

# A seder lesson

## Bitter herbs of Passover offer pungent reminder of the past

By Peggy Wolff  
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It's one of the four questions at the seder that ushers in the Passover holiday (beginning at sundown April 12 this year):

Why is this night different from all other nights? For on all other nights we eat all kinds of herbs, but on this night bitter herbs.

During the seder, when Jewish people taste the *maror*, the bitter herbs, they remember the bitterness of 400 years of slavery in Egypt.

The Book of Exodus mentions bitter herbs along with the paschal lamb and unleavened bread as the prescribed foods for the Passover feast, but it wasn't until the 2nd Century, in the Talmud, that the specific plants were listed. "These are the vegetables with which a person fulfills his obligation to eat *maror*: with *chazeres*, with *tamcha*, with *charchavina*, with *ulshin*, and with *maror*." (Pesachim 2:6)

At springtime in ancient times, these vegetables grew in roadsides, fields and rocky sites. Ron Wolfson, dean of the Center for Jewish Education at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, writes in "Passover: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration," that botanists have concluded that *chazeres* is prickly lettuce, *ulshin* is chicory, *tamcha* is sow thistle, *charchavina* is eryngo, or sea holly, and *maror* itself is centary, from the *Centaurea* genus.

In their growth cycle in the Middle East the plants typically broke through the earth in late fall or early winter, when the leaves could be enjoyed in salads. But by spring, the appearance and the taste of the five

herbs changed dramatically. A stalk emerged in the center of each plant, and it sprouted very small, very bitter herbs.

The lettuce described in the Talmud is prickly lettuce, with stiff grey-green leaves, and generally considered a weed in most parts of the world.

We may not think of lettuce as a bitter plant because we harvest it at a young age, but it is acceptable at the seder because when left to grow, the stalks become thick and retain a bitter taste; also, the leaves become tough and bitter.

Chicory, with its somewhat sharp-flavored heads of leaves, has been grown for centuries both as a salad and as a cooked vegetable.

Sow thistle, also called milk thistle for its milky sap, looks like a leggy weed with a yellow dandelionlike flower.

Eryngo was a thick prickly plant, a creeper around the trunk of a date palm with leaves resembling scorpions.

And centary, or star thistle, was a weedy aster on a tall leggy stem.

### Honoring tradition

"These leaves are the *maror* which the [Talmud] requires us to eat," Wolfson writes, "leaves (read: lives) of our ancestors in Egypt, which began as sweet but became bitter in time."

For the Jewish people left in Palestine and for the Sephardim living in the Mediterranean region, romaine lettuce became the *maror* of the seder.

The Ashkenazim of Eastern Europe and western Russia, and their descendants, substituted horseradish root, a plant native to their region.

"Don't forget that in Eastern Europe in the spring there were no greens, just leftover root vegetables, so horseradish became very popular," said Jewish culinary scholar and cookbook author Joan Nathan.

Although folklore would have you believe that horseradish gets its name because the gnarly root resembles a horse's hoof,



Tribune file photo by Bob Fila

Horseradish root has long been used as the bitter root in the seder ritual. It can be grated by hand or in a food processor.

horse (or hoarse) actually refers to the coarseness and pungency of the root, writes Mitchell Davis in "The Mensch Chef." The plant is notorious for being eye-tearingly, sinus-clearingly sharp, although this is only the case when it is cut.

Today, because the bitter herbs are tasted twice during the seder—first after the blessing over the bitter herbs, and later between two pieces of matzo for the Hillel sandwich—the practice of using both horseradish root and a bitter green (romaine, chicory, or endive) is common.

### Clean, and bitter

For the seder plate, it is important to clean the fresh greens of any dirt or insects. According to the Talmud, they cannot be cooked in any way—preserved, stewed or boiled—because that would neutralize their bitter fla-

vor.

Tradition says that the horseradish should be uncooked, unadulterated with beets, grated or slivered. Since prepared horseradish often is mixed with other ingredients such as beets or additives, many believe it lacks essential purity and do not use it.

Choose a piece of fresh horseradish root that is especially hard and free of soft spots. The texture is woody and dense, so a sharp serrated knife is the best way to saw through it. You can cut it into small pieces and throw it into a food processor to grate it, but if you put your face over the lid, you will sorely regret it.

A little bit of horseradish goes a long way.

Rabbi Steven Stark Lowenstein of Glencoe's Am Shalom temple eats an amount of horseradish that is equivalent to the

## Passover bitter herb salad

Preparation time: 18 minutes

Yield: 8 servings

■ This recipe is from "The Sephardic Kitchen," by Rabbi Robert Sternberg, executive director of the Hatikvah Holocaust Education and Resource Center in Springfield, Mass. It uses three plants that grow in the Mediterranean region that are accepted as the *maror* at the seder table: chicory, romaine and endive.

- 5 cups torn romaine lettuce leaves
- 2½ cups each: torn chicory leaves, torn endive lettuce leaves
- 1½ cups torn arugula or watercress
- 2 green onions, white and some green, thinly sliced
- 1 leek, white part only, thinly sliced
- ⅓ cup chopped fresh parsley leaves
- ¼ cup chopped fresh dill leaves
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh mint leaves
- 1 large clove garlic, peeled, chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ⅔ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ⅓ cup plus 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1 egg yolk, see note
- Freshly ground pepper

1. Combine romaine, chicory, endive, arugula, green onion and leek slices, parsley, dill and mint in a large mixing bowl; set aside.

2. Place the garlic into a mortar or on a cutting board with the salt; mash into a paste. Transfer the paste to a jar with a tight-fitting lid; add the olive oil, lemon juice and egg yolk to the jar. Shake well to combine; pour over the salad. Toss well; season with pepper to taste.

**Note:** Use a pasteurized egg, available in supermarkets, to avoid any salmonella bacteria that may be present in raw eggs.

### Nutrition information per serving:

205 calories, 84% of calories from fat, 20 g fat, 3 g saturated fat, 27 mg cholesterol, 7 g carbohydrates, 2 g protein, 306 mg sodium, 2 g fiber

## Horseradish cream

Preparation time: 20 minutes

Chilling time: 30 minutes

Yield: About 1 cup

■ Although it's hard to think of latkes past Hanukkah, they are served during Passover as well. This recipe, which comes from "The Gefilte Variations," by Jayne Cohen, is a great complement to fried potato pancakes.

- ½ cup peeled, finely diced cucumber
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 large clove garlic, minced
- 1 cup sour cream
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill
- 1 tablespoon drained bottled white horseradish, or to taste
- Freshly ground pepper

1. Sprinkle the cucumber with ¼ teaspoon of the salt; let stand 10 minutes. Wrap in paper towels or a kitchen towel; squeeze out as much liquid as possible.

2. Place the garlic into a mortar or on a cutting board with the remaining ¼ teaspoon of the salt. Mash into a paste; transfer to a small bowl. Stir in the cucumber, sour cream, dill, horseradish and pepper to taste. Cover with plastic wrap; refrigerate at least 30 minutes. Let mixture warm to room temperature before serving.

### Nutrition information per tablespoon:

32 calories, 83% of calories from fat, 3 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 6 mg cholesterol, 1 g carbohydrates, 0.5 g protein, 83 mg sodium, 0.1 g fiber

bulk of an olive, the amount discussed in the Talmud.

"It's a standard measure," he said. "I believe that if you can

consume all your bitter herbs during the seder then hopefully you'll be blessed without bitterness for a year."