

Raleigh couple fills niche for classic Jewish comfort food

By Jill Warren Lucas



Photo by Jeremy M. Lange

When Jamie Rose was preparing to move from Charlotte to New York 10 years ago to advance her career, she joined JDate. The Durham native used the popular Jewish dating community to connect with a promising fellow in Long Island named Mike Eliahu.

"We clicked right away, but she wouldn't meet me the first time she came to the city," recalls Mike, whose wife of eight years smiles and rubs her pregnant belly. They moved to North Raleigh in 2011 and are expecting their second son in August.

"She likes to take her time and think things over. But not about this," Mike says, pausing as he rapidly rolls out dozens of knishes in The Cookery, the professional kitchen in Durham that's launched many successful food enterprises. "She even came up with the name Knish-a-licious. She was behind this from the start."

Knish-a-licious will debut Saturday at the Midtown Farmers Market at North Hills, which is open from 8 a.m. to noon. The classic Jewish comfort food will be sold toasty warm or frozen for \$4 each in three flavors: seasoned potato, sweet potato and kasha, a savory buckwheat blend.

"We've always talked about having our own business so we didn't have to be part of the corporate world," says Jamie, a marketing and communications professional. Her husband works days as a financial analyst, cooking knishes at nights and on weekends. "We haven't sold a single knish yet, but based on the response of friends and family, I really think it's going to work."

Mike previously taught himself how to make chewy, New York–style bagels, but the couple never considered that a viable business option. "There are plenty of bagel shops here," Jamie says. "His parents were visiting and we started talking about knishes one day. It just clicked. It's something everyone who moves here misses, but no one makes. I think even people who have never had them will love them."

With no professional food experience, Mike took on the challenge of learning how to make knishes, a complex task that often takes several pages to describe in cookbooks. Aiming for a healthier style, he decided against making the fried squares that are the stuff of childhood memory for many Northern transplants. Instead, he focused on making open-top, generously stuffed baked knishes with a tender-crisp crust.

Mike tested countless dough variations until he hit on one that can be rolled thin but was strong enough to hold about seven ounces of sturdy filling. With a schmear of spicy brown mustard, the shareable, practically meal-sized knishes will fill the stomachs and melt the hearts of those who gave up on finding "real" knishes in the Triangle.

"This took a lot of practice," says Mike, who wears a New York Rangers cap and a white chef coat—the latter of which he acquired recently when a photographer friend suggested he might want to look more, well, "cheffy" on the business website. "Turns out, it's great for protection," he says, referring to the strict food preparation regulations he must follow. "It helps to remind me how everything must be kept immaculately clean."

The knishes are vegetarian but not kosher. The Eliahus originally hoped for that but were unable to rent a commercial kitchen meeting the high religious standard. Mike hopes to produce gluten-free versions in the future, not only to meet popular demand but also to bake knishes his wife, who has celiac disease, can digest.

"I only taste-test the filling," Jamie says. "I have about a dozen gluten-free knishes in the freezer at home, but again, finding a place to make them for sale is a different story."

Despite this, Jamie's role in the flavor of the knishes cannot be understated. Slow-cooked onions are a key ingredient, and Mike learned how to caramelize pounds of them from her adored grandmother, who turns 90 in June.

"Oh, she'd yell at him," Jamie recalls with a laugh. "It takes a long time to get it just so. You have to be patient, which Mike is, but she'd yell about letting them burn, or adding paprika too soon. I stayed out of it."

The night they made their first batch of knishes with grandma's help stretched into the wee hours. "They finally came out of the oven around 2 in the morning," Mike recalls. "I didn't hear her come down and she scared the life out of me. She couldn't stand it. She had to try one."

So what did she think? "Trust me," Mike says, grabbing another handful of dough. "If she didn't like it, I wouldn't be here today."

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