



Passover goes gourmet

After years of jarred gefilte fish, one woman discovers a Seder meal worth eating

BY RACHEL LEVIN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG LEE

WHY WAS THIS NIGHT different from all other nights? For starters, there was a bar. And not a bottle of sticky-sweet Manischewitz behind it. People at this Passover Seder were drinking. *Good wine.* Before the first of the traditional four glasses was poured.

Second, people were dressed in jeans. My mother never let me wear even my very best Jordache to any Jewish holiday. Skirts only, and tights that would sag around my ankles. Now, three decades

later, I swapped a pair of faded cords for a stylish purple number and heels. I hadn't felt this overdressed since I wore a bathing suit to the Big Sur hot springs.

Third, this wasn't my grandparents' house in a manicured Boston suburb, but a mod cafe in a former warehouse in San Francisco. My aunts and crazy cousins were clear across the country. There were no conversations-cum-arguments about what route everyone took to get there. Or kids' tables topped with Dixie cups



TOP Wise Sons deli held a Seder last year in a San Francisco cafe but has since opened its own restaurant.

BOTTOM Leo Beckerman with gefilte fish.

“Tonight, we’re going to move through the Passover story pretty quickly,” announced Leo. “We’ve got eating to do!”

of Welch’s white grape juice.

Above all, apart from my Caribbean-born gentile friend George—whom I’d dragged here while my Jewish husband was, uh, at a Black Crowes concert—this was a Seder of strangers. All different backgrounds. Fifty folks here *voluntarily*, not because their parents forced them.

The big draw? The food. Cooked, not by Grandma Hannah, but by Leo Beckerman and Evan Bloom, whose Wise Sons Jewish Delicatessen pop-up here had an instant cult following. Lines snaked down sidewalks for their hand-sliced artisanal spin on pastrami. The demand for good deli—in a city long lacking it—grew so strong that the duo recently opened a real-deal restaurant. Last April, their first-ever public Passover Seder sold out within minutes by word of mouth.

Imagine, the promise of gefilte fish that good.

Strangers become friends

Candles were lit. Communal tables were set. Sparely. No lacy white tablecloths or Blue Danube china. Playing silently on a screen was the ’50s classic film *The Ten Commandments*. I mean, Charlton Heston’s low-tech parting of the Red Sea is the kind of Seder entertainment I could’ve used as a kid.

I loved my grandpa Orrin, I really did. He was a kind, lanky doctor in a knit tie and corduroy blazer. But his Seders were by-the-book snooze.

Here was fresh-faced 28-year-old Leo!

With waist-length dreadlocks pulled back in a ponytail, he had a cool, confident command over the room that would no doubt make his own grandfather proud. After the blessing over the wine, servers presented plates of matzo. It was blistered, cracker-thin, imperfectly shaped. And *not* from a box, but made by Bay Area local Blake Joffe of Beauty’s Bagel Shop—with more than just the requisite flour and water. If all it takes is a little sea salt and olive oil to enhance matzo’s typically dry-mouth taste, then I vote for a minor overhaul of tradition.

Still, this was a legit Seder. Everyone had a photocopy of a Haggadah, the book of prayers, songs, and biblical tales that recount the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and freedom from slavery.

It’s a good story. But as a kid, taking turns around the table reading *The Entire. Freaking. Thing* meant we didn’t eat for *hours*. I’d steal sprigs of parsley from the tabletop (long after we’d dipped it in the ritual salt water)—and sit, starving and bored as hell. Grandma’s dense-as-rocks matzo balls and gray, leather-tough brisket weren’t any prize. But by the time dinner was actually served, I would’ve eaten the jar of Heinz Chili Sauce she’d “seasoned” it with. >34



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FROM LEFT Matzo ball soup; Evan Bloom and Blake Joffe plating brisket and kugel.

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Trend

“Tonight, we’re going to move through the Passover story pretty quickly,” announced Leo. “We’ve got eating to do!” Amen to that.

And so it began: the explanation of the Seder plate, the Four Questions (typically, the youngest person at the table is charged with tone-deaf singing this integral part of the evening, but on this night, the lone tween was too shy; instead we were treated to a woman who actually had a beautiful voice), and the Ten Plagues, detailing Old World woes. By the festive song “Dayenu” (“Enough”), we’d lost count of glasses of wine and were all one big, happy family—singing, clapping, exchanging smiles. George turned to me and exclaimed: “I love this! I’m with my people!”

Before we knew it, dinner was served, family-style: pickled heirloom carrots and Bull’s Blood beets. “Mock liver”—a mash of organic peas and Blue Lake beans. The prettiest, most perfectly pungent, hand-grated fluorescent-fuchsia horseradish I’ve ever had. (Note to Wise Sons: Jar that stuff!) The soup was a clean, flavorful broth buoying matzo balls as God intended them to be: feather-light and fluffy. The gefilte fish was a custom-grind of carp and whitefish in a fennel-thyme fumet—a far cry from the congealed stuff in jars you see every season at the supermarket. And the brisket: not gray! Not tough! Just fork-tender shreds of peppery sweet meat.

Three hours later, when we were down to the last sips of madeira, matched with a creamy, rich chocolate pot de crème (single-handedly bringing Passover desserts back from the dead), there was laughter; career-advice-giving; gossip about embarrassing wedding toasts and bad breakups involving people we didn’t know. No barking between relatives or help-clear-the-table mandates from Mom. But hugs good-bye. And sincere cries of “Next Year—with Wise Sons!”

Wise Sons’ Seders Apr 6, 7 (*passover@wisesonsdeli.com* for reservations).

Wise Sons Jewish Delicatessen, 3150 24th St., San Francisco; *wisesonsdeli.com*



Homemade matzo

MAKES 12 CRACKERS | 1¼ HOURS

This easy recipe, served at Wise Sons’ Seder pop-up, is from Beauty’s Bagel Shop in Oakland.

About 2¾ cups flour, divided
½ tsp. kosher salt
⅓ cup olive oil
About ½ tsp. fine sea salt

- 1. Set** a pizza stone (or large baking sheet) on a rack in an oven and preheat to 500° for 45 minutes.
- 2. Put** 2¼ cups flour, kosher salt, and oil in a food processor. With motor running, slowly add ½ cup water. Dough will come together into a ball. It should feel soft, supple, and not sticky; if it is sticky, add more flour, 1 tbsp. at a time.
- 3. Divide** dough into 12 portions. Using a floured rolling pin, roll 1 portion at a time on a well-floured work surface into a round about 8 in. wide and just thin enough to see through. Lightly sprinkle with sea salt and press it in with your hands. Prick all over with a fork (this will prevent it from puffing up too much).
- 4. Flour** a wooden pizza peel or back of a baking sheet generously and transfer dough to it. Gently slide dough onto hot pizza stone. Bake until matzo is light golden and crisp on each side and a bit darker at the edges, turning once with a wide spatula, 2 to 3 minutes total. Transfer matzo to a cooling rack and make remaining matzos the same way.
- 5. Rebake** any matzo that isn’t crisp in the center: Put crackers on a rimmed baking sheet, reduce oven to 250°, and bake 15 to 25 minutes.

Make ahead: Up to 2 days, stored airtight.

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