

More Than Matzoh

Finding And Cooking Great Passover Food Is Possible With A Little Planning

by **Erin Mantz**

In the weeks leading up to Passover, Beth Steindecker of Northwest D.C. gets well prepared. She stocks up at the right grocery stores, makes plans to attend seders at her Mom's or in-laws' homes, digs out that decades-old delicious Matzoh Roll recipe and creates some simple menus. Fabulous Passover food is found! If only it were that easy for everyone.

Passover is a Jewish holiday where food becomes the focus of reflection, tradition and a challenge for those observing it. When it comes to Passover food, Jews do not eat chametz (leaven; anything made from the five major grains-wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt-that has not been completely cooking within 18 minutes after coming into contact with water). This commemorates the fact that the Jews leaving Egypt were quickly fleeing into the desert and did not have time to let their bread rise. Some Ashkenazi Orthodox Jews also avoid rice, corn, peanuts and legumes (beans).

From sundown April 2 to April 10, Jews will celebrate Passover to commemorate their liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt and the "passing over" of the forces of destruction over their homes as the Angel of Death spared the first born of the Israelites on the eve of Exodus. On the first two nights, Jewish people have a special seder meal that includes matzoh to remember the matzoh Jews ate as they left Egypt; maror/bitter herbs to remember the bitter taste of slavery; charoses, a mixture that looks like clay, to remember the clay and bricks the slaves used; and four cups of wine to celebrate their freedom.

As those familiar with the old low-carb craze know, giving up bread or pasta can be hard to do. Things get even more complicated on Passover, but the good news is the growing abundance and wide variety of great Passover food in the Washington area. From grocery stores like Rockville's Koshermart and clever catering from Northwest D.C.'s The Artful Party to prepared items from Virginia's Wegmans and tips from local moms, keeping Passover is easier and more delicious than ever.

Community Centers And Caterers Get Creative With Passover Food

If all you can think about is matzoh, think again. This year, teen girls will happily hold a pre-Passover "Chocolate Seder" at the Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia in Fairfax. Last year's event, sponsored by B'nai B'rith Girls, was a huge success as 30 girls dug into bittersweet chocolate instead of bitter herbs and sipped four glasses of chocolate milk in place of the traditional seder's four glasses of wine.

Innovation is also on the menu at boutique catering firm The Artful Party in Northwest D.C. Founder Carole Ash caters the annual "Miriam's Seder" out of the Adas Israel

kosher kitchen in Northwest D.C.-an event that brings women of all ages together prior to Passover. As women gather at this year's "Miriam's Seder," they will celebrate the 10th anniversary of the D.C. Jewish Community Center and read from a special Haggadah that highlights Jewish women. Ash sees why area clients depend on catering at seder time. "Lots of families have two parents working, and Passover is an especially large meal to do. Everyone wants the traditional brisket, kugels and matzoh-ball soup with chicken, but you can be very creative," she says. She offers new twists on Passover food, like Israeli charoses, more Middle-Eastern dishes and a Matzoh Polenta predicted to be a big hit.

Educators Make Passover a Hands-On Experience For Kids

Special seder plate food helps convey the Passover story, but how can you make it compelling for preschoolers? Candice Kroehl, Ed.D, director of the Greenzaid Early Childhood Center at B'nai Tzedek in Potomac, MD, takes "hands-on" to a higher level. She organizes a school field trip to the local matzoh factory. Rabbi Mendel Kaplan from the Chabad of Maryland emphasizes the Chabad factory "is an effort to get kids excited about the holiday and have a positive hands-on experience." Students don a Matzoh baker's hat, pour matzoh batter into mixers, roll out the dough, bake and eat their own matzoh. They leave with a better understanding of Passover and a pre-packed kosher-for-Passover matzoh for their family's seder. Rabbi Kaplan runs into adults who remember their visits from 20 years ago. (The factory matzoh is not kosher for Passover. For information about the factory, call the Chabad at 301-983-200.)

The hands-on experience continues back in the Greenzaid classrooms as students make and eat charoses. Others absorb the Passover story through books and circle time or play in pretend kitchens by sorting fake food into Passover and non-Passover piles. Parent-child "Make a Seder Plate" workshops are worked into the curriculum and are well attended.

Moms Recognize Convenience And Planning Is Key

Family time and mealtime can be a year-round challenge for moms-and Passover demands extra coordination. Working full-time with a one-year old at home, Steindecker offers this recommendation to moms: "Passover adds another layer to the working mom balancing act, but it's important to prepare so you can spend the holiday enjoying time with your family. Try to find places that offer prepared foods for Passover and take advantage of those! If you plan to cook, keep the menu simple." Steindecker also brings home leftovers from her mom's seder, like zucchini latkes and chocolate chip meringue cookies, that she, husband Jeremy and even baby Matthew snack on.

