



Ida Weinhouse's Fluden Forms

Presented by Harvey Kabaker

An inscription on the back of the frame declares:

These hand carved wooden forms were brought from Europe in 1900 by Ida Weinhouse (my paternal grandmother). They were used to make delicacies for Purim – called "Fluden."

– Pearl Weinhouse Kabaker

Fluden forms from Bessarabia –

How does this qualify as a genealogy exhibit?

In various forms, and by various names, the dessert confection called fluden has been around for a long time. But I believe that only in Bessarabia, since the 19th century, has fluden been made with a heavy dough, decorated with designs from carved wooden blocks pressed into the top layer before baking. My grandfather Harry Weinhouse was reluctant to talk about how he got to the United States, but he said he came from Yedinets (Edinet) in northern Bessarabia. With no contemporary documentation of their origins, I believe my great grandparents Ida and Morris Weinhouse are proven by this collection to have lived in Bessarabia.

What is fluden?

The simplest description of fluden is a layered pastry filled with a confection, such as boiled nuts and honey.

What kind of dough?

Nearly every recipe I could find starts with a typical pie crust dough, which is rolled thin, doubled over, rolled thin again, and so on, to produce a thin, flaky crust. Think filo dough. Think baklava. Think strudel. Starting with dough, add layers of filling and

dough in a round or square baking pan, and bake. Cut into pieces.

This kind of dough would not keep intricate designs from fluden forms. You would need something more like bread, or cookie dough, with some thickness and a soft texture.



Food writer Jayne Cohen is the only source I could find who mentions a thicker dough.

Fluden, a layered Ashkenazi pastry, sometimes made with thin, flaky layers (like strudel or filo), sometimes with a rich yeast dough, and sometimes with a sweet cookie dough, is served on various holidays. For Passover, the pastry is sometimes made of potato starch (for flaky layers), sometimes of matzoh meal (for thicker ones). Fillings vary according to the holiday as well as personal taste: cooks might use a sweet cheese on Shavuot, jams on Shabbat, apples and other fruit on Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot, even typical Purim hamantaschen fillings.

Joan Nathan offers a recipe for fig fluden with a typical pie crust bottom and top, and one layer of fig filling.

In *The Jewish Holiday Baker*, she writes:

A *fluden*, which comes from *fladni* or *fladen*, "flatcake" in German, is just that, a flat, double- or often multi-layered flaky pastry filled with poppy seeds, apples and raisins, or cheese. It was originally common to southern Germany and Alsace-Lorraine, later spreading east to Hungary, Romania, and other Eastern European countries. Often flavored with honey, it was eaten in the fall at Rosh Hashanah or Sukkot and is symbolic, like strudel, of an abundant yield.

Even the authoritative *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* offers an Ashkenazic fluden recipe featuring a somewhat richer dough, but rolled and rerolled to make a flaky pastry.

A Google search for fluden recipes yields about 2,850 results. I've reviewed enough of them to conclude that just four or five recipes are out there. Joan Nathan's is one; another is Gil Marks's. They get passed around, sometimes with credit to the original author but most often not. I found just one that uses cookie dough; it doesn't say anything about decorating the top.



What's the evidence for Bessarabia?

At the 2010 IAJGS conference in Los Angeles, Yefim Kogan convened a Bessarabia group meeting. One of his slides is reproduced at the left. I had an immediate flash of



recognition. These blocks belong to Ronni Otaki of California, who included the picture in a brief family history, now available on the SIG Internet site. They came down, daughter to daughter, from her great grandmother, who lived with Ronni's grandmother in Kaushany, Bessarabia, at the beginning of the 20th century. At that time the family owned a dairy shop and sold milk, cheese, butter and other items. The blocks were carved by Ronni's great-great grandfather; by my guesstimate, it would have been in the early- to mid-1800s. Ronni says there are

bits of dough in some of the grooves, though she believes the blocks were used most often to press designs into the surface of butter.

In the Yizkor book for Bender, Pinchas Bendersky wrote of his family life in the early 20th century, before he made Aliya in 1920.

