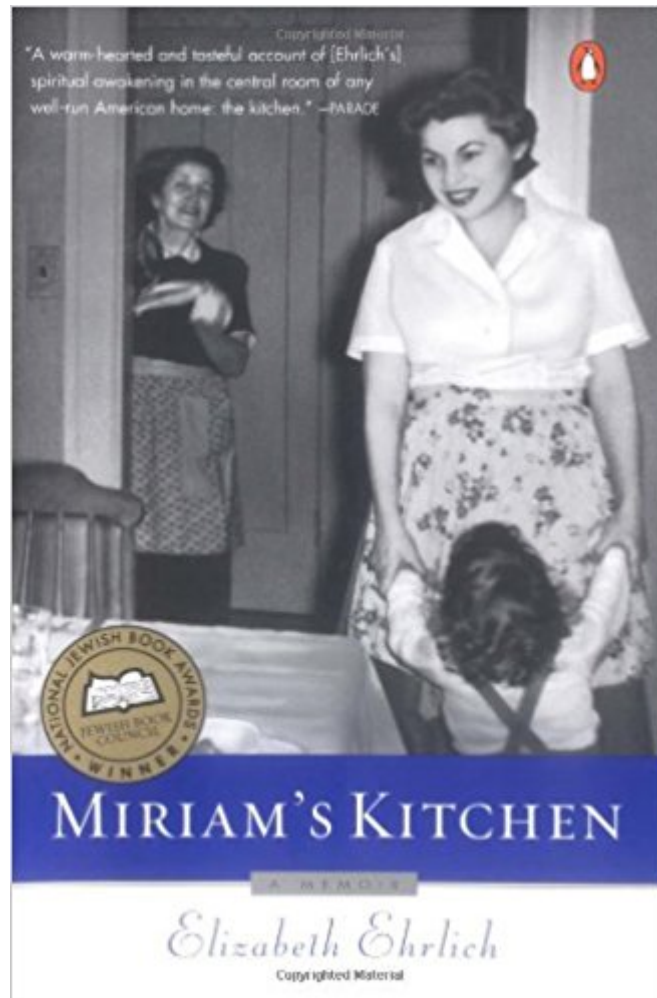




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# Miriam's Kitchen: A Memoir



## Synopsis

Like many Jewish Americans, Elizabeth Ehrlich was ambivalent about her background. She identified with Jewish cultural attitudes, but not with the institutions; she had fond memories of her Jewish grandmothers, but she found their religious practices irrelevant to her life. It wasn't until she entered the kitchen--and world--of her mother-in-law, Miriam, a Holocaust survivor, that Ehrlich began to understand the importance of preserving the traditions of the past. As Ehrlich looks on, Miriam methodically and lovingly prepares countless kosher meals while relating the often painful stories of her life in Poland and her immigration to America. These stories trigger a kind of religious awakening in Ehrlich, who--as she moves tentatively toward reclaiming the heritage she rejected as a young woman--gains a new appreciation of life's possibilities, choices, and limitations.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Food memoirs often delve into the meaning of life. This hardly surprises--memories are as essential to daily life as the food that sustains us. Miriam's Kitchen blends recipes and food reminiscences with family narratives and observations about the author's personal evolution as a Jew. Ehrlich weaves the stories from four generations of family life, punctuated with powerful and often tragic memories. While her mother-in-law, Miriam, is teaching her to make chicken livers with noodles, Ehrlich unexpectedly learns how Miriam, her mother, and husband survived a Nazi labor camp in Poland during the Holocaust. Using vivid and bare yet discreet words, she graphically tells what they suffered and the nightmares that still haunt them. Ehrlich's own story covers her transformation

from a child whose family lit Sabbath candles but went boating on Yom Kippur, to an adult who chooses an Orthodox life marked by ambivalence about the rigors of being kosher and pride in what she is passing on to her children. Recipes for Honey Cake, Noodle Pudding, and many others are buried treasures hidden among Ehrlich's intense words. Sadly omitted is a recipe for potato kugel. Her grandmother uses this tempting pudding to good-naturedly test, taunt, and ultimately as the means for accepting her daughter Selina's non-Jewish fiancé into the family. Happily for us, 24 other tempting kosher recipes make up for this one missed dish. *Miriam's Kitchen* is a gripping and gratifying memoir of food, life, tragedy, and family survival. --Dana Jacobi

