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Cooking up community at Hillel at Virginia Tech

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Chefs Jeff Kurtz (left) and Catherine Towle (middle) cook the weekly Shabbat, or Jewish Sabbath meal, at Hillel at Virginia Tech. The traditional meal is prepared according to Jewish dietary laws, which prohibit the cooking or serving of dairy with meat, among other rules.

MATT GENTRY | The Roanoke Times

BLACKSBURG — On a recent Friday afternoon, Catherine Towle was busy making big pans of ratatouille for a crowd of 90.

Behind her a commercial oven hummed, ready to cook the vegetable casserole for Hillel at Virginia Tech's weekly Shabbat, or Sabbath dinner. Beneath her feet, the clean blue floor shined. Across the room where the color changed to red, seasoned chicken quarters roasted in a second set of ovens.

It takes two full commercial kitchens — one for dairy and another for meat — to prepare the traditional Shabbat meal. Hillel has the only such facility in the New River Valley, and on Friday evenings when Tech classes are in session, the center provides a place for Jewish students and curious Gentiles to come together.

“It’s this big thing, getting to eat Kosher food with literally all of my friends,” senior biology major Leor Clark said.

“We’re blessed to have that because, honestly, in the South there aren’t many places to eat Kosher. And there aren’t that many Hillels that can provide Kosher food, so we’re really, really, really lucky.”

Hillel at Virginia Tech is a non-profit student group affiliated with Hillel International, a Jewish campus life organization with more than 550 chapters worldwide. Hillel estimates that about 2,000 Jewish students attend Virginia Tech and about half of them have some level of involvement with the organization.

Hillel's Kosher kitchen added about \$100,000 to the overall \$2.5 million cost of its off-campus headquarters — officially called the Malcolm Rosenberg Hillel Center — that opened in 2013. But Hillel Executive Director Sue Kurtz said it was worth it to establish a key part of Jewish culture in the area.

Unique to Judaism

Even for an experienced non-Jewish chef like Towle, Kosher cooking takes practice.

“You really have to be careful what you're doing,” she said. “And it's things you wouldn't think of, like butter.”

On this night, no butter was allowed, not even in the classic French ratatouille. It was because of the chicken. For those who keep Kosher, i.e. follow traditional Jewish dietary laws, meat and dairy can't be cooked or eaten together. Pork and shellfish also are prohibited.

Some aspects of the tradition require strict attention. Student volunteers setting the dining room tables were careful to use only square plates designated for meat meals. A second set of round dishes reserved for dairy meals sat unused in the storage room, along with dairy-only serving bowls and platters.

While it requires effort, Kosher dining serves as a religious and cultural touchstone for Jewish students.

“It's something unique only Judaism has, and it's a way to constantly think about being Jewish in your everyday life,” chemical engineering senior Andy Brenner said.

For others, it recalls familiar comforts not available elsewhere.

“Eating a Kosher meal on a Friday night really feels like home to me,” said Jenny Judenberg, a junior electrical engineering major from Georgia.

Growing up, “my family would sit down every Friday night and eat the Shabbat meal,” Clark said. “So, coming to college and having that consistent meal with my second family ... it kind of brings a little bit of home to Virginia Tech with me.”

Hillel also offers the only reliably Kosher meal some may have all week.

Supply and demand

While Tech's on-campus dining program offers occasional special meals for Jewish students, those who keep Kosher say their on-campus choices are limited. During Passover, when observant Jews must avoid anything made with leavening, it is even more challenging.

"They had matzo ball soup in one dining hall, but I was never at that dining hall," Jenny Judenberg said. "I basically walked around with a box of matzo [unleavened bread] for a week."

Students acknowledge that offering Kosher dining options isn't easy for the university. While Tech ranks among the top 60 U.S. colleges for its Jewish population as tracked by Hillel International, Jews make up less than 6% of the overall 34,000-member student body.

"They're trying," Clark said. "It's really hard when there's a low demand."

Tech does offer some prepackaged Kosher items in some on-campus locations, Dining Services Director Ted Faulkner said. But without a certified Kosher kitchen or food production site, the selection is small.

Over the past year, dining services has been in discussions with the Jewish Student Union and a local rabbi about ways Tech might expand its offerings, Faulkner said.



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No concrete plans have emerged yet, but Faulkner said university leaders remain committed to being more inclusive.

