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FOOD & DINING



ABEL URIBE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE; SHANNON KINSELLA/FOOD STYLING

A sweet Passover

Brownies and cookies made from alternative flours provide comfort during these tough times

By PEGGY WOLFF
Chicago Tribune

At sundown April 8, Jewish families will celebrate the first night of Passover by retelling the story of the exodus from serfdom, the promise of redemption and the decades of the Israelites' desert wandering. Although Passover will be occurring in a much different world this year, Jewish people do have a history of one long narrative of resilience. Whether you are interfaith, just Jewish, Jewish adjacent, celebrating solo, or with a

bare minimum of family seated far apart, we all need grounding. And so we move on, recasting a holiday that has been upended by COVID-19.

The first of the four questions — Why is this night different from all other nights? — will probably induce an entire night of discussion.

Passover is the Festival of Freedom. It is also called the Festival of Matzoh. Even with Passover in pandemic, there'll be stacks of matzoh, unleavened and square, the Jews' original ancient cracker made with wheat and water. As a child, I think I remember

holding my head in my hands, overawed by the amount of bread I could not have for a week. That faded as a front-of-mind thought quite a while ago.

Passover desserts were equally sad. Remember when pastries based on potato flour, matzoh meal, and the more finely ground matzoh cake meal, showcased the ingenuity of home cooks and bakeries?

Today we have choices. We can lean on the gluten-free community for chametz-free baking.

Here are recipes for two comfort

foods, both crowd-pleasers that suit the two schools of Passover dessertdom: what's new, and what follows the strict food rules.

At the grocery store, head to the aisle of the alternate flours, the gluten-free flours. Our recipes call for almond, coconut and banana flour; all gluten-free.

Almond flour is ground from whole almonds with the skin intact or not.

"Coconut flour is made from fresh mature coconuts," emailed Tim Malec,

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quality assurance manager for Clearly Organic Coconut Flour. The flour is a byproduct of extracting the coconut milk from the meat.

"The remaining fresh coconut meat," or the leftover meat, "is pulverized and dried to a fine powder."

And banana flour? "I never heard of banana flour," said the guy on the ladder stocking the designated Passover shelves at a big grocery. Nor had I, until five years ago when I toured Ritual Chocolate, a small Park City, Utah, factory that, at the end of the chocolate tour, encouraged us to step into a cafe. After watching cacao beans turn into chocolate, don't you just want a rich, fudgy brownie? And there they were, on the counter by the register. Gluten-free, the sign said. The sight of those deep, intensely dark chocolate brownies with crackly tops unadorned by any dusting of powdered sugar did reliably raise my pulse.

They were made with banana flour and baked with Ritual's small batch, bean-to-bar ethically sourced foodstuff du jour—bittersweet chocolate—but also studded with cacao nibs, which are lightly roasted and crushed cacao beans that have a wonderful nutlike crunch.

Wow! Wouldn't Roald Dahl, author of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," be proud to know that really great chocolate can still make your troubles go away.

David Wintzer's nearby Park City banana flour business, first called WEDO (Women Entrepreneurs Development Organization) then renamed Zuvii, was packing banana flour.

On a phone call, Wintzer said that he was the first in America to import banana flour more than 10 years ago, and from Kenya, where he made microloans to women who had been producing flour from their crop.

"The paleo community told us about the benefits of green bananas," he said. And though his first supplier didn't work out, other countries had suppliers that met FDA standards. Unripe green bananas that have not yet turned to sugar are harvested, then peeled, sliced, dehydrated and pulverized into flour. Fifty-five pound boxes arrived at his packaging plant in Park City, where small containers were filled and shipped to "1,000 stores nationwide."

What about cooking with banana flour?

"Because of the high starch there is a denseness to the batter. It absorbs moisture. It binds like crazy. The starch properties are what do that," he said. "The surprise is that it (a brownie) comes out like a whole-wheat-looking thing. Dark, almost like a bran color."

If you are hosting a Seder—even a small one—there probably won't be family together cooking for a day in your kitchen. But you will have desserts that will be talked about until your usual spirited discussions and singing next year.

Peggy Wolff is a freelance writer.

