PASSEOVER COOKING GOES NUTS

During World War II, Planters oil company tapped into the popularity of peanut oil by issuing a special Yiddish Passover recipe booklet. Stefanie Halpern reports that the booklet presents the oil as a better alternative to other cooking fats for use on Passover, such as shortening and schmaltz (chicken fat), and advertises it as a "quality oil", which has no taste or odour, does not absorb other food odours, and makes food "nicer in appearance and better in taste".

The distribution of the booklet coincided with the increased usage of peanut oil during World War II in America, when commonly-used oils were rationed. Peanut production reached more than 750,000 tonnes in 1941. By 1943, it had increased to 1.1 million tonnes.

The Planters booklet was created to appeal to the more observant contingent of the American Jewish population. Forty-Six Ways explains that "rabbis all over the country use [Hi-Hat Peanut Oil] in their homes for Passover and the whole year round". It informs the home cook that the hechsher (label deeming a food kosher) on Hi-Hat Peanut Oil was received from Rabbi Hersch Kohn of New York, who also certified products for manufacturers such as Maxwell House from the 1930s to 1960s.

For the contemporary reader, it may seem strange that peanut oil, widely considered by rabbinical authorities today to be derived from kitniot (legumes, seeds, rice, corn, and other grains which are traditionally not eaten on Passover), would have been so popular amongst eastern-European Jewish immigrant households. As scholar Zev Eshel explains, at the time Planters printed their booklet, peanuts were not necessarily understood by these Jews to be kitniot due to their scarcity in the 'old country'. While Passover tradition dictated that they shouldn’t be eaten they were never forbidden under dietary laws. In the postwar years, as Orthodox rabbinical authorities began to take a more stringent approach to the interpretation of what should be considered kitniot, the use of Planters Hi-Hat Oil steeply declined.

In 2015, the Rabbinical Assembly, the governing body for the Conservative movement, issued a ruling that was widely accepted by Masorti and Progressive Jews around the world, including in the UK. This permitted the use of kitniot and kitniot-derived oils on Passover. If you are one of the many who consume kitniot on Passover, why not try a recipe from Forty-Six Ways this year?

Stefanie Halpern is VIVO archive director. vivo.org