to Mexico and Latin America. They show up in Mexican food as *sopapillas*, deep fried dough drizzled with honey, and also the quintessential Mexican winter holiday dish of golden, deep-fried balls of cheese-infused dough. Throughout Latin America, they are often called *biñuelos*, sometimes made with cheese and a flatter shape.

Nearly every cuisine and culture have some version of a deep fried, syrup-soaked or sugar-covered dough that Jews serve at Hanukkah. In India, they are *jalebi*, while in Morocco, *sfenj* are made by pulling each piece of dough into thin circles before frying, reminiscent of doughnuts. Syrian Jews make *zalabieh*, Persian Jews *zoolobiah* and for Iraqi Jews it's *zangoola*. Italian Jews serve anise-flavored *frittelle di Hanukkah* and in Greece, *lokoumades* are covered with powdered sugar. All are a good excuse to enjoy a sweet fried treat at least once a year at Hanukkah!

This recipe was given to me handwritten on a 3x5 notecard by a distant relative I had just met nearly 50 years ago. It's one of many, many versions online, in books and in people's personal recipe collections. With these bumuelos part of my Hanukkah celebration, I feel especially connected to my Sephardic heritage and family, known and unknown.

BUMUELOS

Makes about 3 dozen

Dough

4 1/2 teaspoons dry yeast (2 envelopes)
1 1/3 cups warm water
1 egg, well beaten
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon good neutral oil plus more for deep frying (avocado, safflower, peanut)
3 cups + 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour

Syrup

1 cup sugar
1/2 cup honey
1 cup water
1 teaspoon orange blossom water (optional)
1 stick cinnamon
5-10 cloves, to taste (optional)
1-2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice

Other serving options

Warm honey or maple syrup

Cinnamon-sugar mixture

Powdered sugar

To make the dough, in a medium mixing bowl, dissolve the yeast in 1/3 cup warm water (reserving the rest of water) and until the mixture starts to bubble, about 10 minutes. Stir in the beaten egg, salt and 1 tablespoon oil.

Put all the flour in a large mixing bowl. Add the liquid mixture all at once and stir (a wooden spoon is best), gradually adding only as much of the reserved water as needed to make a sticky, slightly loose dough. Cover the bowl with a clean towel and set aside in a warm place to rise for at least 1 hour or up to 2.

To make the syrup, stir all the ingredients except the lemon juice together in a saucepan over medium heat until the sugar dissolves, bring to a boil and keep at a lively simmer for about 15 minutes, then stir in the lemon juice and set aside. The syrup can be made while the dough rises or ahead of time and refrigerated for up to three weeks. Either way, warm the syrup before serving.

When the dough is ready, add 3 to 4 inches of oil to a heavy, deep 5- or 6-quart saucepan or a deep fryer. Heat the oil to 365 to 375 degrees F. Use a tablespoon to drop pieces of dough into the hot oil. Quickly dipping the tablespoon into a glass or bowl of oil before each scoop of dough will keep it from sticking to the spoon. The bumuelos puff up, so do not crowd too many at a time in the pan. Cook to a beautiful golden brown, about 2 minutes on the first side, then carefully flip over to the other side with tongs or chopsticks. When cooked golden brown on both sides, gently to remove each from the oil to drain on cooling racks set over a large baking sheet covered with paper towel or brown paper from a cut-up shopping bag.

Serve immediately, either drizzling with warm syrup or sprinkling with cinnamon-sugar mixture or powdered sugar. You can also pass the warm syrup for people to drizzle for themselves. If necessary, bumuelos can be kept warm for up to 1 hour in a 225-degree oven on cooling racks over a baking sheet.



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