

Food

## How a South African Dish Became a Staple of the IDF

**Poyke is perfect for cookouts and campfires—and for hungry soldiers on the front line**

**BY REMY GLANTZ    MAY 13, 2024**

When I was serving as a tank commander in the IDF in 2016, our tanks became our homes—our kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, and living rooms. At night we found whatever warm corner we could and huddled there in a sleeping bag until we drifted off to sleep. On warmer nights, we slept on top of the turret, nearly rolling off and falling to the ground as we dreamed of easier days. In the mornings, we dumped tuna, chocolate spread, and halva unceremoniously between two pieces of stale bread and called it breakfast.

One weekend, my platoon was “voluntold” to stay in the field to guard our equipment while the other platoons returned to base. There were 16 glorious hours in which we could breathe and decompress from the week. The commanders returned our cell phones, and we caught up with loved ones, reassuring them that we were being fed enough and changing our socks frequently. Saturday night marked the end of our break. We returned to reality in gloom and anxiety, wondering what trials the new week would bring. I prepared to grit my teeth and continue onward, just trying to make it through, when my commander pulled me aside.

“You’re going to base. Pull whatever looks good from the pantry and come back with a poyke pot and a guitar,” he said to me, smiling softly as he started his stopwatch. “You have 20 minutes, good luck.” We were going to make poyke, a popular meal cooked over a campfire that is often eaten in the IDF. I tried to recall what ingredients my friends had stuffed into my pack the year prior, when we made poyke after we hiked from our kibbutz to the Baniyas Waterfall in the Golan Heights. I returned from the base with vegetables, rice, a bottle of Coke, and the Israeli equivalent of Slim Jims. The guitar on my back made it in one piece, and the heavy cast iron pot showed no damage from the numerous times I’d dropped it on the way.

We split off into groups. Two of us pulled nails from the wooden pallets that our ammunition had been stored on and began to build the fire. I chopped onions,

carrots, and potatoes with my dirty [Leatherman](#). Someone had grabbed the guitar already and was plucking out a familiar [Meir Banai](#) tune, our 12 tanks silhouetted behind him. We hoisted the pot into the fire, resting it on a bed of glowing embers. A glug of oil and our crudely cut vegetables came next. The vegetables blackened and turned bitter, scorched by the intense heat, but it was dark out and we would only realize our mistake later. Meat sizzled and hissed against the hot metal as its fat rendered. I slashed through the commercial-sized sack of rice and we dumped it in, along with water and the entire liter and a half of Coke. With the grace of great chefs, we spilled food and spices everywhere, throwing up orange sparks as debris landed in the flames. We poked a long stick through the handle of the lid, occasionally lifting it off to stir our [poyke](#)—though others are adamant about *not* stirring poyke.

The name *poyke* comes from Afrikaans [potjiekos](#), the literal translation being “small, round pot.” While migrating away from the British-controlled Cape Colony, Dutch settlers would carry these pots in their caravans and wagons. They could allow the poyke to cook slowly, unattended, while they made camp. It didn’t require much fuel, and it was portable: Once they were ready to continue their trek, the pot was placed back into the wagon, often still with the previous night’s stew for that day’s lunch. It was an efficient way to cook for these settlers and later became commonplace in South African homes, still cooked outdoors over charcoal or wood, often for many guests. South African Jews immigrating to Israel in the 1980s and ’90s brought these pots and traditions with them. Poyke quickly became a staple of any campfire. Whether it was rebellious teenagers on a kibbutz sneaking beers from their parents, or soldiers spending long weeks in the field, poyke was central. It requires little attention and almost no culinary knowledge. It is easy, efficient, and delicious. But most significantly, it brings people together.

Technically, poyke is not a stew. Purists assert that the ingredients should be steamed, not boiled: less liquid, lower heat, and *no stirring*. Liquid isn’t emulsified with fat, so the individual components of the pot remain mostly separated, and you are left with a traditional poyke.

But that isn’t the version that made its way to Israel. Much like traffic laws, those strict “rules” are considered mere suggestions by most Israelis, and everyone has their own “special” way of making poyke.

