

Take an Exodus from Heavy Fare Try Fruits and Veggies at Seder

By Linda Morel

New York (JTA) — Hard-boiled eggs, brisket, matzah balls laced with chicken fat and flourless cakes that require eight eggs. Not to forget the farfel casseroles laden with margarine and often containing harmful trans fats or the saturated fat of butter.

Passover may be the quintessential spring holiday, but many of its foods are far from "lite" in calories, cholesterol and fat.

This heavy fare evolved in part because most American Jews emigrated from Eastern European countries, where snow was still knee deep when Passover arrived and it made sense to beat the chill by indulging in foods that stick to the ribs.

But must we continue this pattern in a country with gentler springs, central heating, and rising rates of heart disease, diabetes and obesity?

To balance the hard-boiled eggs, glistening casseroles and meaty entrees on seder tables, enlightened hosts often select side dishes brimming with fresh produce. They're filling but light, tasty and attractive.

"Health hazards come with affluence," explains Michael van Straten in "The Healthy Jewish Cookbook: 100 Delicious Recipes from Around the World." "As Jews acquired money they added more meat to their diet, consuming fewer vegetables, beans and grains."

An osteopath, acupuncturist and a naturopath — a practitioner of healing without drugs — van Straten, became a pioneer in nutrition long before most people realized that rich foods aren't healthy.

"In my early 20s I was already studying naturopathy, seen as cranky nutrition," says van Straten, who lived in England until recently. "I loved my mother's Jewish cooking, but soon became aware of the health risks."

Sharing an apartment with fellow students, he began tweaking her recipes to reduce fat and add nutritious ingredients. Years later he explored recipes from across the Diaspora, culling light fare to feature in "The Healthy Jewish Cookbook."

"The basic principles of kosher cooking are healthy, particularly those which forbid the consumption of milk and meat foods in the same meal," van Straten says. "This simple practice immediately reduces the amount of saturated and artery-clogging fat."

His quest to healthier eating led him to Sephardi cuisine, which calls for the olive oil and produce found in sunny Mediterranean countries.

Still, Passover lures many from heart-smart foods. Jewish women — and some men — take pride in preparing their most luscious recipes for the holiday, which celebrates the Israelites' freedom from bondage, the defining moment in Jewish history.

"High fat foods are usually high calorie foods," says registered dietitian Lisa Ellis. "The cholesterol



Michael van Straten

found in egg yolks, full-fat dairy products and meat is unhealthy, artery-clogging fat."

Ellis, of White Plains, NY, has four children and keeps a kosher home. She often prepares seders for 15 to 20 people.

"When you consume so much high-fat, high-calorie food in a short time span, your gall bladder has to work harder than it should," she says. "Foods high in fat stay in the stomach longer than vegetables and fruit because they take longer to digest."

Ellis says this all becomes a burden on someone's system.

Some of the ritual foods associated with Passover are full of fiber — the charoset, bitter herbs and greens. Ellis says there are ways to cut down on the eggs and fat-laden dishes associated with this special holiday.

"Sometimes you can use less fat and fewer eggs in recipes," she says. "Experiment with recipes before Passover arrives." In place of margarine, Ellis suggests using trans-fat free oils such as olive, canola and safflower. Olive oil sometimes works well in baking.

"You save here, you save there, it all adds up," she says.

Another suggestion: "If you want to participate in the egg course, just eat the egg white," Ellis says. "It's pure protein and under 20 calories, with no fat."

If you feel deprived without tasting the yolk, she suggests cutting the egg in half and sharing it with someone else at the table.

For seder guests, who have no control over the fat that goes into the cooking, Ellis says to shrink the portion sizes.

"Portion control is the most important thing when considering high fat, high cholesterol foods," she says. "If you eat half portions, you'll consume half as many fatty foods."

As seders entail several courses, no one is leaving the table hungry. The problem is, many people leave too full.

"If you're prone to indigestion, you run the chance of getting reflux," Ellis says. "Your stomach has a lining to protect it against the acids that break down food. If that acid backs up into the esophagus, which has no protective lining, you can experience a burning sensation in your chest and throat."

Ellis selects her seder menu carefully.

"I don't serve brisket on Passover if I'm making matzah balls because they contain chicken

fat," she says. "Instead I prepare a skinless chicken dish with dried fruit, which provides fiber."

She recommends eating plenty of fruits and vegetables during Passover to counteract the binding effect of matzah.

Van Straten stresses the importance of whole wheat matzah.

"One of the great problems of Passover is constipation, already a widely suffered Jewish illness, made worse by the lack of fiber," he says.

When it comes to side dishes, Ellis prefers steamed vegetables. For seders she sautes broccoli or string beans in a little olive oil, sprinkling slivered almonds on top. Besides honey glazed carrots, her menu typically features a salad.

Noting that many people crave a good matzah farfel, she serves a small one, so "everyone gets to try a little." Ellis adds fiber by preparing the dish with peaches or other fruit.

She caps off the meal with pastries, but also offers fresh fruit for a lighter choice.

Afraid your family and friends will rebel against spa cuisine on Passover?

