

# Vermatzah

**Passover Flatbread for a Mountainous Land**



Passover is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the exodus of the Israelites from slavery into freedom, a narrative that became a worldwide inspiration for people who fight for freedom and human rights. What is less known is that Passover was also a major agriculture festival, indicating spring and the barley ripening season, celebrating the awakening of the natural world in days when people's lives were even more directly dependent on nature than ours.

Passover starts with the Seder, a ceremonial dinner to commemorate how Pharaoh, after suffering 10 plagues, drove the Israelites off to the desert, where they wandered for 40 years, becoming a nation and settling at what is now Israel.

The Seder feast incorporates ritual foods, the first is the crispy flatbread known as matzah. "With the dough the Israelites had brought from Egypt, they baked loaves of unleavened bread. The dough was without yeast because they had been driven out of Egypt and did not have time to prepare food for themselves." (Exodus 12:39). The Israelites prepared this substitute for bread out of flour and water, and hasty baked them over open fire. Even today, traditional matzah is made with pure water and grains that have been kept dry or since harvest; less than 18 minutes is supposed to pass from the moment water touches the flour to baking, to prevent leavening.

We found this inspiring version of matzah at Naga (Natural Grain Alchemy) Bakehouse, a small family business in Middletown Springs, Vermont. Started in 2004 by Doug Freilich and Julie Sperling, the Bakehouse is run with the help of their daughters Ellis and Tikko.

"Naga Bakehouse bakes wood-fired oven breads during summers, selling them at farmers' markets in New York, Vermont and Massachusetts. As they were seeking what else to make with a

*Story and Recipe by Yael Dolev; Photos by Eyal Dolev*

variety of heirloom grains to utilize the oven during winter days, the idea to make hardy fire-baked crackers was born—"and if crackers, why not return to our Jewish heritage" proclaimed Doug, "and make Matzah?"

The "Vermatzah" (Vermont matzah) is handmade, following ancient days' traditional matzah in shape (round) and taste: Our ancestors used Emmer—the wild wheat of that area. They certainly used whole grains, and they baked over fire. Vermatzah is made of Emmer mixed with other whole-grain varieties.

The couple had started growing their own wheat, Julie explains, but because they need more than they can grow themselves they rely on neighboring farmers. They were searching for wheat varieties that add tastes, flavors, smells,

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colors and consistency of flour. "People who are used to white flour are not aware that grains have many traits which affect the quality of baking products."

Wheat is making a comeback in Vermont's fields and farmers are learning how to cultivate and harvest old and new varieties: Each variety of wheat requires specific growing conditions and some yield more than others. The bakers never know in

advance how much of each type they are going to get. Therefore, "there is no secret recipe for a successful dough, as it is a constant trial-and-error process," Julie says. "We are consistently inconsistent, every day's bake is dependent on what is in season."

The Naga Bakehouse is proud to be Eco-Kosher, a term that was introduced by Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi in the 1970s, and brings modern meaning of good practices into the ancient dietary restrictions, a groundbreaking trend in current Judaism discourse. For the Naga family, Eco-Kosher embraces treating your land, growing with organic principles, using heirloom varieties and purchasing all ingredients locally, while treating suppliers and farmers with respect.

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## Meet the Family

Julie Sperling and Doug Freilich grew up in New York. Julie was an outdoor child who loved horses, so Vermont seems like her natural place. Doug studied filmmaking and together they made environmental documentaries.

After studying environmental science they decided to live by their values: "We don't mind working hard as long as we are independent and connecting to the elements." That is how they started baking using a wood-fired oven. They gradually learned how to bake, what grains to use, and in time also how to raise two daughters, Tikko (15) and Ellis (12), who are an integral part of the business.

Tikko (then 5) help selling bread loaves at the market, while her parents were shopping for ingredients. When all bread was sold she purchased a bracelet with the money she earned. It took a 101 business lessons to explain to the child that money earned is deposited in cashbox for next day ingredients.

Being technology savvy, the kids are responsible for online help in communication, marketing and shipping. Tikko explains, "At my age my classmates are also starting to work but here it is not just a job, but a lot of fun too." Ellis adds that "growing in that bakery from the day that I can remember myself gave me a different perspective on the world. Sometimes I miss some activities with my friends, but I invite them to the market, or they come to help me out in the bakery."

And there are some privileges too, as at matzah season teachers are more accommodating when you don't finish all your homework.

When I asked the family how they eat Vermatzah they grumbled that they hardly get to enjoy any, because all of it is sent to customers.

"The product is as delicate as porcelain, but if we are lucky to break one, we eat it," says Julie. How best to enjoy Vermatzah? Julie argued for eating it plain and Ellis suggested butter and jam, while Tikko

## Charoset

Serves 10–15

8 ounces white raisins

¼ cup orange liqueur

3 ounces currants or wild dry blueberries

½ cup cherry liqueur or Port

3 Granny Smith apples

1 pear

¼ cup white wine

⅛ cup Cognac or brandy

13 ounces dates, pitted, or pressed baking dates

½ teaspoon cinnamon, ground

½ teaspoon cardamom, ground

½ teaspoon ginger, ground

¼ teaspoon clove, ground

10–15 ounces nuts (pistachios, pine nuts and cashews), roasted

recommended soaking it in soup. I suggest serving it with Charoset. Eaten as part of the Seder, the word comes from Cheres—meaning clay. The Charoset's texture and color symbolize the mud that the Israelite used to make bricks for building the pyramids. One does not need a recipe for Charoset: It is a combination of fresh fruit like apples, pears, quinces and

bananas; dry fruits like dates, raisins and apricots; and nuts like almonds, pecans or walnuts.

As for the amount, it is said that there is nothing like too much Charoset. Here is my method, adding the traditional wines of the Seder into the Charoset, mixing in spices and using exotic nuts, to make a "spiritual" Charoset.  
~Yael Dolev

1. Soak raisins overnight in orange liqueur and currants in cherry liqueur.

2. In a food processor combine apples, pears, dates, white wine, Cognac and spices. Process till all shredded and mixed. Don't over process to an applesauce texture as you want a chunky consistency.

3. Add raisins, currants and nuts and mix well.

4. Taste to adjust flavors but make sure you leave something for the Seder evening...



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The Naga team expands the term into a family working together: gathering firewood, grinding grains and baking—all is done by parents and daughters collectively, willingly paying the price of lower production. Giving "kosher" a social and ecological value is what celebrating Passover means to them. Eco-Kosher stimulated customers to connect with the bakery, ask questions, and discuss what is the relevance of "Kosher to Passover" and celebrating Passover in our contemporary life.

Doug reminds us that the exodus was extremely physical; the suffering of the people who were slaves and walked 40 years in the desert was enormous. They were all very dependent on each other to prevail and survive. And that is how Doug feels every year at matzah season: "It is a nonstop hard work, and the body is aching, but you go on with full energy to accomplish the mission of sending matzah to households that celebrate Passover. Like the Israelites, family members depend on each other and each is doing its best to make the enterprise a success."

For Doug that is the connection between his memories of his traditional childhood Seder and their family venture in Vermont. 

*Israeli born Food Coach Yael Dolev wishes to convince everyone to enjoy wellness via delicious food. Yael teaches Mediterranean ways of eating and cooking. She develops easy to make recipes and her passion is to coach people with food allergies to enjoy yummy food. Yael worked as a consultant and a cook in kitchens like, Bennington MOW, and she is an active member of Bennington Farm to Plate Council.*