“We have to do this together. We certainly don’t want to jump out front and do it on our own. We need student input,” Dean of Students Byron Hughes said. “We welcome the dialogue with our students and the partnership and the relationship to be able to advance priorities like these.”

Keeping Kosher can also be complicated because there’s not just one way of doing it.

Including everyone

Brenner, who sometimes leads Shabbat religious services at Hillel, said he went vegetarian to keep religiously Kosher on campus. But others take a more flexible approach.

Doni Kaye teaches Jewish enrichment courses at Hillel. Although he grew up strictly Kosher, Kaye said, he will sometimes eat non-Kosher foods at dinner parties and restaurants.

“It doesn’t detract from the meaning for me,” he said. “But it can be different for other people.”

Although she too grew up strictly Kosher, today Clark sometimes mixes dairy and meat because “they taste very good together,” she said. “Kosher is really just a choice that people make. Some communities are strictly Kosher, and sometimes it’s not a choice. But for other people, it is a choice.”

Clark said she still avoids pork and shrimp, though.

Jeff Kurtz grew up on New York’s Long Island eating that area’s plentiful local shellfish. He eventually adopted a Kosher diet at the urging of his wife of 40 years, Hillel Executive Director Sue Kurtz.

“But I still miss my cheeseburgers and my shellfish,” Jeff said.

Six years ago, Sue convinced her “total foodie” husband to run Hillel’s strictly Kosher kitchen. It’s a big commitment. Sue said the couple drives to Maryland once a month to buy certified Kosher meats, and Jeff said he ensures that everything in the kitchen down to the spices is certified Kosher.

While challenging, that attention to detail ensures that everyone, no matter how they personally keep Kosher, can eat the Shabbat meal together.

“We try to be inclusive here,” Kaye said. “Our goal is to make people feel included.”

Building community

The meals also are meant to strengthen ties between Hillel and the wider community.

“We always have students who do not identify as Jewish at our weekly dinners,” said Caleb Reed, Hillel development associate. “We also actively invite people from outside our community to join us in one of Judaism’s most beautiful traditions — Shabbat.”

Those visitors not only get a free meal, they also learn about Judaism.

“I think it does shed a positive light on how diverse Jewish people are. People have this one image of what Jews are — like, Orthodox and they wear black hats, and they wear black clothing and long skirts,” Clark said. “But that’s not everyone, and you can learn to meet everybody and get to know the different perspectives on Judaism, the different takes on it.”

“The wider community is always invited,” Kaye said. And that allows Hillel to “initiate connection and civil discourse.”

Building strong community ties is one strategy to cope with rising anti-Jewish bias. The New York City-based Anti-Defamation League has surveyed U.S. attitudes toward Jews since 1964. In 2011, just over half of respondents said they agreed with at least one out of 11 common stereotypes about Jews, such as “Jews are more loyal to Israel than to America.” In 2019, that percentage rose to 61.

And nationally, hate crime incidents directed at American Jews have increased since 2014, according to FBI figures. That year, 650 anti-Jewish incidents were reported. By 2017, the number had surged to 938, before dropping slightly to 835 last year. Some have been deadly.

But bringing people together can curtail fear and misunderstanding.

“It’s hard to hate someone once you get to know them, especially over a great meal,” Reed said. “The more we build community, the more people who may join us in the fight against anti-Semitism.”

For more information, visit <https://www.hillelatvirginiatech.org>.

A Kosher primer

Kosher dietary laws, called Kashrut in Hebrew, are based in the Holy Torah, and according to some sources were transmitted by God to Moses at Mount Sinai.

According to the law, only fish with fins and scales may be eaten, which precludes invertebrates like shellfish. Similarly, all insects except grasshoppers and all amphibians are banned for use as food.

Only land mammals that chew their cud and have cloven hooves may be eaten. Pigs, which don't chew cud are considered unfit as food, and sea mammals such as whale are also prohibited. Only domesticated fowl, such as chicken, goose, turkey and duck may be eaten.

The ban on eating dairy and meat together is thought to come from verses in Exodus and Deuteronomy, which prohibit cooking a "kid in its mother's milk."

Kosher traditions have been debated since at least Biblical times, and traditions vary around the world. Fruits and vegetables are generally considered Kosher, except for those produced in Israel. There fruits and vegetables may only be grown under Rabbinical supervision and are subject to tithes.

SOURCES: "Teshuvah: A Guide for the Newly Observant Jew" by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz; Harvard University; and Chabad.org.

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