While our pot cooked, we sang along to the strings and warmed ourselves by the fire. We debriefed our week, and as the burning pallets collapsed onto themselves, so too did the hierarchical barriers between us and our commanders. They told us

about their girlfriends and asked about ours. They shared their plans to travel the world. One commander wanted to study Buddhism in Tibet. Another wanted to trek through South America. We shared with each other our hopes, dreams, and fears. We dug past the superficial and mundane and reached something meaningful.

Poyke, the simple act of making a few soldiers sit around a fire and eat, was as crucial to our training as memorizing tactics and procedures. When I received my own soldiers to train, poyke helped me to instill in them brotherhood, compassion, and a sense of belonging.

The flames danced on our faces and we laid bare our truths. In that pot we saw our humanity.

My stomach growled just as the black metal spat angrily at us, demanding to be removed from the fire. We placed slices of bread at the bottom of cheap plastic bowls to keep them from melting and burned our mouths on the hot, slightly charred, but perfect poyke.

I witnessed the atrocities of Oct. 7 through the black screen of my phone. I had just gotten home from a long day (and night) at the restaurant where I work in Philadelphia. It was late. There was a red alert informing me of rocket attacks. I was used to that, but this time the wording was off. I didn't know what it was exactly, but it was different. My gut told me what my brain refused to understand: Something was happening. As more alerts flooded my phone, the picture became clearer. I sent WhatsApp messages to my friends and my old unit's group chat.

I flew back as soon as I could to serve in the reserves. My family was worried and didn't want me to go, but I assured them that I wouldn't be in harm's way.

My company was located on the northern border, on a peninsula of land surrounded by Hezbollah. We were a supporting force, defending against Hezbollah's attacks.

The mortars and drones hit us during the day, usually. They seemed to know what I had promised my parents, though, and the impacts always missed our encampment. The nights were quiet enough that we could cook and eat together. We spoke about the lives we left behind, our families, careers, and what we longed to do once this horrific war came to an end. I found myself once again sitting around a fire, burning my mouth on hot and slightly charred but perfect poyke.

I've since returned to work at my restaurant—until I am called into reserves again. I remember the poorly chopped vegetables that I burned in a cast iron pot years ago in the desert, and I smile as I peel perfect little potatoes and brunoise red onions for paying customers. In the restaurant, I braise, poach, and dice and make confit and chiffonade. I have the great privilege to cook with exceptional cuts of meat, beautiful local produce, and artisan spice blends.

But I would *still* rather have the poyke.

## THE RECIPE

A staple of cookouts in Israel brought by South African Jews in the 1980s and '90s, this one-pot campfire meal is easy, hot, and delicious. Traditionally cooked in a cast iron cauldron over a low fire, poyke usually consists of meat, vegetables, and a grain. Though a cast iron pot is *always* great, this can be made in any kind of pot and in the comfort of your own kitchen—no need to brave the elements!

## INGREDIENTS

- **2lbs chicken, beef, or lamb**
- **A handful of salt**
- **1liter Coca-Cola**
- **3large carrots**
- **2large potatoes (diced)**
- **4ribs celery (chopped)**
- **6-8cloves garlic, sliced (or can substitute 1 Tbsp garlic powder)**
- **1onion**
- **4cups rice**
- **1 ½liters water**
- **3Tbsp extra-virgin olive oil**
- **Hot paprika and any other desired spices**

## PREPARATION

- **Step 1**

Dice carrots, potatoes, and meat of choice into similarly sized chunks.

Roughly chop onion, celery, and garlic.

- **Step 2**

Over medium heat, sweat onion, celery, and garlic in oil until tender.

- **Step 3**

Bloom spices in the pot and add your protein, potato, and carrots.

- **Step 4**

Stir in rice and salt and pour in the water and Coca-Cola, covering the pot with the lid.

- **Step 5**

Enjoy being with the people you are with.

- **Step 6**

The poyke is ready when the rice is fully cooked and the bottom (probably) burned beyond salvation, about 45 minutes.