

Give Global Traditions a Seat at Your Passover Table

By Paula Shoyer

The Seder plate tells the story of the Israelite slaves in Egypt as well as their redemption. I have discovered that the particular items placed on the plate and table — as well as unique customs — tell another story of the many homelands of the Jewish people.

As my husband, Andy and I began hosting our own Seders, we developed our own customs. One year, Andy decided to tell the Maggid (story of the Exodus) part of the Seder through a play, and a family tradition was born. Each year, our guests vie for the plum roles, and once a friend brought actual costumes for the roles of Moses and the Israelites.

Another custom we hold dear is singing Chad Gadya, sounding out each part. I will never forget my serious father voicing goat sounds, which had the entire table in stitches.

The items on our Seder table are typical of other families whose ancestors hail from Eastern Europe. Over the years, I have seen couples in mixed marriages, meaning Ashkenazic and Sephardic, who have learned to blend their customs. We have learned that there are many more differences between Ashkenazic and Sephardic practices beyond the spelling of charoset/haroset, respectively. Susan Berger has a Hungarian father and an American mother of Syrian descent. At their Seder, each member takes turns holding a pillowcase sack of matzoh. The other guests ask the person, with the sack where they are coming from and the holder says “Egypt.” When asked where they are going, they respond “Jerusalem.” The holder then swings the sack to the next person and the ritual is repeated. Melissa Arking, an Ashkenazi friend married to a Syrian, said that at their table, when the matzoh is passed around, a poem is read in Arabic.

Other interesting ceremonies include a tradition in Italy, Sicily and Morocco to bring the Seder plate to the table covered with a beautiful scarf while the family sings. In Tunisia and Sardinia, the Seder plate is placed on the head



Photo credit: Wikipedia

President Barack Obama celebrates Passover at the 2011 White House Seder.

of the leader, then passed around from person to person and held briefly on each head. This custom is to recall that as slaves in Egypt we carried heavy burdens on our heads.

According to Laurent Bensimon, whose family is Moroccan, when the Seder plate is passed over everyone’s heads at her family Seder, they sing “bevhilu yatzanu mimitzrayim” (in haste He took us out of Egypt).

Ethiopian Jews break all of their dishes before Passover and make new ones that they use for the year until the next Passover. This symbolizes a complete break from the past and a new start.

Persian and Afghani Jews place long green onions on the Seder plate to remind them of the whips of the Egyptians during slavery. Right before the song Dayenu, they pass them around for everyone to “whip” each other.

At our table, we dip a finger into wine during the recitation of the 10 plagues. Dalia Mor Stav, of Iraqi descent, said that at her house, the Seder leader takes a cup of wine and, at the mention of each plague, pours some of the wine into an old vessel while the guests chant the names of enemies of the people of Israel past and present, such as Haman and Amalek. At the end, the wine is discarded to symbolize casting a plague onto our enemies.

Jennifer Abadi, a writer in New York who seeks to preserve Sephardic and Judeo-Arab food traditions, published “Too Good to Passover” last year, an impressive book that is both deeply historical and full of delicious recipes and traditions. The book is organized by geographic region. For each area, she lists the items on the Seder plate, unique customs, menus for the Seder and throughout Passover, as well as what is eaten to break Passover. She

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shares lovely personal family stories from the people she interviewed.

From Jennifer's research and others I interviewed, I learned that the Seder plate components, which I thought were fairly standard, vary widely around the world.

Brenda Gazzar, who comes from a Karaite Jewish family from Egypt, wrote about their unique customs a few years ago in the Jewish Journal. Karaite Jews rely solely on Torah rather than Rabbinic Judaism, and, for maror, her mother makes a bitter herb salad with endives, anise, butter lettuce, lemon and salt.

In her book "King Solomon's Table," Joan Nathan explains how horseradish root is not available in Recife, Brazil, which has a Jewish community dating back to the 1600s, so there is a version with wasabi powder, beets, sugar, vinegar and salt.

Vegetarians place a roasted carrot or beet on the Seder plate in lieu of the shank bone. In Georgia and Moldova, they use a roasted chicken wing as their shank bone.

Sarah Brooks, a convert, says she gets "to choose her background" and leans toward Sephardic because "the food is better." Because she is part American Indian, she includes wild rice on her Seder plate.

Many North African Jews have bowls of red wine vinegar instead of salt water. Greek Jews put out cider vinegar and Mexican Jews use lime juice.

As for matzoh, among the Bene Israel community of India, extended families went from home to home to help each one bake enough matzoh for the entire week.

Dana Marlowe of Washington, D.C., says, "We place an orange on our Seder plate every single year, as a sign of inclusion for all Jewish lesbian women and gay men. By showing this symbol of solidarity, we make a statement toward inclusiveness in modern society."

Regarding the roasted egg, Susan Barocas, a D.C. chef and writer of Turkish background,



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serves her guests the Sephardic huevos haminados, eggs simmered for 6 to 8 hours with lots of onion skins, peppercorns and some oil to keep the water from boiling out so fast. Some Turkish Jews add coffee grinds to the cooking liquid. Yemenite Jews eat eggs as the main course at their Seders.

In the country of Georgia, they play a game before the meal where each person takes a hard-boiled egg and bangs it against another person's egg to break it. The winner is the person whose egg has no cracks.

Charoset is what sets the Jewish world apart on Passover and I discovered so many variations made with local ingredients — recipes far more interesting than I ever imagined.

Charoset is almost always a paste to remind us of the mortar used by Israelite slaves for building in Egypt. In Gibraltar, Jews add actual dust from bricks to their charoset.