Cacao nib and bittersweet chocolate banana flour brownies

Prep: 30 minutes, plus cooling time **Freeze:** 45 minutes **Bake:** 23-25 minutes **Makes:** 24 brownies

This recipe is adapted from one by Robbie Stout and Anna Davies, co-owners of Ritual Chocolate. Underneath the crackly, firm top, you won't necessarily taste banana, but you will get the crunch from cacao nibs. Those are a key component. Freeze brownies for at least 45 minutes before cutting into small squares. To store, cover tightly with plastic wrap for up to three days.

8 ounces chocolate 70% cacao bars, chopped into small pieces
 1/4 cup unsalted butter
 1 1/2 cups brown sugar, packed
 3 eggs
 1/4 cup water
 1/2 cup cacao nibs
 1/3 cup banana flour
 3/4 teaspoon kosher salt
 1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease (or line with parchment paper) the bottom and sides of a 9-by-12-inch baking pan with cooking spray. Melt the broken chocolate pieces with the butter in a microwave on medium-high or in a double boiler; set aside.

2. Using a whisk or mixer, beat the brown sugar, eggs and water in a medium bowl. Add the melted chocolate and butter; stir until fully incorporated but do not overmix.

3. Stir together the nibs, banana flour, salt and baking soda in a separate bowl. Add to the batter, stirring until fully incorporated, but do not overmix.

4. Pour the batter into the prepared pan; smooth the top evenly with a spatula. Bake until the top is crackly, sides pull away from the edges and a toothpick comes out clean, 23-25 minutes.

5. Let the pan cool on a rack, about 25 minutes. Cover with foil and freeze for 45 minutes. The brownies will be much easier to cut into squares.

Nutrition information per brownie: 163 calories, 8 g fat, 5 g saturated fat, 29 mg cholesterol, 21 g carbohydrates, 16 g sugar, 2 g protein, 101 mg sodium, 2 g fiber



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These chocolate and pecan cookies are made with almond flour and brown butter.

Brown butter chocolate almond flour cookies

Prep: 30 minutes **Freeze:** 30 minutes **Cook:** 20 minutes **Makes:** 28 cookies (about 2-inch diameter)

This recipe from kosher chef, restaurateur and cookbook author Laura Frankel combines two gluten-free flours that, she emailed, "actually add flavor to a recipe while still providing structure. Also, if the butter is too soft, it will not cream and the cookies will be dense." Use a light-colored pan to brown the butter so that you can see the brown specks develop.

10 tablespoons unsalted butter (5 ounces)
 1 cup almond flour, packed (4 ounces)
 3 tablespoons coconut flour
 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
 1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon brown sugar, packed (about 4 ounces)
 1 egg
 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
 4 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
 3/4 cup chopped pecans
 2 teaspoons flaky sea salt or coarse salt

1. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper.

2. In a small pan, heat butter over low to medium-low; allow the butter to bubble away until the foam subsides and the color is a light nutty brown, 8-10 minutes. As you see a lot of foam rising, do not turn your back on the pan because the difference between deep golden brown and black can be seconds. Let butter sit off the heat for a few minutes, then transfer to a heatproof container and freeze until solid, 30-35 minutes. The browned bits and flecks will sink to the bottom. When you invert the container, gently scrape off burnt bits or the flour will overwhelm the cookies. You can also use a fine mesh strainer to remove the burnt bits.

3. Whisk together the almond flour, coconut flour and baking soda in a medium bowl. Set aside.

4. In a stand mixer (or with electric beaters) on medium-low, cream the butter and sugar together until light and the sugar is no longer gritty, about 3 minutes. Add the egg, vanilla and flour mixture. Stir to combine. Stir in the chocolate, pecans and salt.

5. Scoop walnut-size pieces of dough; arrange on the baking sheets about 2 inches apart. Bake until golden brown, 8-10 minutes, rotating the pans after 4 minutes.

6. Allow to cool before moving to a cooling rack as the cookies will be very soft.

Nutrition information per cookie: 124 calories, 10 g fat, 4 g saturated fat, 18 mg cholesterol, 7 g carbohydrates, 6 g sugar, 2 g protein, 197 mg sodium, 1 g fiber