Accidental Balabusta

Retirement offers new path

Newly discovered balabusta joins group of competent women.

SHELLEY CIVKIN

The definition of balabusta goes like this: 1) an impressively competent homemaker; 2) female head of household.

I recently saw balabusta used in a sentence: “She’s such a balabusta, she can make Shabbos for 20 in one afternoon.” Seriously? In which galaxy could anybody (never mind a balabusta) make any meal for 20 in one afternoon? I’m pretty sure that’s called hyperbole, or straight up bovine.

According to the Jewish Chronicle, “Balboosters [sic] are rather out of fashion these days, victims of feminism and women’s magazines. Still, at least according to family myth, all of our grandmothers were balaboosters — heroic homemakers who raised large numbers of children in strained circumstances and made real gefilte fish from a carp that swarm about in the bathtub.” Not my Jewish grandparents! Mine were neither spectacular cooks, nor did they have a barbath filled with fish.

I don’t buy the idea that balaboostas are out of fashion these days. I believe they’re just contemporary versions of the old-time balabustas. We hold down jobs, raise kids — well, not me personally, but millions of other modern balaboosters — and we’re active in our communities. And we just happen to bake, cook, do the laundry, clean the house and more. I, for one, am flattered to be called a balabusta.

Even an accidental one. I feel like it puts me squarely in the category with other competent Jewish women who juggie multiple tasks and are the glue that holds their families together.

So, how did I come to be crowned “the Accidental Balabusta”? It was the day I made a textbook perfect, uber-yummy pot roast. My husband Harvey took one bite and proclaimed me the Accidental Balabusta. Just like that!

To substantiate his declaration, a week later I baked a batch of baklava and rosemary challah buns (recipe from Rising: The Book of Challah by Rochie Pinson). They were exquisite. Or so I’m told. For the record, there was no bread machine or KitchenAid dough hook within 100 metres of my tiny galley kitchen. Just me, a 13-line stainless steel bowl and enough flour to coat a bison.

For an encore, I made a hand-made, painted challah cover. Next thing you know, I’ll be herding sheep. Anyway, that’s how the new moniker stuck.

Regarding the definition of balabusta, I might qualify as the “female head of household,” depending on whom you ask. As for being a remarkably skilled housekeeper, well, the jury’s still out on that one.

It was an uber-yummy pot roast that spawned the Accidental Balabusta.

Way out. Truth to tell, most people I know would unequivocally classify me as the anti-balabusta. “That Shelley Civkin is a real balabusta!” said nobody. Ever.

But it’s not for lack of trying. OK, for about 50 years, it was, I simply wasn’t interested in cooking and cleaning. I was single and worked full-time. Since I only got married at age 53, the chicken-and-mushroom soup that spawned the Accidental Balabusta? You gotta be kidding! For me, it was soup. The boys’ assignment — wait for it — was to read. Or eat chips. When guests come over, I pull out all the stops, OK, I pull out the fancy hand towels. Actually, Harvey pulls them out. I watch.

The last time I did anything domestic was in Grade 5 Hebrew school, when our teacher had all the girls embroider kippots for the boys. The boys’ assignment — wait for it — was to wear the kippot. No sexism there. Of course, it was the early 1960s. So, you’re welcome, boys.

But back to the balabusta thing, it turns out that I actually enjoy cooking and baking. Who knew? With nothing but free time on my hands now (except for my volunteer activities), I can kick back, put my hair up and tie on an apron, that is.

Stay tuned for more Accidental Balabusta.

Shelley Civkin, aka the Accidental Balabusta, is a happily retired librarian and communications officer. For 17 years, she wrote a weekly book review column for the Richmond Review, and currently writes a bi-weekly column about retirement for the Richmond News.