

[Brandywine Table]

# Easter and Passover

Laura Muzzi Brennan

## SHARING HOLIDAY TRADITIONS



I GREW UP CELEBRATING EASTER, AS did most of my neighbors. Eating chocolate-coconut eggs for breakfast and sitting down to a ham dinner are some of my happiest childhood memories.

When I moved to Philadelphia, a new friend invited me to her Passover Seder, introducing me to the wonder of her mother's matzoh ball soup and brisket. That was over 20 years ago, and I've never forgotten the food—and how much richer life is when we share in each other's holiday traditions.

Whether that tradition is Easter or Passover, holiday hosts must strike a balance between feeding their guests well and spending time with them, so I called on a professional to share his ideas and his best tips for seamless entertaining of groups large and small.

A graduate of the Restaurant School at Wildwood, Jeff Ebert has been the executive chef at Finley Catering for five years. Finley's venues include Ballroom at the Ben, the Crystal Tea Room and Union Trust in Philadelphia. Since fall 2016, they've also catered at Newtown Square's Ballroom at Ellis Preserve. While these venues are popular for weddings and corporate events, Finley Catering plans to add other events including an Easter celebration in spring 2018.

Whether Chef Ebert is in his professional kitchen or spending for family and friends at home, he believes preparation is paramount. He still lives by the 5 Ps—prior planning prevents poor performance—a lesson from his mentorship at Great Valley's Desmond Hotel.

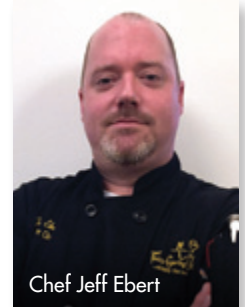
Besides considering budget, number of guests and their tastes, Ebert advises home cooks to factor in cleanup time, oven space and each dish's cooking temperature. Whenever possible, he says, choose dishes that share the same cooking temperature, and you'll make hosting that much easier.

Before shopping, Ebert lays out serving dishes and utensils for each menu item, a trick he first learned from his mother who hosted many an Easter dinner. (Incidentally, lamb was always on the menu in his Irish household.)

He also writes out a "fire list," detailing exactly when to put each dish in the oven and how much cooking and resting time it requires. "You need a plan because when you start drinking wine . . ." he laughs, trailing off.

Ebert is also full of ideas for the little touches that make holiday gatherings memorable. If your plates are oven-safe, he recommends heating them at 200–250° for a few minutes. He likes to garnish food simply—with herb sprigs, micro greens or snow pea shoots. And if you're serving buffet style, he suggests placing dishes at different levels to add visual interest. No fancy serving pieces necessary: position a few bricks, boxes or books under linens, top with platters and you've got a show-stopping display.

Whether you're breaking Easter bread or matzoh this spring, I hope the following recipes help you appreciate the beauty of your own—and your neighbor's—traditions.



Chef Jeff Ebert

## Herb Crusted Roasted Rack of Lamb With Lavender Jus

“Frenching” a rack of lamb means removing the meat, membrane and fat from the first few inches of bone for a clean, elegant presentation. Ask your butcher to do it or watch this helpful video at [www.FineCooking.com/videos/how-to-french-rack-of-lamb.aspx](http://www.FineCooking.com/videos/how-to-french-rack-of-lamb.aspx). This classic recipe comes courtesy of Chef Jeff Ebert, Finley Catering.



- ¾ C. medium coarse bread crumbs
- 2 Tb. fresh chopped rosemary
- 1 Tb. minced garlic
- Kosher salt and black pepper, to taste
- 2 Tb. melted butter,
- 2 each 7–8 bone rack of lamb, trimmed and Frenched
- 4 Tb. Dijon mustard
- 2 medium shallots, chopped
- 1 Tb. vegetable oil
- ½ C. red wine
- 3 C. beef or veal stock
- 2 Tb. dried lavender leaves

Preheat oven to 375°. In a bowl, combine bread crumbs, most of the rosemary, garlic and salt and pepper. Add butter to mixture so it clumps slightly in your hand.

Season lamb rack with salt and pepper. In a skillet on high heat, sear all sides of lamb rack until golden brown. Brush the mustard on the lamb rack and roll in bread crumb mixture until evenly coated. Wrap bones in foil to prevent charring.

Place lamb racks on baking sheet, bone side down. Roast in oven for 12–15 minutes depending on desired doneness. (Chef Ebert always recommends rare-to medium rare for lamb racks. Aim for an internal temperature of 110°.)

Remove from oven and let rest, loosely covered, for 8–10 minutes. Remember the meat will continue to cook for a short time.

## Symbolic Food: Haroset

Haroset (or charoset), a fruit and nut paste, is one of six symbolic foods on the Passover Seder plate. It represents the mortar and brick Hebrew slaves used to build Egypt’s pyramids. My friend Sara tweaks her haroset from year to year. This is her latest version, adapted from Bon Appetit. Serve on matzoh.

