

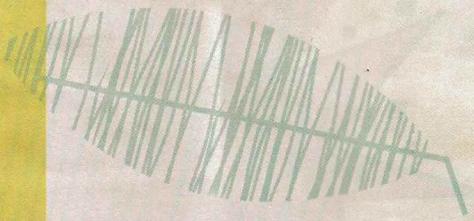
"Buy this book for any friend and they'll get it, they'll smile, and they'll learn why you honored them with it."
—Mike Roizen, MD, four-time #1 *New York Times* best-selling author and founder of RealAge.com

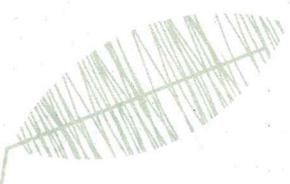
Braided

A Journey of a Thousand Challahs



Beth Ricanati, MD





Physician uncovers the peace and continuity behind challah baking

By ROCHELLE NEWMAN RUBINOFF

PHYSICIAN BETH RICANATI has been baking challah every Friday for the past decade. Rain or shine, home or away—she has been known to bring ingredients with her while visiting out of town family and friends—she is completely committed and devoted to this meaningful tradition.

Five years into it, she realized she was on a journey and both wanted and needed to tell her story.

And so came her beautifully told tale in *Braided, A Journey of a Thousand Challahs*, due out in September.

The fact that the release date is September 18, 2018, only sets to confirm that power of this entire experience for her, since the Hebrew numerical equivalent of *chai*—life—is the number 18.

How did it all begin?

“Ten years ago, I was an incredibly stretched-thin mom of three young children, working at the hospital, completely overwhelmed. A friend of mine called around the Jewish holidays and said, ‘you should bake challah.’ I laughed.” At the time she thought, “I don’t bake at all and I don’t bake challah. I can barely brush my teeth,” Ricanati said.

Long story short, she decided to give it a go, and bake her first challah.

“It was the most magical thing—there I was, my hands were in the dough. I had stopped for 20 minutes, and the world didn’t stop. I could take a break and make the dough. For me, that was transformative.”

The book reads in part like a food memoir and in part like a love letter to the act of challah baking. After reading it, it is hard not to gather your own ingredients and immediately start kneading.

“I love all of it,” Ricanati said. “I love the mise en place. I love setting out the ingredients. I think about the flour, the eggs, the yeast...”

Ricanati is very adamant that the quality of our food matters—a lot. “This process has made me more aware of that. And I try to carry that over into my medical practice.” She has devoted much of her medical career to women’s health and specifically to treating chronic disease through lifestyle and diet.

Eight years ago, when she moved from Cleveland to Los Angeles with her husband and children, she realized she really wanted to write, in addition to practice medicine, and has managed to do both successfully. Currently, she serves the underserved—in the area of adult internal medicine.

Frequently, Ricanati will hold challah bakes in her home, hosting small groups of women, introducing them to her passion for challah baking. “I love knowing that when I make challah on Fridays, women all over the world are also making challah and have been doing so for thousands of years,” Ricanati said. “I love the sense of community that engenders. I like feeling connected to others—something that is often difficult to feel in our fast-paced lives, and making challah allows me to feel connected.”

The theme of being able to slow down, take a step back, and bring the spirituality of Shabbat into our lives seems to resonate with many women. Locally, synagogues and other organizations provide challah-baking experiences all year long.

The L’Chaim Center, a vibrant Jewish life and learning center in Deerfield, has been running monthly challah-baking programs for people of diverse backgrounds, ages, and affiliations for several years.

“In my experience as an educator, challah baking is the portal to a more rich, meaningful Jewish identity. There’s just this association that Jewish people have with challah. It is a return to tradition, it’s an anchor—something that reminds us where we come from,” said Ali Begoun, co-educational director for the L’Chaim Center. “I really think that’s why it’s so powerful for Jewish women. They want to bring a sense of connection and warmth and family tradition back into their life. It’s a way to connect us to something meaningful and something uniquely Jewish.”

The Shabbat Project, which is an initiative to get the world’s

Jews to celebrate one Shabbat together, has run large, successful challah bakes locally since 2014. They, too, welcome Jews from all walks of life—traditional, secular, religious, young and old—to participate.

This year, they are partnering with JCCs around the country, including JCC Chicago. “Keeping It Together,” will take place on Thursday evening, Oct. 25, and will be held at five locations in the Chicago area. The baking initiative is expected to draw more than 2,000 women. ■

Early registration for Keeping it Together is suggested, as space is limited. For more information, visit theshabbatprojectchicago.org.

For more information about the L’Chaim Center, visit www.lchaimcenter.org.

Rochelle Newman Rubinoff is a freelance writer living in the northern suburbs of Chicago.

