

Matzo S'mores: Brilliant? Or Brooklyn?

Enterprising outfits, bakers and chefs are trying to give the holiday staple a culinary makeover



Adrienne Sherman plans on doing plenty of entertaining for Passover. She will have more than 20 guests to her home for the elaborate Seder meal that marks the start of the eight-day holiday. She will prepare dishes ranging from chicken soup to brisket to her famous carrot soufflé.

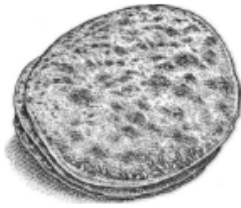
But at some point during the holiday, Ms. Sherman will break out the matzo and marshmallows.

Ms. Sherman, of Bridgewater, N.J., uses a s'mores-making kit, which also includes chocolate, from Manischewitz Company, called "S'more Matzo."

"Just plain matzo gets old," she says.

Matzo isn't your typical epicurean delight. In its purest form, the unleavened bread, central to the Jewish holiday of Passover, consists of nothing more than flour and water. The resulting product, known as the "bread of affliction," has been compared with everything from toasted cardboard to hardtack.





Vertmatzah

Enterprising outfits, bakers and chefs are trying to reverse tradition and give the holiday staple a culinary makeover. Some are using matzo in unexpected ways, trying to make it a year-round snack food like potato chips or slathering it with everything from garlic to toffee. Not all the matzo products are kosher for Passover.

At the Naga Bakehouse, a family-run bakery in the Vermont town of Middletown Springs, matzo gets the artisan treatment. Husband-and-wife founders Doug Freilich and Julie Sperling use locally sourced wheat in their flour and bake their matzo—or “Vertmatzah,” as they call it—in a wood-fired oven.

Pieces are wrapped in parchment paper and tied with yarn before being boxed. The taste is a bit nutty, Ms. Sperling says, with a “hint of the fire.” The price—\$18 for six pieces—puts Vertmatzah in a different category from standard matzo in supermarkets, which often sells for a few dollars per box.



Heidi Silverstein, a retiree who lives in Stamford, Conn., has been buying Vertmatzah for the past several years for her Passover table. “It actually has taste,” she says. An “earthy” flavor.

The Matzo Project, a Brooklyn, N.Y., company launched in 2016, makes its gourmet version with the addition of sea salt and sunflower oil in the dough. The recipe allows for a “lighter” matzo than the traditional version, says company co-founder Kevin Rodriguez. The boxes show a caricature of a Jewish grandmother with the caption: “Would it kill you to try something new?”

Hoping for year-round appeal, the company also has a line of matzo chips, packaged like other bagged snacks, in flavors including salt and cinnamon sugar.



For some, buying the right matzo is just the starting point.

Steven Raichlen, a barbecue connoisseur who has written several books on the subject, favors a whole-wheat matzo for his holiday observance. But he often coats it with some extra-virgin olive oil, garlic and herbs and then heats it up on the grill.

“You can think of this as garlic bread made with matzo,” he says.

Joshua Rotter, a writer in San Francisco, makes a sweet version with chocolate, slivered almonds, brown sugar and matzo. What started as just a confection he shared with his family has now become a hit with just about everyone in his circle. “And I’m talking lots of non-Jewish people,” he says.

He got a request to prepare it as a wedding present. “I made it with white chocolate,” he says of the gift.



Even traditional manufacturers of Jewish foods are upping their matzo game—at least in terms of variety. Streit's Matzos, a company based in Orangeburg, N.Y., whose history goes back more than a century, has added spelt and organic versions to its line.

Manischewitz, which bills itself as the largest marketer of kosher foods in North America, markets its s'mores-making kit. "Once you melt the marshmallows and the chocolate, you don't miss the graham crackers that much," says Shani Seidman, Manischewitz's marketing director.

Matzo's place on the Passover table is intrinsically connected to the story of the Jews' enslavement in Ancient Egypt. The unleavened bread was made in haste as they prepared to flee their captivity. Today, many Jews assume the flavorless aspect is in keeping with the holiday's theme of suffering.

Not so, says Rabbi Moshe Elefant, chief operating officer of OU Kosher, an agency that certifies kosher products.

"Just because it's the bread of affliction doesn't mean you have to be afflicted when you eat it," he says.

Write to Charles Passy at cpassy@wsj.com