With some planning and preparation, moms today don't have to fear Passover food, according to Meredith Jacobs, Potomac resident, mom of two and author of the new book *The Modern Jewish Mom's Guide to Shabbat* (Harper Collins, February 2007). She insists that people don't have to cook every dish at once if they plan things out. "Passover is one of the most challenging holidays when it comes to food," she admits. Because so much food is involved, Jacobs insists the more moms can do ahead of time, the better. "You

don't have to be exhausted on seder night or have a gigantic mess in the kitchen that compels guests to spend hours cleaning up." She makes and freezes matzoh balls ahead of time (tip: add fresh dill) and simply adds them to the soup before serving. She also streamlines: cooking pieces instead of a whole chicken; cutting vegetables and simply roasting with olive oil; using disposable containers.

Deborah Altman of Rockville, MD, cooks almost every meal for Passover, so planning ahead is important. "I go through all my recipes, plan for the week and identify easy, no-fuss treats for the kids. I get most cooking ingredients from Giant or Koshermart, and great gefilte fish from Costco." She brings five-year-old Isaac and seven-year-old Rachel into menu planning and cooking; they pick recipes and make family favorites such as her Matzoh Toffee Crunch and flourless chocolate tortes—proof that people really can make some amazing things without leavening! Her advice to moms: "Bake a lot. Put the kids to bed and bake muffins for the next day, but cook with your kids, too." She continues her mom's tradition of making Passover a special time. "My mom would never buy matzoh except at Passover, so it would be special. I have recipes my family begs me to make during the year, but I keep them for Passover and everyone looks forward to them."

Local Restaurants and Grocers Get Into The Passover Groove

The National Restaurant Association notes an increase in people dining out or using restaurant takeout for holidays, so people can spend more quality time with friends and family rather than with pots and pans. Thanks to one family restaurant, Maryland residents do not have to give up pizza for Passover. Ledo Pizza in Bethesda, Rockville and North Potomac makes Passover pizza. According to Jim Robertson, Ledo operating partner, customer feedback over the past few years was overwhelmingly positive and the pizza proved popular with people of all ages. "We can see how the community really appreciates it," he says proudly. Because Jews may differ in their levels of Passover observance, Ledo is very careful to list all dough ingredients so people can make that personal decision.

Seder table reservations fill up quickly at hot spot restaurant Felix in Adams Morgan, Washington, D.C., where people can eat the first two Passover nights in good taste and style. Owner Alan Popovsky started offering Passover here 10 years ago after reading about New York City restaurants doing it. "A lot of people are transient in D.C. or can't get home. Other people like it because they don't have to cook at home."

While many people run to kosher supermarkets such as Rockville's Koshermart and Shaul's of Silver Spring, many regular grocery stores like Giant and D.C.'s Brookville Market offer Passover items. According to Giant's Jamie Miller, offerings vary from store to store based on customer demand and space availability. Miller also explains that while overall demand for Passover items has risen slightly, product offerings have greatly improved. It's not just about matzoh and macaroons anymore.

Some places offer Passover food that may or may not be kosher for Passover or cooked in a kosher kitchen, so ask for details to ensure you're observing the way you intend. And,

by no means could this piece cover every local Passover food resource! Many independent and chain groceries, gourmet shops, restaurants, caterers and community programs abound for Passover food. For more information, check with the places in your neighborhood as well as synagogues and local Jewish organizations.

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From Aviva Goldfarb of Chevy Chase, Maryland, author of the book and weekly email newsletter, *The Six O'Clock Scramble*.

Speedy Quick Matzoh Ball Soup

Prep (20 minutes) + Cook (30 minutes)
8 servings, about 2 cups each

If you have never tried matzoh ball soup, it's a treat. During the Passover seder, this filling soup signifies the beginning of the meal and is always a favorite part of the dinner. Traditional matzoh ball soup takes a couple of hours to make, and involves many pots, strained herbs and vegetables, and many steps. This version takes only about 20 minutes of actual work, and makes enough for a couple of meals.

1 box (4.5 oz) matzoh ball mix (sold in supermarkets with kosher foods)
4 eggs
1/2 cup vegetable oil
2 teaspoons salt
2 boxes (32 oz. each) chicken or vegetable broth
3 large carrots, sliced
3 stalks celery, sliced
1 tablespoon chopped fresh dill (or use 1 teaspoon dried)

Prepare the matzoh ball mix according to the package directions. (For most packages, mix the matzoh meal with 4 beaten eggs and 1/2 cup oil, stir and refrigerate for 15 minutes.)

Set a large pot of water to boil. Once it boils, add the salt to the boiling water. Using wet hands, gently form the matzoh ball mixture into 1-inch balls and carefully drop them into the water. Cover the pot and cook them for 30 minutes (reduce the heat, if necessary, so the water doesn't boil over, but do keep it at a low boil).

After adding the matzoh balls to the boiling water, bring the broth to a boil in a separate large pot. Add the carrots and celery and simmer for 15 minutes. When the matzoh balls are cooked, using a slotted spoon, carefully remove them from the salted water and add them to the pot with the broth and vegetables. Add the dill and serve the soup hot, making sure you put a matzoh ball and some vegetables into each bowl.

