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By Daniel Pomerantz

Sephardic Flavor for Your Seder

If you've never heard the term "Ashkephardic," then you've probably never had dinner at my house. I'm a big fan of combining Ashkenazi and Sephardic cuisine; both traditions have some incredible flavors, and combining them can take you to a whole new level of "yum!" Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews have the same religious beliefs, but their cooking styles are vastly different. Ashkenazi foods are more familiar to American cooks (matzo ball soup and gefilte fish), while Sephardic foods tend to be more exotic in terms of flavor (shakshuka and hummus). Both cuisines are kosher, but the foods and spices vary greatly between the two groups.

Why the difference? It basically boils down to the weather. Ashkenazi food is reflective of the colder regions where Ashkenazi Jews settled (Germany, Russia, Eastern Europe). To survive a Russian or Polish winter, one needed heavy, rib-sticking cuisine—foods like potatoes, noodles, meat, honey, preserved and pickled foods. Sephardic Jews settled in warmer areas of the Mediterranean (Morocco, Italy, France). Due to the sunny climate, they had access to fresh vegetables, fish, fruits, spices and olive oil. Because of this, Sephardic cuisine tends to be lighter, healthier, and more colorful.

The difference between Sephardic and Ashkenazi cuisine is pronounced during Passover, when the food laws become more challenging. While both groups prohibit chametz (leavened grain products) during the holiday, there is a separate category of foods called kitniyot that is dealt with differently by both traditions. While Ashkenazi Jews ban kitniyot from the Passover table, Sephardic Jews do not. Kitniyot items include rice, corn, millet, dried beans and lentils, peas, green beans, soybeans, peanuts, sesame seeds, poppy seeds, and mustard.

The origin of the Ashkenazi ban on kitniyot is unclear; it's thought that perhaps kitniyot were considered too similar to grains. Grains and kitniyot often shared the same storage bags, so there was a possibility that chametz might accidentally be mixed in with the kitniyot and consumed during Passover. Another theory is that kitniyot expands when immersed in water, which may have been perceived by the early rabbis as a form of rising or leavening. Whatever the reason, most Ashkenazi Jews today stick to the ban on kitniyot, even though it's not technically prohibited by Torah law. By contrast, Sephardic Jews do consume kitniyot during Passover. However, they are careful about ingredients co-mingling. In the Middle East, it's not uncommon to see Sephardic women sifting through bags of rice and lentils repeatedly, going through grain by grain to ensure no chametz is mixed in.

While you won't generally see kitniyot dishes at an Ashkenazi Seder, they are quite common at Sephardic Seders. As I mentioned before, my family eats "Ashkephardic" style; we enjoy foods from both traditions. That means we're a lot less strict about kitniyot at Passover. However, many families do not allow kitniyot at all during the holiday. That doesn't mean you have to ban Sephardic flavors from your Ashkenazi Seder—it just means you have to be a little more careful about which recipes and ingredients you choose.

One of my favorite fish recipes is Sephardic, free of kitniyot, and kosher for Passover. This means it can be served at any Seder, no matter what your background might be. I learned this recipe from my friend Sharone, a Sephardic Jew with Moroccan ancestry. Sharone's young daughter nicknamed this recipe "Maman's Fish"—Maman is what she calls her grandmother, who passed down the recipe to Sharone. I like this name, so I have taken to calling it that as well. It's tasty, healthy, and easy to make. It will give your Seder table a splash of Sephardic spice and color. We like it so much that we eat it year round!

Tori Avey, a recent convert to Judaism, explores food history and Jewish cuisine in her popular cooking blog The Shiksa in the Kitchen. Find out more at [theshiksa.com](http://www.theshiksa.com).



MAMAN'S MOROCCAN FISH

Ingredients

4 boneless skinless fish fillets
 (2 lbs total—firm, dense fish like halibut and snapper work best)
 One bunch fresh cilantro, cut into large pieces
 1 red bell pepper, seeded and cut into long thin strips
 5 large garlic cloves, coarsely chopped
 3 large dried red chili peppers
 ½ tsp turmeric
 1 ½ cups water
 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
 1 heaping tablespoon paprika
 Salt and pepper to taste
 You will also need: Sauté pan (skillet with high sides) or sauteuse

Serves 4

Kosher Key: Pareve, Kosher for Passover.

Before you start cooking, reserve a few pieces of the cilantro for garnish. Place the rest of the cilantro, bell pepper slices, garlic and chili peppers in the bottom of the pan to create a "bed" for the fish.

Place fish fillets on top of the other ingredients. Season fillets generously with salt and pepper, then sprinkle turmeric evenly across fillets. Add 1 ½ cups of water to the pan. Cover pan, turn flame on high, and bring to a boil. As soon as the water boils, reduce heat to medium and uncover the pan. Mixture should be simmering lightly at this point. Allow mixture to simmer uncovered for 10-15 minutes, basting fillets periodically, until the water reduces by half and a yellow broth forms.

In a small bowl, mix together olive oil and paprika with a fork. Pour red oil mixture over the fish fillets, coating them evenly. Let the fish simmer uncovered for 20 minutes more, basting frequently. Fish is done when liquid is reduced to about a quarter of what it was originally and the fish turns reddish-orange from basting.

Serve fish and bell pepper slices together. I like to serve it with a starch like mashed potatoes; the red sauce from the pan can be poured over the top of the fish and the potatoes. Garnish with fresh cilantro leaves.

For more recipes, food photographs and step-by-step instructions, please visit <http://www.theshiksa.com>.



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