



Chef Alon Shaya's
wood-fired matzos.

GATHERING

A Louisiana Passover Seder Merges Generations and Culinary Traditions

By Rien Fertel
Photography by David Gallent

This Passover feast explores the city's historic Jewish communities and their ties with Creole cuisine, featuring the contrasting styles of Mildred Covert's Ashkenazic, (brisket and root vegetables) and Alon Shaya's Sephardic (Mediterranean-centric nuts, honey, and olive oil) backgrounds.

“Sometimes this gets me into trouble when I say it, but I don't believe there is any such thing as Jewish cooking,” Mildred Covert is no rabble-rouser, but this feels like a subversive statement, especially considering that we are gathered for a Seder, the ceremonial meal that commences the Passover holiday, the festive commemoration of the Israelites' freedom from bondage in Egypt. Alon Shaya, perhaps the brightest young chef in America, changing the way eaters think about traditional Jewish foods, nods excitedly. “Yes! It's from everywhere. That's the beauty of it.” He unconsciously reaches down to rearrange the herbs that top a plate of roasted eggplant and continues. “Like in Italy, there's this great old Jewish-Italian cuisine. ...”

That dish exemplifies the shared ideas from Shaya and Covert's exchange—the roots, customs, and assimilationist-tendencies of Jewish culinary culture.

Springing from one of his earliest food memories—the scent of flame-charred peppers and eggplants wafting throughout his grandmother's kitchen—the recipe works as a deconstructed *ciambotta*—the stewed, southern Italian cousin to the French ratatouille—but with an additional drizzle of tahini.

Or, better yet, take the Israeli-born chef's Matzo Ball Soup “Wedding Style,” a bowl of which I look forward to eating each year at the week-long series of Passover dinners Shaya holds at Domenica, his Roosevelt Hotel-located restaurant in New Orleans. Substituting airy-light matzo balls for the dense meatballs found in Napoli region's *minestra maritata* (married or wedding soup), he brilliantly melds two soupy traditions. One of this evening's Seder guests declared this to be his favorite matzo ball soup, next to his *bubbe's*, of course. Chef Shaya smartly responded. “I'm not in the business of competing with grandmothers, but I do want y'all to know, the cook who made these matzo balls is from Cut-Off, Louisiana.”

Menu by Mrs. Mildred Covert (*Kosher Creole*) & Chef Alon Shaya (Domenica) | Hosted by James and Patricia Glickman & Family

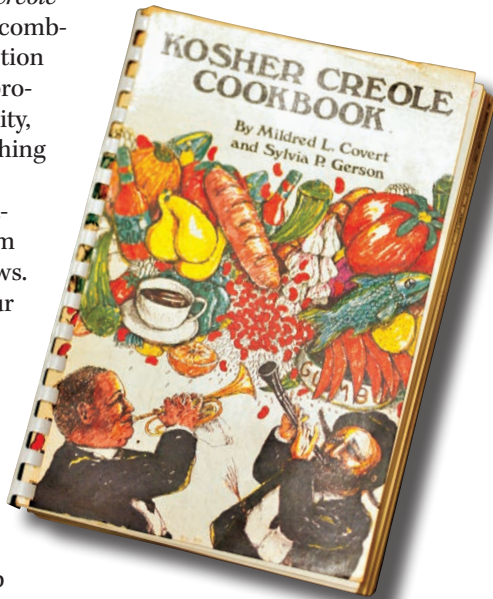


CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Chef Alon Shaya and Mrs. Mildred Covert share the Hagaddah at the Passover table; musicians Randy Cohen a.k.a. “19th Street Red” and Ben Shenck of the Pamorama Jazz and Brass bands; the Glickman family’s collection of kosher cookbooks; Seder hosts Jimmy and Patricia Glickman at the New Orleans Music Exchange, their popular Magazine Street store; Chef Alon Shaya in his kitchen at Domenica, his restaurant in the Roosevelt Hotel.



“*I am New Orleans:
We broke our Yom
Kippur fast on fried
chicken and potato
salad.*”

Mrs. Mildred Covert



Just as this soup linked the familiar with the contemporary, the planners of this Seder ambitiously set a table and guest list that spanned generations, cooking styles, and cultural traditions. This Passover feast would explore the city’s historic Jewish communities and their ties with Creole cuisine, featuring the contrasting styles of Mildred Covert’s Ashkenazic, (brisket and root vegetables) and Alon Shaya’s Sephardic (Mediterranean-centric nuts, honey, and olive oil) backgrounds.

A local culinary icon, Covert was the guest of honor, for her role in bridging Jewish and Louisiana culinary canons. Back in 1982, Covert co-authored with Sylvia Gerson the *Kosher Creole Cookbook*, a quirky, comb-bound recipe collection that, with great improvisation and ingenuity, adapts the eat-anything approach of Creole cooking to the occasionally strict system of Jewish dietary laws. Because much of our water’s bounty is forbidden to observant Jews, the authors swap in gefilte fish for the main proponent in their Oysters Mock-A-Feller and tuna for shrimp in the Stuffed Mirlitons. In many dishes, kosher smoked sausage easily replaces the variety of porky products. While Louisiana’s abundant use of fresh vegetables, eggs, and certain fishes (such as redfish, trout, and flounder) remind us how pareve—the term for non-meat/dairy foods that can be eaten with anything, according to Jewish law—Creole cuisine really is.

Adaptation is the key idea—the “big magic word” in her words—to Covert’s lengthy career as an author and home cook. Growing up in a kosher-keeping home, she remembers eating her grandmother’s red beans and rice each Monday, with brisket displacing the ham hocks and sausage. Despite such culinary switches, she and her family never thought of themselves as outsiders. “I am New Orleans,” she asserts. “We broke our Yom Kippur fast on fried chicken and potato salad.”