### Pistachio and Almond Dried Fruit Haroset

- 1½ C. unsalted raw pistachios
- ½ C. chopped pitted dates
- ½ C. chopped dried cherries
- ½ C. chopped dried apricots
- ¼ C. Riesling
- ¼ C. mix of pomegranate/apple juices
- 1 Tb. honey

- 1½ tsp. fresh lemon juice
- 1 tsp. lemon zest
- 1 tsp. orange zest
- 1 tsp. ground cinnamon
- ½ tsp. cardamom
- ⅓ C. roasted salted Marcona almonds

Stir pistachios in a heavy skillet over medium heat until lightly toasted, 4 to 5 minutes. Set aside to cool. Mix dates, cherries, apricots, Riesling and juice in a medium bowl. Let stand for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Mix in honey, lemon juice, both zests, cinnamon and cardamom. Chop pistachios and almonds. Mix into haroset.

Makes a generous 3 C.

To make the lavender jus:

In a small sauce pan, sauté the shallots in oil until translucent. Deglaze with red wine and reduce by half. Add stock and lavender leaves and simmer until reduced by half. Strain and discard solids.

Slice lamb rack between each bone and plate. Spoon sauce over meat. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

## Serrano Ham, Gruyère and Egg Brioche Tartine

A tartine is basically an open-faced sandwich and an easy, yet upscale brunch item for Easter. Chef Jeff Ebert suggests serving mimosas or sangria. Their sweetness will offset the ham’s saltiness.

- 6, 1”-thick slices of brioche loaf bread
- 2 Tb. unsalted butter plus more softened butter for brushing
- 3 C. frisée, torn into bite-sized pieces
- 2 Tb. extra virgin olive oil
- 2 Tb. fresh lemon juice
- Kosher salt and black pepper, to taste
- 12 large eggs
- ½ lb. Gruyère cheese, thinly sliced, enough for 12 slices



- 12 thin slices of Serrano ham, room temperature
- ½ C. scallions, thinly sliced on the bias

Preheat broiler. Brush each side of brioche with softened butter and toast both sides under broiler until golden brown.

In a mixing bowl, whisk together olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper. Add frisée and toss.

Working in batches if necessary, melt 2 Tb. butter in a skillet and cook eggs sunny side up over medium heat until egg whites are firm and yolks are runny—about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Top the brioche slices with Gruyère, aiming for maximum coverage.

Place under broiler until cheese is melted. Transfer to plate. Top with the frisée salad, 2 slices Serrano ham and 2 fried eggs each. Garnish with scallions. Serve immediately.

Makes 6 servings.

## Chilled Minted Pea Soup

This soup makes a refreshing start to any spring meal, especially Easter dinner where ham or lamb is the main meat dish. The peas’ sweetness balances ham’s saltiness and lamb’s richness. Adapted from Melissa Hamilton and Christopher Hirsheimer’s recipe in Bon Appetit.

- 2 Tb. butter
- 2 leeks, white and light green parts only, chopped
- 4 C. vegetable broth, divided
- 2 lbs. frozen peas (6–7 C.)
- ½ bunch Italian parsley, thick stems removed
- ½ C. fresh mint leaves

Kosher salt and white pepper, to taste  
Garnish: sour cream, fresh snipped chives  
and radishes



Soak leeks in water to remove any grit. Drain well and pat dry with paper towels.

Melt butter in a large pot over medium heat. Add leeks and cook, stirring frequently, until they soften but do not brown, about 5 minutes. Add 2 C. broth and bring to a boil. Add peas. Reduce to a simmer and cook 2–3 minutes, just to take the cold edge off them.

Turn off heat. Stir in parsley, mint, salt and pepper. Working in batches, ladle soup into a blender and blend until smooth. It's nearly impossible to get a perfectly smooth texture so you have three options: 1. push the mixture through a fine meshed sieve. 2. purchase a Vitamix, or 3. don't worry about it and know the soup is delicious no matter what!

Refrigerate for a few hours or overnight. Adjust seasonings and thin with milk or broth if desired.

Garnish with sour cream, chives and radishes sliced paper thin or cut into matchsticks.

Makes 8 C. (about 12 servings).

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### Chicken Soup with Matzoh Balls

*Janet Schwartz kindly shared her family's recipe with me. It originated with her Polish maternal great grandmother. Janet laughed as she told me it was the one dish her mother, a non-cook, could make well.*

*For the chicken soup:*

1 whole chicken or 4–5 lbs. chicken parts,  
skin on, bone in  
1 carrot, sliced  
2 stalks celery, sliced  
1 medium onion, sliced  
1 parsnip  
1 bunch curly parsley

4 tsp. salt  
Pepper to taste  
Water  
1 bunch dill, washed and tied with thread

*For the matzoh balls:*

4 large eggs  
1 C. water  
Pinch of salt  
4–6 Tb. chicken fat, shortening, or oil  
(Use 6 Tb. for softer balls.)  
1½ C. matzoh meal (or a little more to  
make firmer balls)  
Water  
1½ tsp. salt

*To make the soup:*

Put chicken, vegetables, parsley and salt and pepper in a stock pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil. When foam appears on top, remove it with a slotted spoon. Then lower the heat to the lowest possible setting where the soup can stay boiling.