Give them the chopped liver, potato kugel, brisket and sponge cake they crave. But these brown foods are crying out for the healthy crunch of fiber. Fruits and vegetables not only add color to the table, they complement the season.

Remember, a sprig of greens on the seder plate is the first sign of spring.

The recipes here, as well as the historical information and health notes, are from "The Healthy Jewish Cookbook."

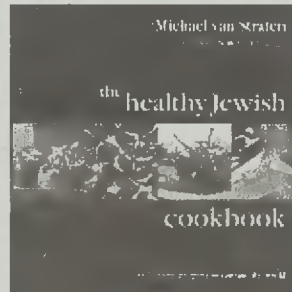
Sweet and Sour Zucchini Sicilian Jews adopted this Turkish recipe.

1/4 c. olive oil
8 lg. zucchini, cut into lg. cubes
1 T. finely chopped, fresh oregano leaves
1 sm. garlic clove, finely chopped
3 T. red wine vinegar
3 T. raw sugar (if unavailable, use light brown sugar)
1/2 t. ground cinnamon

Warm the oil in a large frying pan. Saute the zucchini, stirring frequently, until softened but not browned. Using a slotted spoon, put onto a serving plate and sprinkle with the oregano. Add the garlic, vinegar, sugar, cinnamon and about 2 T. water to the oil remaining in the pan. Bring to a boil and simmer until thickened. Serve zucchini with the sauce poured on top.

Yield: 4 servings
Health note: This recipe provides heart protection with the garlic, beta carotene from the zucchini and antibacterial phytochemicals from the cinnamon.

Olive and Orange Salad
Jews were the earliest cultivators of citrus fruits. Olives have been cultivated for at least 5,000 years, and they're part of Jewish biblical



history. Widely used in Sephardic cuisine, this salad is a favorite in Israel, although its origins are probably North Africa.

4 oranges peeled and sliced horizontally
About 18 black olives, pitted and cut in half

Juice of 1 lemon
1/4 c. extra-virgin olive oil
1 garlic clove, very finely chopped
1 t. finely chopped fresh mint
1/2 t. ground cumin
1/2 t. paprika, plus 2 pinches for serving

Put the oranges into a serving bowl. Scatter olives over them. Whisk together the lemon juice, olive oil, garlic, mint, cumin and paprika. Pour dressing over the salad, sprinkling 2 pinches of paprika on top.

Yield: 4 servings
Health note: This recipe contains the vitamin C of oranges. Olives provide some vitamin E and lots of protective antioxidants.

Nutty Spinach with Raisins
The combination of spinach, nuts and dried fruits is a common favorite with Jews in the Middle East and North Africa. This recipe comes from Rome, but it was almost certainly taken there by Jewish traders during the days of the Roman Empire.

2 oz. (about 1/3 c.) seedless raisins
1/4 c. pine nuts
2 T. olive oil
1 clove garlic, very finely sliced
2-1/4 lbs. baby spinach
Juice of 1/2 lemon

Soak raisins in freshly boiled water for 10 min. Dry roast the pine nuts. Put olive oil into a lg.

pot. Saute the garlic very gently for 2 min. Wash the spinach, even if the package says it's already washed. Add to the garlic pot with water clinging to the leaves. Cook covered over gentle heat until the spinach is wilted — not more than 5 min. Drain the raisins. Add to the spinach along with the pine nuts, stirring gently. Serve with lemon juice squeezed on top. Delicious hot or cold.

Yield: 4 servings
Health note: With all the nutrients in spinach — especially the beta carotene — the protein and minerals from the pine nuts and the heart-protective properties from the garlic, this recipe is exceptionally healthy.

Braised Carrots
Carrots are widely used in all Jewish communities, from the coldest parts of Eastern Europe to the kitchens of the Mediterranean and the hot spots of the Middle East, Asia and India. Adding mint and raisins is typical of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish cooking.

3 T olive oil
8 young carrots with the bottom 1/2" of their leaves
About 1 c. vegetable broth, or use a low-salt bouillon cube
1 T. freshly chopped mint
1/4 c. raisins
2 T. finely chopped flat-leaf parsley

Heat the olive oil in a large frying pan and saute the carrots gently, until golden all over — about 6 minutes. Add enough broth just to cover. Add the mint and raisins. Cover and simmer until the carrots are almost tender — about 15 min. Uncover and bring to a brisk boil, till most of the liquid has evaporated. Sprinkle with parsley for serving.

Yield: 4 servings
Health note: Rich in cancer-fighting beta carotene, carrots are one of the few vegetables that are better eaten cooked than raw, as the cooking process makes the nutrients easier for your body to extract. The oil in this recipe improves absorption of beta carotene, a fat-soluble nutrient that is also good for night vision. ☆

"The wonderful time, the most joyous time of the year has come ... The sun is high in the sky ... the air is free and fresh, soft and clear. On the hill are the first sprouts of spring grass — tender, quivering, green ... With a screech and a flutter of wings, a straight line of swallows flies overhead, and I am reminded of the Song of Songs. 'For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing is come.'"

— Sholom Aleichem