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Boston Jewish Food Conference brings entire food cycle to spiritual place

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Leora Mallach PHOTO: SARAH BERRY NEWTON CENTRE –

As we prepare to dip the green vegetable and chop the apples and nuts, it is an especially good time to take a moment to consider where this ancient bounty comes from and what it means in today's world. An excellent place to do that is the 2016 Boston Jewish Food Conference being held here on Sunday, April 3.

“This is the fifth annual event,” says Leora Mallach, director of Ganei Beantown, which is organizing the conference. “It started as a way for the Jewish community to come together and talk about issues of sustainable food in person, instead of just via a list serve.”

This year, farmers, chefs, restaurateurs and others involved and interested in the world of food will come together to taste, savor and discuss the many ingredients that make up Jewish food and Jewish culture, especially those related to Tikkun Olam and caring for our world and its people.

“This conference is really an amazing opportunity for community members to join together to geek out about food, sustainability and Judaism,” says Rachel Barbanel Fried, a former conference rosh mitbach (kitchen coordinator), who is serving as chairwoman of this year's event.

“I love this conference because I’m passionate about food and sustainability and how that impacts the way that we live,” she says. “This is my chance to spend a day celebrating those interests with others who feel and think similarly.”

The 2016 conference focuses on the food system, and how everyone plays a part in it. Participants can attend workshops to get up close and personal with the people who make the food business work. There will be an Israeli-style shuk (marketplace) and a silent auction that includes hands-on activities for farmers and foodies, as well as products from many of the conference’s presenters, partners and supporters.

Participants can discuss the importance of food choices on health and the environment, and consider the laws of kashrut with Rabbi Zalman Krems, kashrut administrator for KVH Kosher, which is also ensuring the event will be in keeping with Jewish dietary laws.

Other activities include assessing one’s “edible carbon footprint” with Rabbi Katy Allen, spiritual leader of Wayland’s Ma’yan Tikvah – A Wellspring of Hope, and Green Restaurant Association founder Michael Oshman.

“Making food choices that have as little impact as possible on the planet and that support workers is an important spiritual and religious practice,” Rabbi Allen observes.

Participants can also gauge the food needs of the community with Ashley Stanley, founder of the food rescue group Lovin’ Spoonfuls, and Bernice Behar, director of Family Table, the kosher food pantry run by Jewish Family and Children’s Service.

“I am always inspired when I have the chance to talk with other people in the Jewish community who are passionate about food justice,” Behar says, “as well as those who are working actively to make healthy food more accessible to everyone.” There will be food to eat at the conference, as well. Inna Khitrik, who runs Inna’s Kitchen here with her son Alex, will serve her legendary borscht.

“We are excited to be a part of this vibrant and evolving Jewish food movement,” Alex says. He became involved with the conference while volunteering with its organizers at the Jewish social justice hub, Moishe Kavod House. “It fits perfectly with our goal of continuing and evolving our culinary traditions while also supporting local agriculture,” he says.

Chef educator Loni Zeflon, who serves as community outreach coordinator for Future Chefs, a Boston-based program that prepares younger food enthusiasts for careers in the industry, will prepare the Middle Eastern lentil-and-rice staple, *mujadara*.

“The collaborative nature and overall enthusiasm of the [Boston Jewish Food Conference] team makes me feel like I am finding a Jewish home in this city,” Zeflon says. “I look forward to teaching and learning more at this event about ways to connect our kitchen to our spirituality.”

In addition to discussions and activities, there will be events and presentations for youth, including childcare for those who like to dig in the dirt; a vegetarian dinner, with vegan and

gluten-free options available; and an evening minyan at 7 p.m.

Organizers are asking visitors to bring donations of kosher soup or tomato sauce for Family Table.

“It has been a real pleasure to work with the [Beantown Jewish Gardens] staff,” Rabbi Krems says. “Without a doubt, all the participants will gain more insights regarding the food we eat, as well its impact on us as individuals and on the Jewish community.”

The 2016 Boston Jewish Food Conference will be held at Congregation Shaarei Tefillah, 35 Morseland Av., Newton on Sunday, April 3 from 12-7 p.m. For more information, visit beantownjewishgardens.org.

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