On Purim eve all Jewish businesses closed early and craftsmen put down their tools. Jews rushed to synagogues to hear the reading of the Megillah. On the following day stores were closed at noon. Everyday attire was replaced by holiday clothes and preparations were begun for the Purim meal to be eaten at dusk. The housewives were excitedly busy preparing fluden (a concoction of nuts and honey), and Hammentashen for their family and for the Mishloah Manot sent to friends and family.

Fenia Kleiman, born in 1931 in Cernautsy (now Chernovtsy), Ukraine, told an interviewer for Centropa at age 71 that before she was born, her father once was put in charge of the fluden for a family wedding because when fluden was made for a celebration, it had to be watched by a master of ceremony. When her father and mother were growing up, Chernovtsy was in northwestern Bessarabia.

Centropa interviewed Melitta Seiler at age 74 in Brasov, Romania, in 2003. She also grew up in Chernovtsy. She recalled:

There were several sweets made on Purim; we cooked the traditional leika. We also did fluden. . . . It was somewhat similar to strudel; it was made up of dough that was spread very, very thin on tablecloths in the house, thin as cigarette paper, and left to dry.

Mendel Kreimer, 83 years old in 2204 when Centropa interviewed him, spoke of growing up in Chisinau (Kishinev) in the 1920s. On Purim my mother made hamentashen and fluden. For fluden she bought special patterned waffles and boiled nuts in honey for filling, he said.

A while back my uncle Norman Weinhouse spoke with some residents in a retirement home about their memories of fluden. Use the challah recipe, they told him.

A history of fluden

In his *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, Gil Marks says fluden originated in France. He even ventures back to the cradles of civilization:

Ancient Romans enjoyed a variety of savory and sweet curd cheese dishes cooked in dough casings—including tracta, a dough rolled out to make pastries. Both the Jerusalem Talmud and Babylonian Talmud mention *t rahkta* and *troknin* (tracta), although the Babylonians were unfamiliar with the exact nature of the dish. In Judea, which was under Roman domination, a pastry with an upper and lower crust of *tracta* became traditional Sabbath fare. The Talmud fails to mention the nature of the fillings. These outer dough layers came to represent the double portion or manna collected for the Sabbath, as well as the lower and upper layers of dew that protected the manna. The culinary practice of preparing covered pastries for the Sabbath was adopted by Italians, Sephardim, and later Franco-Germans, most notably in the Ashkenazic *pashtida* (meat-filled pies) and the favorite dessert of the early Ashkenazim, *fluden*, which originated among the Jews of France. . . .

The earliest record of *fluden* occurred in the writings of Rabbi Gershom ben Judah of Mainz (a city on the Rhine River) around the year 1000 CE. . . .

The original cheese version became a traditional Sabbath and Rosh Hashanah treat. Until the sixteenth century, Ashkenazim did not wait between eating meat and dairy, but merely cleared the table and rinsed out their mouths, so a cheese *fluden* could be served as dessert soon after a meat meal. . . .

With the destruction of the Franco-German Jewish communities—precipitated by the massacres in the wake of the Black Death (1348-1350) and the expulsion of the remaining Jews from France in 1394—the popularity of *fluden*, particularly cheese *uden*, declined. One reason for this change was [that] the eastern Ashkenazim began upholding the tradition of waiting six hours after eating meat before eating dairy, and by German Jews the custom of waiting three hours. . . .

Marks walks *fluden* through Galicia, Ukraine, Hungary and Romania, noting that it was primarily among Hungarians and Romanians that *fluden* continued to flourish. In early America *fluden* failed to take hold, Marks speculates, perhaps because it was replaced with the similar but easier apple pie.

. . . Around the mid-twentieth century, the dish began to make an appearance in America, reflecting a growing Hungarian presence. The *fluden* in the *Jewish Examiner Prize Kosher Recipe Book* (Brooklyn, 1937) consisted of eighteen thin pastry layers and was filled with raisins and ground walnuts.

Marks concludes his fluden discussion with a recipe for Ashkenazic layered cheese pastry (*kaese fluden*) with four layers of thin, flaky dough.