



DEADLINE NEAR

Time to send in your farmers market information for Good Eating's annual roundup. **Page 2**

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HOLIDAY POURS

Celebratory wine recommendations for Passover and Easter meals. **Page 3**

IT'S TRADITION?

Passover rules have one writer longing for lentils, corn and other forbidden foods. **Page 4**

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4 Chicago Tribune | Good Eating | Section 6 | Wednesday, April 9, 2014 NS

Longing for FORBIDDEN FOODS

Passover custom leaves one writer hungry for kitniyot items — such as corn, rice, millet and legumes — prohibited for many Jews during the holiday

BY PEGGY WOLFF
Special to Tribune Newspapers

As rich as the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition is, once each year I lean toward going Sephardic for a week. That time is, of course, Passover, when the two largest groups of Jews follow very different food customs.

The Ashkenazic Jews are from France, Germany, Eastern Europe and their descendants. Sephardic Jews are the Jews of Spain, Portugal, North Africa, the Middle East and their descendants.

On Passover, most Jews avoid chametz, leavened products from wheat, barley, rye, spelt and oat, the five grains mentioned in the Talmud, one of the central works of the Jewish people. Hundreds of years later, and during the 13th century, post-Talmudic authorities added another group of restricted foods to the original five grains.

This second group of foods is called kitniyot (KIT-nee-yaht) and it includes corn, rice, millet, sesame and poppy seeds, and legumes such as lentils, chick peas, fava beans and edamame. The Sephardic Jews refused to go along with the prohibition. This was what they grew, and this was what they ate. But the Ashkenazic communities honored the restriction of avoiding kitniyot, and it became their tradition.

This Passover food custom is probably the best-known of the differences between the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, and it is a big one. While the commandment to avoid chametz is written in the Talmud, the eating of kitniyot is not a law. It is not a commandment. It is a custom. And they weigh differently.

Rabbi Phyllis A. Sommer, an Ashkenazic rabbi from Am Shalom in Glencoe, Ill., knows of many Reform rabbis, including herself, who eat kitniyot during the holiday. "There's this sense that we can all eat kitniyot because the Sephardic do," she says. She buys corn tortillas — not wheat — and makes her own refried beans by boiling and squashing them.

Why more restrictions? "It was about appearance," says Sommer, meaning that raw kitniyot resembles the five grains, making it easy for someone to get them confused with chametz. One more reason: These products typically grew next to grain fields and it was not unusual for a small amount of chametz to get mixed in.

"We have to figure out how to celebrate the spirit of the holiday," Sommer says. "It should be less of a food issue and more about how people want to make



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Judaism a part of their lives."

Some rabbis say, what's the big deal? It's only eight days! There are more food choices than ever.

"For me it all hinges on the line from the Haggadah," says Rabbi David Young of Congregation B'nai Tzedek in Fountain Valley, Calif. "In every generation, a person is obligated to view oneself as personally freed from Egypt. We are told that it is our obligation to feel what they felt and understand what they went through. Today we have it so easy compared to the slaves in Egypt, but to get just a taste of what they went through, we make it a little difficult to cook for a week."

What if you have no religious food traditions?

Growing up, there was no heroic effort in my parents' home to scout for breadcrumbs under the sofa, nor were there four sets of dishes — one for meat, one for dairy, plus separate meat and dairy dishes for Passover.

Kids are like little video cameras running around with legs. They record everything. Take everything in. What did I record? Hit playback — not much there in terms of food customs.

After I married a man who lives more Jewishly than I ever did, I found myself going through the motions. I paid exorbitant prices for kosher-for-Pass-

over foods; spent days setting up three tables for 28 Seder guests; had many conversations with my sister about how many briskets she should bring; set out the Czechoslovakian plates my grandparents brought back with the 18-karat gold rims. I now know that to undergo the whole experience is to take over your life for an entire week.

I know people who keep a proper kosher house, and to them it's relevant and comforting.

But the way I remember the Seder, I mumbled away at a Haggadah but no one teased out any meaning. Everyone wanted to get past the service and on to the meal. The Seder lasted

one night and Passover was finished.

I came to realize that what mattered more was about being a Jew morally. If Passover is a holiday of redemption, then how are we to be free? How are we to free others?

During a Seder my husband and I hosted, I took so much joy in inviting immigrants from Belarus who had never experienced a Seder. The grandmother taught piano. Her son was an engineer, the daughter-in-law a chemist. No one could find a job here. They followed along, sort-of-politely-smiling, with their Russian Haggadah translations.

The next day, my dad reached out to a friend who

Fresh fava bean salad

Prep: 25 minutes **Cook:** 11 minutes **Makes:** 4 servings

It is a sure sign of spring when fava beans appear in the market. Happily, their arrival coincides with the feast of Passover. The beans are enjoyed by the Sephardim, the Mediterranean Jews, and by other Jews who allow the custom of kitniyot (rice, corn, legumes) during the holiday. This recipe is adapted from "The Scent of Orange Blossoms" by Kitty Morse and Danielle Mamane

- 12 ounces shelled and peeled fava beans, plus 5 tender pods reserved
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 1/2 teaspoons paprika
- 1 scant tablespoon cumin
- 5 cloves garlic, minced
- 3/8 cup water
- 5 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 15 cilantro sprigs, finely chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon salt

1 String the reserved bean pods; cut them into 1/2-inch pieces.

2 Combine the olive oil, paprika, cumin and garlic in a large skillet over medium heat. Cook until the mixture begins to foam, 2-3 minutes.

3 Add the beans, pod pieces and water. Cook, stirring, until the beans are tender but not soft, 8-10 minutes. Add the lemon juice, cilantro and salt. Cook, stirring, 1-2 minutes.

4 Cool; serve at room temperature.

Nutrition information per serving: 168 calories, 11 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 13 g carbohydrates, 5 g protein, 338 mg sodium, 4 g fiber

owned a furniture store in Skokie, Ill. In less than a week, the young man, trained as an engineer, was hired. Selling La-Z-Boy recliners. He had a job, in America.

This year, I know that if I were shopping in Israel, there would be so many foods with kitniyot, which reflects the Sephardic population. So why not prepare an option or two that expands the meal choices, like Persian rice or a chicken with lentil dish. Like Rabbi Sommer, I'm just trying to make a meaningful connection and if, as she said, "the tradition we were raised in is too restrictive, then why not?"

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