After 45 minutes, add the dill. After 15 more minutes, check to see if the vegetables are soft and chicken is cooked through. (If not soft, cook 15 minutes more.)

Take the chicken out and strain the soup until clear. Discard vegetables (or eat them) and save chicken for another use. (Janet's mom ground the chicken and used it for chicken croquettes.)

*To make the matzoh balls (usually made a day or two in advance):*

Mix eggs, water, pinch of salt, chicken fat and matzoh meal in a bowl and refrigerate, uncovered, for 30 minutes.

Fill a stock pot with water and 1½ tsp. salt and bring to a boil over high heat.

Make about 24 matzoh balls out of the refrigerated mixture. (They'll "grow" in the water.)

Drop the balls into the boiling water and return it to a boil. Put a lid on the pot, leaving just a crack for steam to escape. Reduce the heat to medium. The water should still be boiling. Cook 30–40 minutes.

Pick out the balls and lay in a single layer on a tray. Do not cover or refrigerate until cooled. Bring matzoh balls to room temperature before placing them in soup.

When ready to serve, divide soup into 12 bowls and place 2 matzoh balls in each.

Makes 12 servings.

### Brisket

2½–3 lb. brisket (first cut)  
Sweet paprika, to taste  
Kosher salt, to taste  
Garlic powder, to taste  
Black pepper, to taste  
2 small or medium onions, sliced  
2 Tb. oil, divided  
½ C. red wine  
1 C. beef broth  
½–1 lb. sliced mushrooms, optional



Preheat oven to 325°.

Generously season brisket all over with paprika, salt, garlic powder and a few grinds of black pepper. (Sara uses a couple Tb. paprika.) Allow to sit for a few minutes.

In a Dutch oven or other large ovenproof pan, cook onions over medium high heat in 1 Tb. oil until starting to brown, about 3–5 minutes. Set onions aside.

Add 1 Tb. oil to Dutch oven and brown brisket on all sides. Top with onions and pour wine and broth on top. Cover with foil or lid but leave a little space for venting. Cook for 3–4 hours until brisket is tender. If using sliced mushrooms, add them during the last hour of cooking.

Makes 6–8 servings.

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### Mom's Chopped Liver

*Cindy Hirsh learned to make this Polish dish from her mother, Raymonde Winkler. Her version is Kosher for Passover. Serve on matzoh.*

3–4 large slices calves' liver, purchased from  
a kosher butcher  
Kosher salt  
3 large onions, sliced  
Generous ¼ C. olive oil  
4 hard boiled eggs, sliced  
2 cloves garlic, sliced  
¼ piece of matzoh, broken into pieces

Make an "x" or a slit on one side of the liver slices. Rinse livers and pat dry. If there

are veins, remove them and pull to remove the clear skin surrounding the liver.

Sprinkle kosher salt on one side of liver slices. Place on top of broiler grate so the blood will drain away into the broiler pan below it. Set the oven to broil and place the broiler pan with livers' salted side up on the second highest rack in oven. Cook until the slices turn brown. Flip the slices over and sprinkle kosher salt on the other side. Broil until brown.

To make sure liver has been koshered, (the liver will only be considered kosher if all the blood has been drained and cooked off) slice into it. It should no longer be bloody, and the meat inside should be tan. This process happens quickly so monitor carefully or the liver will be overcooked. Slice into large pieces soon after removing from broiler because you don't want the liver to keep cooking. Set aside.

Heat some olive oil in a frying pan on medium heat and put in the onion slices when oil shimmers. Stir to coat onions with oil. Cover and reduce temperature to low. This allows the onions to soften quickly

and reduces the time needed to caramelize. Once softened and beginning to brown, remove lid and allow the liquid to evaporate, stirring occasionally until the onions are a rich caramel color.



Add the garlic slices and cook a few minutes longer until the garlic slices have softened but not too long so that the onions begin to burn.

Set up your food processor's meat grinding attachment and use the medium-holed disc. Alternate placing liver, onions and eggs into the grinder. To remove any ingredients that have gotten stuck, place some of the broken matzoh pieces into the grinder. Grind the mixture a second time,

adding additional matzoh pieces to clean out the grinder.

Grinding the liver twice ensures a creamy texture and mixing of the ingredients.

Makes 10-12 appetizer servings. ♦

*Laura traces her love of all things culinary to the first time she leafed through her mother's Betty Crocker's Cooky Book—which still occupies a place of honor among her 600+ cookbooks. A passionate supporter of local food, she co-founded a farmers market, judges area food contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with the excitement most people reserve for winning a Mega Millions jackpot.*



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