Ehrlich, a former writer for *BusinessWeek*, writes with humor and passion about her journey from ambivalent Jew to a woman who observes tradition and teaches her children about their ethnic heritage. Her story begins when she meets Miriam, her future mother-in-law, a Polish Holocaust survivor who "guarded culinary specialties in her mind during years when possession and certainties were ripped from her hands." Through Miriam, Ehrlich awakens to dormant memories and traditions in her past and gradually decides that her own family life would have greater meaning if she made her kitchen kosher. The author opens a window on a culture and tradition that her readers may know nothing about, discussing religious and dietary laws and sharing over two dozen recipes for traditional foods. Orthodox readers will likely see themselves in descriptions of the humor and ambivalence involved in trying to incorporate the traditions in today's society. The writing is crisp and smooth. Recommended for public libraries. ?Susan Dearstyne, Hudson Valley Community Coll., Troy, N.Y. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A beautifully written memoir about Mrs. Ehrlich's mother-in-law, Miriam that is centered around the theme of the Jewish family. After reading it I came away with a better appreciation of why many Jewish people keep Kosher and how it is meaningful to them. I owned this book several years ago and after completing it donated the volume to a used book sale for charity. This latest copy was purchased a gift for a dear friend who I am sure will enjoy it as much as I did.

This book was discussed in my book group. I only read about 15% of the book, though since I had a used copy, I was able to read the areas that had been highlighted and commented on by the previous reader (who seems quite thoughtful). The book is almost twenty years old now, and my book group wondered how anyone would manage to keep a kosher household when working full

time and living in an isolated nuclear family (as most of us do). Recognizing the value of ritual and tradition, we also questioned the cost (not just financial) of rituals developed in different times. As a foodie and someone who cooks almost every meal from scratch, I can appreciate the work involved! In a community, I can see this could be possible, but the division of labor seems questionable in today's society.

My words can't do Elizabeth Ehrlich's justice but I will try. This is a great, uplifting read for anyone who yearns for a lost connection, regardless of heritage, and for anyone who values the importance of tradition. In our fast paced, always changing world, this is a beautiful reminder of what it means to really BE someone, to reconnect with the family and traditions that make us unique, and to recognize the importance these traditions hold. With the surge in popularity of discovering one's ancestry, whether through records or DNA, I also think this would make a great gift for those beginning their journey of discovery.

I read this book many years ago and enjoyed it then. I recently rediscovered it on my bookshelf and again, I am swept away by the deliciousness of the book. For anyone that has ever tried to learn old world recipes and learn to maintain a kosher home/kitchen the book speaks volumes. I know many people say the book is repetitive, and it is. I suppose it doesn't bother me because I understand how many times a person can try and fail at maintaining a kosher kitchen and how many times a recipe can fail despite every good intention. I am not a mushroom eater but I was particularly interested in the egg salad recipe in the book (It is not listed as the others are, just written about in the short chapter titled, "Egg Salad") I was interested enough to try it and I am glad I did. The cooked onion gives a real warm to the dish and I found that I could get away with very little salt. I used canned mushrooms that I had dried and reheated in the skillet with the onions. Very yum!

Everyone has a history, and everyone has a past. This past influences who we are and who we become. Traditions are passed down through generations in order to preserve the history of family. In *Miriam's Kitchen* by Elizabeth Ehrlich, the author compiles stories throughout her life in connection to recipes from her mother-in-law, a Holocaust survivor. The influence of her mother-in-law, Miriam, shapes Elizabeth's spiritual and religious journey. This memoir follows a woman's awakening into religious and family values. The memoir is outlined throughout the span of a year, with each section encompassing a different month. These months make up her spiritual journey from longing to continuity. The religious journey outlined parallels Ehrlich's life as she grows

into becoming a woman, a cook, and most importantly traditionally Jewish. The author outlines the main idea that she is trying to convey perfectly in the last paragraph of the introduction. "I embrace them all. I consider the law, the restrictions, the presumptions of happiness, the doubt. I inventory layers of translucent recollection evoking food, love, home, apocrypha, anger, ritual, laughter, conflict and regret. The result is a collage, but also a way of life. That collage is my religion, and it is what I am passing on." (Ehrlich, 1998). This memoir is about wonder and interest, a search for a history, reclamation of tradition, and an integration of that tradition into the modern world.

As a young adult, raised much of my life entirely on Christian beliefs, values, and customs, I thought this tale of Jewish immigrants and their descendants would seem foreign to me. However, I was truly amazed by the power of this book to cross the lines of culture and be accessible to everyone--but most easily understood by Americans. The tale of immigration and then subsequent loss of culture, language, and history is a common and well-understood concept in this country of immigrants. Despite its common theme, *Miriam's Kitchen* transcends the ordinary, becoming a tale of self-discovery and love for one's ancestors. The author, Elizabeth Ehrlich creatively weaves the stories of her own and her husband's families and ancestors with her chef training in the kitchen with her mother-in-law, Miriam, a holocaust survivor. Her desperate struggle to unite her Jewish beliefs and a desire for observance of Jewish laws with what she believes is right and best for her family and her community, forms the major conflict in this book. All in all, an incredibly moving story of the struggle to keep a different culture alive in today's America.

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