

Bittersweet: The Passover Feast

In Judaism, eating is not simply a mundane activity but a means of reconnecting with community, history, and tradition. Nowhere is this more evident than the seven-day (eight outside Israel) holiday of Passover (or *Pesach*), also called the Festival of *Matzah* (Unleavened Bread), beginning this year on April 8 and ending on April 16. By its very name, the Festival of *Matzah* clearly places food at the centre of the ritual menu. Commemorating the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt and their eventual liberation, Passover is one of the most celebrated of all Jewish holidays, and its association with food may explain part of that popularity!

The Passover *Seder* (Hebrew for 'order') is the feast held on the first two evenings of the festival, when Jews gather to read from the *Haggadah* (a liturgical text and guide), drink wine, tell stories, sing, and eat special foods. During the first night's meal, the youngest person at the table sings four questions, all of which ask what makes the night different from all other nights. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, this year's *Seder* will have to be different from all other years, as families isolate themselves and host virtual festivities on Skype, Zoom or via FaceTime.

Celebrating Passover requires several days of preparation, beginning with an exhaustive house-cleaning. The aim of scrupulously patrolling pantries and kitchen shelves, turning inside and out the pockets of clothing and scrubbing every nook and cranny in the home, is to get rid of even the tiniest forbidden crumb of *hametz* that might lurk there. *Hametz* is defined as any grain that ferments on decomposition, namely, wheat, barley, spelt, oats and rye. In deference to the memory of the Israelites who fled Egypt in such a hurry that their dough did not have time to rise, Jews avoid eating or even benefitting from any use of *hametz*, and dispose of things like bread, yeast, beer, and in some communities, even yoghurt and fermented milk products. All cooking utensils and implements are exchanged for special holiday ones or scoured and washed in boiling water, calling to mind the polished pots and pans in Van Schooten's painting (see below).



Fig 1.

There is a ritual search for leaven (*bedikat hametz*) and cats are invited to catch mice that might bring in some leavened breadcrumbs to the already clean house. One such ‘food guardian’ is immortalised in an 18th century piece of soft-paste porcelain (see below).



Fig 2.

The *Seder* is a multimedia event – its sights, sounds, tastes and smells captivate young and old alike, and there are few foods that carry as much history and meaning as do those on the *Seder* plate (*Qe'arah*), which traditionally holds five or six items that symbolise parts of the Passover story. These items are raised, dipped, combined, eaten, or pointed out, and include *chazeret* (usually lettuce), *karpas* (a green vegetable such as celery, which is ostentatiously included in a 17th century still life by Van Son in, see below), *beitzah* (a roasted or hard-boiled egg that represents both mourning and rebirth), *zeroa* (shank bone), *haroset* (a sticky fruit-and-nut paste that mimics the clay mortar used by Jewish slaves in Egypt) and *maror* (bitter herbs that act as a reminder of the bitterness of servitude, although most Jews now use horseradish). A new addition to the *Seder* plate, and an essential motif of the *Feast & Fast* exhibition, is the pineapple. Prized as a symbol of welcome and prosperity, it stands as a sign of hospitality to today's refugees.



Fig 3.

As well as the items on the *Seder* plate, the *Seder* table also features a container of salt water or vinegar, four glasses of wine (consumed while reclining) and three pieces of *matzah* stacked and wrapped or covered in a cloth. Jewish texts and rituals send the clear message that eating bread brings Jews nearer to God and God nearer to them, and for hundreds of years *matzah* was considered the 'Jewish food' par excellence. (Up until the 15th century, *matzah* was relatively thick, dense, soft and round, but today it is equated by most Westerners with a thin, cracker-like, square product that originated in Germany). In fact, *matzah* was so popular among Italian Christians during the 18th century that in cities like Rome and Mantua, Catholic authorities attempting to keep Jews and Christians apart frequently banned Jews from selling *matzah* to non-Jews and barred Christians from eating it.

During the *Seder*, participants make and eat the 'Hillel Sandwich' (*Korech*), by putting a bitter herb and *haroset* (which according to one Iberian recipe from 1726 contained raisins, almonds, cinnamon, pistachios, dates, ginger, walnuts, apples, pears, figs and hazelnuts) between two pieces of *matzah*. It was a wrap in the modern sense. *Matzah* as a wrap, being convenient and portable, fits into the hasty nature of the first Passover. A verse from the Book of Exodus states, 'And so shall you eat it: with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste...'. (Exodus 12.11) The *matzah* wrap was a version of fast food!

The main festive meal (*Shulchan Orech*) sees the parade of dinner food begin. Quintessential Passover fare for Ashkenazim (Jews from Central and Eastern Europe) includes soup with *matzah* balls, *matzah* brei (a dish of soaked pieces of *matzah* mixed with beaten eggs and fried as a pancake or omelette), gefilte fish (a poached mixture of ground, deboned fish such as carp or pike) with horseradish, and for dessert, nut, honey and sponge cakes, in which finely ground *matzah* meal and potato starch substitute for flour. Sephardim (Jews from the Iberian Peninsula) might enjoy *mina* (a magnificent pie, a bit like lasagne, in which *matzah* is layered with spiced meat such as ground lamb and beef, or vegetables), roasted lamb or poultry accompanied by meat-stuffed vegetables and *apio* (a sweet and sour combination of carrots and celery root). A typical 16th century Spanish meal served on the first night of Passover would plausibly have included roasted lamb in a coating of chard, mint, garlic and egg; chickpeas cooked with honey, onions and spices, and turrón (an almond and honey nougat) for dessert.

The challenge of celebrating Passover in the face of COVID-19 underscores the fact that the *Seder* night is not a time of frozen decorum, but of reinvention. Jewish food is a dynamic cultural phenomenon. Practices are lost and added over the centuries and layered upon each other, intertwined, and continually shifting. At this moment of rupture, the enthusiasm of *Seder* participants in every generation (whether eating symbolic foods, talking about food, preparing food, or visualizing imaginary meals) reminds us that food is not just fuel. It can offer new connections, new adventures and, maybe, liberation.

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Figure 1: Floris Gerritsz. van Schooten (1585/88–1656), *Kitchen utensils, meat and vegetables* (detail), Haarlem, Netherlands, c.1620–30. Oil on canvas. 102.2 x 158.1 cm. Given by Prof. C. Hague, 1820 (96). Conserved by Victoria Sutcliffe at the Hamilton Kerr Institute. © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Figure 2: *Cat seated with a mouse in its paw*, Bow Porcelain Manufactory, England, c. 1753-8. Soft-paste porcelain painted overglaze in enamels. 8.1 x 5 cm. Dr J.W.L. Glaisher Bequest (C.3055-1928). © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Figure 3: Joris van Son (1623–67), *Still life with a lobster* (detail), Antwerp, Belgium, 1660. Oil on canvas. 64.1 x 89.2 cm. C.B. Marlay Bequest, 1912 (M.76). © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.