Maryland resident Sofia Abraham Mendoza was born in Guatemala, but her background is Spanish-Portuguese. At her house, charoset is made with dates, apples, toasted almonds, date or pomegranate syrup, wine, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves and orange. She also uses grated ginger for maror, but she's certain "someone, somewhere would object."

In Cuba, traditional fruits are often not available, so Cuban Jews created "Charoset of the Oppressed" made of matzoh, honey, cinnamon and wine. If you incorporate this tradition, it will remind everyone at the table of the plight of Cuban Jews and other oppressed people around the world.

ITALIAN STYLE HAROSET



Yield: Serves 8 / Makes 2 cups

6 large Medjool dates (about 10 regular), finely chopped (need about 1/3 cup)

1 cup peeled and finely chopped red and/or green apples (about 1 medium red or green apple, or half of each)

1 medium whole navel orange, peeled, sectioned, then cut into

Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians all roll charoset into balls. Barocas, a guest chef for several White House Seders during the Obama administration, served the First Family Moroccan charoset balls.

Nathan, in "King Solomon's Table," offers several charoset recipes from around the world, such as a Persian version that has cardamom and pomegranate juice. Tunisian charoset is apples, almonds, dates and dried ground rose petals. The Afghani version has oranges and cashews.

Pati Jinich, a Mexican chef who has a PBS cooking show and several cookbooks, shared how her family's charoset comprised apple, pear, walnuts or pecans and the required Manischewitz wine. Yet as a modern cook, she adds rehydrated hibiscus leaves.

Nicole Totah, whose father emigrated from Syria to the United States, serves a charoset "flight," and each guest receives small amounts of charoset from around the world. Guests discuss the origin of each ingredient. This tradition is a beautiful way to connect with Jews all over the Diaspora.

Last Passover, in Israel, I discovered Ben and Jerry's charoset-flavored ice cream, first introduced in 2015 and produced only in Israel. After my family and friends laughed about it, we were delighted with how tasty it was. The flavor demonstrates how essential charoset is to our Passover experience. The taste was definitely Ashkenazi.

Clearly, Passover traditions continue to evolve. We should use our Seders as an opportunity to connect not just with our ancestors in Egypt, but also with Jews of different backgrounds from the past and present.

small 1/4-inch chunks (need 1/2 cup)

1/2 cup finely chopped chestnuts (from package or freshly boiled and peeled)

1/3 cup pignoli nuts

1/2 cup mashed bananas (about 1 medium banana)

2 tablespoons sweet red Passover wine

1/8 to 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/8 teaspoon ground cloves

1/2 to 1 teaspoon of sugar, if desired

Pinch of salt

2 to 3 teaspoons freshly squeezed lemon juice, strained

1. Combine all the ingredients in an airtight container and refrigerate at least 2 hours or overnight to allow flavors to meld.

2. Serve haroset at room temperature in one or two small dessert bowls at either end of the Seder table.

© Jennifer Abadi, from "Too Good To Passover: Sephardic & Judeo-Arab Seder Menus and Memories from Africa, Asia and Europe."

For the New Year: Old World Tastes and Modern Methods

SEDER PLATE SALAD



Serves 6

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 10 minutes

Advance prep: Dressing and lamb may be made 2 days in advance

Equipment:

Cutting board

- knives
- measuring cups and spoons
- small saucepan
- tongs
- small bowl
- whisk
- large serving bowl

For the salad

2 pieces of lamb shoulder (about 20 ounces/600 g total)

2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil

Salt and black pepper

1 large head romaine lettuce, cut into 2-inch (5-cm) pieces

2 stalks celery, thinly sliced

1 cup (40 g) loosely packed fresh parsley leaves, roughly chopped

1/3 cup (40 g) walnut halves, roughly chopped into 1/2-inch (12-mm) pieces

2 apples (Red Delicious, Fuji, or Gala), cored and cut into 3/4-inch (2-cm) cubes

3 large eggs, hard-boiled and quartered

For the dressing

1/2 cup (120 mL) mayonnaise

4 teaspoons jarred white horseradish

1 tablespoon sugar

2 tablespoons sweet kosher wine

Salt and black pepper

1. Preheat oven to broil or an outdoor grill to medium-high heat.
2. To make the lamb: Rub the lamb shoulder pieces with oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste. Broil or grill for 4 to 5 minutes per side for medium rare, or until desired doneness. Let cool for 5 minutes and, if serving immediately, slice into thin, 2-inch-long (5-cm) pieces. If making in advance, wait to slice the lamb until after reheating. The lamb may be roasted 2 days in advance; cover and store in the fridge.

3. To make the salad dressing: In a small bowl, whisk the mayonnaise, white horseradish, sugar, and wine until well combined. Add salt and pepper to taste. The dressing may be made 2 days in advance; cover and store in the fridge.

4. To assemble the salad: Place the romaine pieces in a large bowl. Add the celery and parsley and toss to combine. Sprinkle the walnuts and apples on top and arrange the egg quarters around the perimeter of the bowl. Scatter the lamb pieces on top. To serve, scoop some of everything onto each plate and drizzle with the dressing.

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For more on global international Passover culinary foodways, see two articles from B'nai B'rith Magazine by Seth Shapiro in the online archives.

Gourmet for Passover: Finding Inspiration in Tradition (Spring 2013)

Charoset: A Muddy Footprint on the Seder Plate, featuring Egyptian, Persian, Turkish, Moroccan, Mexican and Italian recipes (Spring 2014)

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