Hub's first Jewish food conference: gardening to kashering on menu

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Food historian Barbara Haber will tell the World War II story of Harvard faculty wives, immigrant Jewish women and Viennese pastry.

What's it like to be a Jewish farmer? How do ethics apply to eating? How does a chicken become kosher? And how did pastries help Jewish refugees from Europe make a new life in Cambridge?

The answers to those questions and many more can be found at the first Boston Jewish Food Conference, which will be held April 22 at Hebrew College in Newton.

Some 200 people, many of them young adults, are expected to attend, according to organizer Leora Mallach, co-founder of Ganei (Garden) Beantown, Beantown Jewish Gardens. "It's not just about what we eat, but how our community thinks about what the world eats," said Mallach, 38.

The conference's 18 workshops will cover such topics as baking challah with ancient grains, healthy Jewish eating, the spiritual aspects of gardening and why Jews should care about US agricultural policy.

Ben Harris, a former writer for Jewish Telegraph Agency, will speak on his new life as an organic farmer. Naftali Hanau, founder of Grow and Behold Foods, kosher meat purveyor, will demonstrate ritual slaughter of a chicken (attendees can help pluck the feathers).

Want to start a garden at your synagogue? Rabbi Aaron Fine of Temple Sinai of Marblehead, Rabbi Jeremy Morrison of Temple Israel of Boston and Tom Cheatham, a member of Temple Shalom of Salem, will talk about how they did it.

The panel Food Access in Greater Boston will look at efforts to bring fresh produce to urban neighborhoods. Jenny Silverman, who is helping launch the Dorchester Community Food Co-op in the neighborhood where she has lived for 31 years, noted that many residents don't live within walking distance of supermarkets and depend on corner stores. She said the co-op plans to set up shop in the area, directly selling to residents as well as supplying local stores and possibly health centers.

The co-op sponsored a 12- week winter market in Codman Square that drew 200-300 each week.

Silverman, 61, education director at the Workmen's Circle in Brookline, is the granddaughter of a Workmen's Circle member and labor organizer.

"Being a Jew means being involved in social justice, in supporting labor," she said. "It's not just help out other Jews; you help out the whole world. I care a lot about Jews not losing sight of that."

As to those pastries, food historian Barbara Haber will give a talk about the Window Shop, founded in 1939 by non-Jewish Harvard faculty wives to help Austrian and German Jewish refugees by giving them jobs and connecting them with social services. The shop sold many items made by refugees, including Vienesse pastries like Sachertorte, a cake with chocolate icing and apricot filling.

Refugee women – many of whom came from upper-class backgrounds – worked at the shop to support their families while their husbands got back on their feet,

"All of a sudden [these women] were rolling up their sleeves," said Haber, who describes the store in her book, "From Hardtack to Homefries: An Uncommon History of American Cooks and Meals."

The store opened at a time when Harvard still limited the number of Jews it would admit. But one of its founders, Alice Cope, knew the plight of European Jews firsthand. In the mid- '30s, Cope traveled with her husband, Oliver, to Germany, where he studied with a Jewish pathologist. They witnessed the Nazis smash the pathologist's lab and later send him to a concentration camp, Haber said.

The Window Shop, which would go on to employ members of other immigrant groups as well, closed in 1972.

Haber, who lives in Winchester, was curator of books at Harvard's Schlesinger Library for nearly 25 years. She will appear at the conference on the panel L'dor V'dor: Boston Jewish Food Through the Ages, joined by Steven Greenberg, executive director at the Vilna Shul

To register for the conference, visit beantownjewishgarden projects.wordpress.com.