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## 'Cravings' nourishes both body and soul

By Jules Becker



Belle Linda Halpern believes "that how we eat determines what we are."

The veteran Boston-born Jewish performer - "N (Bonaparte)" at the Pilgrim Theatre (2006); "Esther" at the Jewish Theatre of New England (1989) - has taken to the stage in Cambridge to prove her point. Halpern prepares traditional food while singing about family heritage and individual identity in "Cravings: Songs of Hunger and Satisfaction," the inaugural offering of Central Square Theatre's Cabaret Series.

In an interview, Halpern traces the show back to her mother's mother, Ida R. Goldstein, in whose memory she has dedicated "Cravings." Halpern called her grandmother, who lived in Orange, N.J., "an incredible force in my life" and "a real balabusta" (accomplished housewife and handywoman). In Halpern's family, the cooking gene skipped a generation, so Goldstein became her kitchen mentor. "My mother's rebellion was not to cook," Halpern said. "My rebellion was to cook."

At age 14, she began her culinary adventures with Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking." Two years later, Halpern launched her own catering company, Sing for Your Supper. As the name suggests, she would cook and croon.

Now, with her multi-task show, art imitates life. Halpern ranges from a sassy delivery of Cab Calloway's "Everybody Eats When They Come to My House" to a sweet rendition of John Bucchino's "Grateful" to a rousing version of Yiddish favorite "Roumania, Roumania" — with longtime accompanist Ron Roy providing a brief assist.

Halpern serves up nearly 20 songs in all, with impeccable phrasing, rich coloring and infectious exuberance. Just about the only thing missing is a Hebrew number, say "Eretz Zavot Chalav Udevash" ("Land Flowing with Milk and Honey").

Meanwhile, she's chopping apples and pouring Manischewitz red as she prepares charoset, the sweet Passover dish that represents the bricks and mortar made by the slaves in Egypt. She distributes cups of it to the audience at the end of the 90-minute show.

Another combination dish — meatloaf with cinnamon, oregano and spearmint—takes the form of a pivotal story in "Cravings." Halpern recalls preparing the meal with Ida and being reassured by her grandmother's words: "Whatever you do is OK."

"She was a force of unconditional love," Halpern said in the interview of Ida.

In "Cravings," Halpern explains the Jewish practice of saying grace after meals, known as Birkhat Hamazon, to thank G-d for being content. Both in the show and in life, she embraces the Torah tenet: "And you shall eat and you shall be satisfied."

Sharing the bounty, Halpern earmarked proceeds from three performances to benefit Newburyport Theatre and the food charities Community Servings and Project Mazon. "My vision is that this is a show that is right for community service," she said, adding that she may perform the cabaret across the country.

Why stop there? Halpern, who has appeared in such far-flung cities as Paris, Jerusalem and Bombay, Halpern should consider taking "Cravings" around the world.

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