

# Moses had a plan. You need one, too.

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By [Bonnie S. Benwick](#)

The cooks who host a Passover Seder are busy, busy people. Staging a meal that carries the weight of thousands of years of Jewish symbolism can have that effect.

Thanksgiving's a Sunday picnic by comparison. The house needs to be rid of all chametz, or food made from grains that are leavened and fermented. Other ingredients need to be put aside for the eight-day holiday, which starts Monday night; the list can include rice, beans, corn and all manner of seeds, depending on whether the family is of Ashkenazic (European and Eastern European) descent or Sephardic (Spanish, North African, Mediterranean). Haggadahs must be rounded up; the books contain the order of the Seder service and tell the story of how the Jews were freed from slavery in ancient Egypt. With songs and recitations around the table, the Seder is more entertaining, universal and inspirational than yet another viewing of "The Ten Commandments," Charlton Heston's Moses notwithstanding.

There's kosher wine to be gathered, brisket or fish to be ordered and extra chairs, table linens, plates and platters to be cleaned; it's a structured sit-down affair, with props. Lots of grocery shopping to do. Many dishes benefit from being made in advance; finding space to refrigerate or freeze them requires a good bit of kitchen patrol.

With the following tips from the pros, it's possible to step up your game or take on a first-time Seder with confidence.

## Get organized

Whether you've invited eight or 28 guests, writing things down is the best place to start. Committing the menu to paper will keep you from making too many dishes. It's tempting to

lay out a bountiful dessert spread, but at the end of a long night and after four ceremonial glasses of wine, a single chocolate truffle is all Susie Fishbein needs.

In fact, the first thing the New Jersey author of eight kosher cookbooks does is consult her paperwork from the previous Seder. She keeps photocopies of recipes in separate plastic sleeves; she reads over her notes about tweaks and techniques. Her shopping list springs from her previous year's list of Passover products that became family favorites as well as total amounts of all recipe ingredients. That way, she can add up various egg yolks, whites and whole eggs to determine the total amount she'll need.

Unless you're vegan or watching your cholesterol, Passover is about as eggy as Easter: Eggs are used in cakes, souffled vegetable side dishes and weeknight frittatas. A cold egg soup is served between the gefilte fish and the matzoh ball soup at some Ashkenazi tables. Fishbein recommends buying eggs in bulk, from a big-box store.

Fishbein shared her favorite Seder tip in "Passover by Design" (Mesorah, 2008): she uses small bento boxes to pre-portion the symbolic foods that will be blessed at the table, plus a small sake flask and towel for ceremonial hand washing, eliminating the need for guests to have to get up and down when lack of elbow room can become the 11th plague.

## **Make better matzoh/matzoh ball soup**

At this time of year, Passover's most recognizable foodstuff is on sale in five-pack sets. They're handy, but the cracker sheets within can't compare with the taste of homemade. Yet who has the time or wherewithal to make matzoh from scratch?

DGS Delicatessen chef Barry Koslow and master baker Mark Furstenberg say it's easy to do: flour, water, olive oil, maybe some finishing salt. Roll the dough very thin and lightly prick it all over with a fork. Bake it on a hot stone. Of course, it won't be kosher to use for proper Seder blessings, but it will elevate the holiday's most popular breakfast (made with eggs!). "Crisp, house-made matzoh makes a better matzoh brei," Koslow says.

From matzoh comes matzoh meal — to make matzoh balls. Furstenberg fondly remembers the matzoh balls his family's cook used to saute in butter until they were crisp on the outside and tender within. They were served as a side dish. Ashburn cook Marcia A. Friedman riffs on family heritage by creating a matzoh ball with a meaty interior in her new cookbook, "Meatballs and Matzah Balls: Recipes and Reflections From a Jewish and Italian Life" (self-published, 2013).

When matzoh balls find their way into soup, even an overnight stay in the liquid can make it cloudy. New York kosher cookbook author Helen Nash prepares matzoh balls in water in the classic way, then transfers them to a large pot of store-bought chicken broth. But that's only for holding them in the refrigerator or freezer. For serving, she'll make a chicken broth that's clear and grease-free by lining a strainer with a chilled, damp paper towel.

“It works much better than cheesecloth,” she says. Chicken fat sticks to the towel and congeals; some people will incorporate the schmaltz into their matzoh balls. Nash pitches the paper towel.

## **Go eggless and meatless**

It is possible to eat well through Passover without cracking a single egg, of course. Debra Wasserman, who is co-director of the nonprofit Vegetarian Resource Group in Baltimore, has been doing so for more than 30 years. She replaces the egg with ripe, mashed banana when she makes macaroons (two mashed bananas plus 1 cup of freshly grated coconut). Instead of matzoh ball soup — she prefers to stay away from vegan matzoh balls because they tend to fall apart — she makes a soup of pureed fresh tomato that’s finished with parsley and spices. Her entrees often draw on Indian and Asian cuisine.

“Each year, the dishes I bring are a huge hit, because they are different,” she says.

## **Augment the weeknight repertoire**

Not every post-Seder Passover meal needs to incorporate matzoh. But it’s good to learn a few recipes that can transform the stuff, such as matzoh lasagna and the layered holiday pies known as minas. Leftover brisket can be shredded into a long-simmered ragu. The Seder’s symbolic fruit-and-nut mixture called haroset can be used to stuff baked apples. For a sweet snack, Marcia Friedman toasts Passover marshmallows. She thinks the special holiday ones taste better than regular marshmallows because they’re made with tapioca starch instead of cornstarch. She bakes them in a 350-degree oven on a foil-lined, lightly greased baking sheet for 12 to 15 minutes, during which time they puff and spread, turning crunchy on top.