

KITCHENWISE

It's All Kosher

A kitchen where cooking sustains body and spirit

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSH WAND

ON MY LAST VISIT TO MY sister-in-law Rebecca Ben-Gideon's house in Madison, Wisconsin, I had the chance to watch her make challah, a traditional Jewish bread, as she does every Friday in preparation for the Sabbath. Working at the counter of her bright, airy kitchen, she started with a ball of spongy dough that had been rising on her kitchen counter all morning and divided it into six long strands, which she quickly and expertly wove together to form an intricate loaf.

For the past eight years, ever since I met my husband, Josh Wand, his sister Rebecca and their mother, Barbara Wand, have been teaching me their favorite recipes. Much of Jewish observance revolves around food, and so in passing along the recipes they use for latkes at Hanukkah and for

Rebecca makes challah with her husband and son close at hand.

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honey cake at Rosh Hashanah, they have been sharing an integral aspect of their faith. In the process, they have also revealed something more basic about Jewish cooking: the art and science of keeping a kosher kitchen.

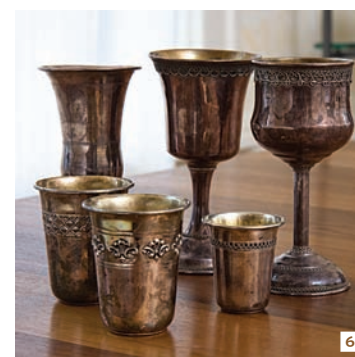
When Rebecca and her husband, Joshua Ben-Gideon, who are both rabbis in the Conservative branch of Judaism, moved with their three children to Madison earlier this year, they were confronted anew with figuring out how best to organize their kitchen to accommodate the laws of kashrut, the dietary regulations that observant Jews follow the world over. At their core, these ancient laws are fairly simple: meat and dairy may not be mixed at any time; meat must come from herbivorous fowl or from an animal that has cloven hooves and chews its cud, and it must be slaughtered and prepared properly; and fish may be eaten only if it has both fins and scales. In practice, however, these rules present some interesting challenges, because the plates, utensils, and cooking implements used for meat and dairy foods must be kept separate to prevent any transfer (even microscopic) of one kind of food to the other.

The kitchen of the Ben-Gideons' new home had not been designed with kosher cooking in mind, and they knew that they would not be able to remodel it right away, but its generous size appealed to them because they often have relatives (and their three children) helping them cook. "The most important thing was to find a house that would work for our family," Joshua explained to me. "We could have figured out how to work with almost any kitchen." Some elements of the existing design happened to meet their needs perfectly. Two wide, glass-fronted cabinets near the door to the dining room proved ideal for housing their two sets of dishes, a white set for meat meals and a blue-rimmed set for dairy meals. Felicitously, the large island at the opposite end of the kitchen also had cabinets and drawers on two sides—a convenient arrangement for keeping cookware separate. Additional cabinets near the sink provided space for the pots and pans used for pareve foods (those that are neither meat nor dairy, like vegetables). To make the kitchen easier to navigate, Rebecca and Joshua labeled the insides of cabinets and drawers with stickers that say "Meat" and "Dairy," so if a guest has to find the proper spoon to use for stirring milk into coffee, the labels will point the way.

Other problems could not be solved quite so easily. Unlike the kitchen in their last home, this one has only one dishwasher, so the couple decided to devote it exclusively to dairy dishes, which they use the most frequently, and to hand-wash everything else. Likewise, they don't have room for separate magnetic strips for holding meat and dairy knives, so both sets are kept in one knife block, and they use two different brands to distinguish them. As for the daily routines that are not dependent on the kitchen's design, they were simply carried over from their previous house—for instance, the use of different-colored dish towels and sponges for cleaning and drying meat and dairy items.

The thought and organization invested in this kitchen make it a remarkably efficient and relaxing work space. Whenever I've helped make a meal there, I've found that I can position myself in one part of the kitchen and have all the appropriate cooking tools within easy reach—something I've never been able to achieve in my own kitchen. On my most recent visit, while watching Rebecca form and bake the challah that she would later bless at the start of our meal, I was struck by another of the kitchen's features, one far more profound than how accessible the pots and pans are: the real reward of keeping a kosher kitchen is that it turns the preparing of food into an act of observance, a daily sacrament that makes the feeding of family a way of feeding the soul as well. 🍴

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1 From left, Jennifer Rubio (Rebecca's sister), Mitchell Wand (her father), Steve Rubio (Jennifer's husband), and Joshua eat in the dining room, just off the kitchen. Because Rebecca and Joshua are both rabbis and therefore often have guests for holiday meals, a large dining room is essential. The room's built-in shelving and sideboard also give them room to store the dishes that do not fit in the kitchen, like their serving bowls. **2** Rebecca's challah, ready for the oven. **3** On the stovetop, pans hold various elements of the dish kasha varnishkas, a family favorite. Pictured counterclockwise from bottom right are sautéed onions, kasha (buckwheat groats), bow-tie pasta, and the assembled dish. **4** Rebecca's daughter Lena and son, Noam, help their grandmother Barbara cook at the kitchen's island. The island was designed with ample space on either side, which allows the kids room to pull up step stools and join in. **5** As in many Jewish homes, Rebecca and Joshua (pictured) often serve multiple meat dishes at holiday meals. To accommodate that, Joshua purchased an outdoor smoker so that he can smoke brisket while he has a turkey roasting in the oven. **6** Rebecca and Joshua have a number of tableware pieces that are used only for certain holidays or ceremonies, including these silver cups, which are used for saying kiddush, the traditional blessing of the wine; two extra sets of dishes for Passover; and apple-shaped plates for serving apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah.