

The great Passover breakfast debate

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The savory aroma of matzo brei sautéing atop a slick of clarified butter is all it takes to bring me bring back to the Passover holidays of my youth.

Making my favorite Passover breakfast dish in my South Charlotte kitchen, I summon up the image of my father and me, 40 years ago, cooking together in our small Minneapolis home.

Matzo brei is made from only two primary ingredients, eggs and matzo. But looks are deceiving: The emotionally satisfying Jewish soul food has more nuances and complications than meet the eye. How to prepare and serve it has launched more than a few debates among brei aficionados.

For the uninitiated, matzo brei (pronounced "bry") is best described as an omelet combining eggs and matzo that is fried in butter or oil.

Matzo is the unleavened flatbread and staple during the eight-day Jewish holiday of Passover. The tradition of forsaking grain in which fermentation or yeast development has occurred stems from the biblical recounting of the Hebrews' exodus from bondage in ancient Egypt.

Working with the precision of a master craftsman, Pop was a no-fuss kind of cook who employed a straight-forward technique.

Lining up the eggs, matzo, butter and cream on the counter alongside an orphaned mixing bowl used only one week during the year, he didn't have to ask me twice to dig deep into the pots and pans to bring out his favorite skillet.

The kid on skillet duty

With me tending the skillet while it heated and the clarified butter got browned and nutty, he'd crumble the matzo into the bowl, cover it with water, then drain,

When is Passover?

Passover starts at sundown Monday and continues for eight days, until April 26. In addition to being a significant holiday in the Jewish calendar, Pesach is known as the festival of unleavened bread.

Savory recipes

Try the Omelet Style and Pancake Style matzo brei, **4D**.

Holiday tips

Seven things to remember when cooking for Passover, 4D.

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Michael J. Solender makes matzo brei in his kitchen, frying it in a pan. He's using a recipe for a savory version of the Passover dish with cheddar cheese.

adding the soaked matzo to the beaten eggs and cream. It went into the hot skillet with the butter, and minutes later, we sat together, silently enjoying our own father-and-son breakfast while the rest of the household slept.

When my older brothers and Mom got up, he'd repeat the ritual with the same gusto and care.

Fluffy and eggy, its crust nicely seared from the clarified butter, Pop's matzo brei was special.

He made sure the middle was still soft, not runny, and offered a warm, salty custard that was the promise of spring and no more snowy sidewalks to shovel. For me, it was all a satisfying goodness that needed nothing more than a grind of fresh black pepper and a tall glass of orange juice.

Matzo's back story

Our traditional post-sundown Passover Seder (service and meal) was glorious, with sumptuous leg of lamb and a cornucopia of special dishes: charoset, tsimmes, matzo ball soup.

But it was the morning after, when my father combined the eggs and matzo and maybe a touch of cream into an omelet for just the two of us, that left me feeling all warm and gooey inside. In our home, the taste of matzo brei surpassed any pancake or waffle.

According to the Book of Exodus, the term "Passover" refers to Hebrew homes in ancient Egypt, marked with a sign on their doorposts that indicated they were to be "passed over" by the Lord, who spared them the 10 horrible plagues that were punishment to the Pharaoh for enslaving the Jews.

Released from their bondage and anxious to flee, the Hebrews did not have time to let their bread rise before baking. The light, unleavened bread, matzo, could be carried without spoiling, and it fed the Jews during their exodus out of Egypt. Some linguists say the word "matzo" comes from the Hebrew word "to hasten."

Savory or sweet?

Passover means matzo. Lots of matzo. We buy it by the brick and we have to find ways to use it.

What is the best way to prepare matzo brei? Herein lays the debate. Dry or wet? Savory or sweet? Pancake or omelet? Matzos soaked in water, egg, both or neither?



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Matzos, center, are the only constant ingredient in the varieties of matzo brei recipes that could include, clockwise from top, eggs, Texas Pete hot sauce, maple syrup, applesauce, apples, cheddar cheese and parsley.



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Michael Solender with his completed sweet, left, and savory matzo brei recipes. Matzo brei, the beloved stalwart of a traditional Passover breakfast, is traditionally made from only two ingredients, eggs and matzo.

I use clarified butter because it has a higher smoke point and adds a nutty flavor of browned butter. But some people use olive oil, nonstick cooking spray or schmaltz - rendered chicken fat.

The debate rages as hotly as the argument over the nuances of Eastern- or Lexington-style barbecue.

My friend Michael Abramson of Raleigh is in the sweet camp. He likes his matzo brei a bit on the dry side with maple syrup on top.

His wife, Stephanie, confessed that her technique has never wavered since childhood. She breaks matzo into small pieces and soaks them in Eggbeaters, using 1/2 cup of Eggbeaters for every one matzo sheet. She lets them soak for a minute or two and then drops them into a lightly oiled, screaming-hot pan, stirring the mass constantly until well-cooked. The result resembles scrambled eggs.

My personal taste runs to the matzo brei of my youth. I like mine savory and served with salt, pepper and, as I've aged, hot sauce. Texas Pete, made in Winston-Salem, is my favorite.

I occasionally go wild adding chopped onion and have been known to put cheddar cheese in between the folded omelet-style preparation.

Split decision

Where do matzo brei experts weigh in?

Lee Katz is owner and top chef at Katz New York Deli in Charlotte, where they serve as many as two dozen orders a day during Passover, usually served with home fries. "We use a brief soak in water, than soak in beaten egg and fry in butter," says Katz, who prefers savory matzo brei.

To demonstrate true matzo brei nonpartisanship, I'm sharing both a savory and sweet recipe. Be mindful and savor the delightful repast. One more secret: It's great for lunch or supper, too.