When she married her less-devout husband, David, though, she was faced, for the first time, with

the challenge of cooking ham. She went to the grocery, unsure of how much salt-pork to purchase. “I need a piece of meat for my husband to eat,” she told the butcher, who presented a piece that looked much too small. “I asked for a bigger piece,” (she holds up her hands indicating a cut of meat much too big) “and cooked it in red beans. Dave took one bite and it was like eating brine.” She teases herself. “It had to have been a mental block. I could not remember things with pork in it.”

For decades, Mrs. Covert was known as the little lady in the red-brick house near Tulane’s campus who, in those pre-word processor days, typed dissertations and manuscripts for students and professors. She obtained her lifelong dream of writing a book when one of her clients spied on her desk a mimeographed compilation of recipes titled *Creosher Cooking*, which she had put together with her friend Gerson. For the past three decades, the Pelican Publishing Company has kept their first cookbook in print, along with its three kosher sequels that highlight Cajun, Southern, and cooking for children. The cookbook series, according to Covert, fulfilled its promise in locating and re-creating a source of ethnic Jewish pride within the city and region, in “letting a community know who we are, where we are, and that we are still here.”

This sense of community informs the lives and Uptown home of our Seder hosts, Jimmy and Patricia Glickman. The shop they co-own, the New Orleans Music Exchange, acts as a nucleus of the city’s vast and various circles of professional and amateur musicians. It was a bit difficult to keep kosher when he moved here in 1985, Mr. Glickman said. But the Passover ritual and dinner is adaptable to one’s own degrees of Judaic belief. Glickman has attended nine-hour-long Seder ceremonies, but prefers his family’s semi-ortho-

dox, somewhat freewheeling approach. “We do it how we want to,” he says, inviting, each spring, a diverse group of 10 to 20 individuals, frequently including local musicians. This early evening, Randy Cohen, a singer/guitarist who travels around the world playing under the sobriquet 19th Street Red, and clarinetist Ben Schenck, founder of the New Orleans Klezmer All-Stars and the Panorama Jazz and Brass Bands, join the Passover table.

The history of Jewish people and New Orleans has long been entwined, with jazz musicians and supporters playing key roles in the evolution of the musical form. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, thousands of Eastern European Ashkenazic Jews—my great-grandparents among them—settled throughout the city and state. They followed scores of Sephardic, French, and German immigrants from

Western Europe who migrated and readily assimilated into the city, a century earlier. The Ashkenazi, like the Sephardi before them, used food to integrate and define themselves against Creole New Orleans. As Marcie Cohen Farris writes in *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South*, “Through foods served in their homes, at fund-raising banquets, and in food businesses, Jews of New Orleans . . . defined their relationship to the Gentile world that surrounded them.”

MENU

- On the Seder Plate: **Charoset**
(Chef Alon Shaya)
- Soup Course: **Matzo Ball Soup “Wedding Style”**
(Chef Alon Shaya)
- Entrée and Accompaniments: (to be passed family-style) **Creole Pot Roast Piquant, Galilee Glazed Carrots, Jaffa Jazzy Beets;**
(all from *Kosher Creole* by Mrs. Mildred Covert) **Coal-Roasted Eggplant with Tahini and Olive Oil- Roasted Vegetables**
(Chef Alon Shaya)
- Salad Course: **Bitter Herb Salad**
(Chef Alon Shaya)
- Dessert: **Passover Almond Cake with Figs, Orange, and Honey**
(Chef Alon Shaya)



The Seder Plate

Charoset

Chef Alon Shaya

My mother would always make charoset for us at the house during Passover. I loved it because it was sweet and complex in flavor and really gave me a reason to eat matzo out of a box. Some of my favorite Italian ingredients seem like they were created for charoset. That is why I added moscato wine, pistachios, and hazelnuts to my version.

- 1/3 cup rice wine vinegar
- 1/3 cup granulated sugar
- 1/3 cup Moscato d’Asti wine
- 1/3 cup onions, cut in 1/2-inch dice
- 3 Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored, cut in 1/2-inch dice
- 1/4 cup honey
- 1 cup dried figs, cut in 1/2-inch dice
- 1 cup dates, cut in 1/2-inch dice
- 1/4 cup good-quality apricot preserves
- zest and juice of 1/2 lemon
- zest and juice of 1/2 orange
- 1/2 cup chopped toasted hazelnuts
- 1/2 cup chopped toasted pistachios
- 1/8 teaspoon kosher salt
- pinch ground allspice

In a medium saucepan, combine vinegar, sugar, wine, onions, apples, and honey. Cook on a low flame until onions become translucent, about seven minutes. Stir gently so that apples retain their shape; remove from heat.

In a separate bowl, combine figs, dates, preserves, citrus zest, and juices.

Place fig mixture in a food processor and lightly pulse one or two times until ingredients combine but are not puréed. Return to mixing bowl. Gently mix in the apple and onion mixture; fold in hazelnuts, pistachios, salt, and allspice. **Serves 6.**

Matzo Ball Soup “Wedding Style”

Chef Alon Shaya

One of my favorite Italian soups is wedding soup. There is something about meatballs floating around in a lemony broth that makes me very hungry. I’ve had some fun with this classic and switched out the meatballs for matzo balls. The beans, tomatoes, and escarole combine to really make the textures and flavors more appealing to me than just plain matzo balls in chicken broth.

- 1 5-pound chicken, giblets removed
- 1 large onion, halved
- 1 large carrot, peeled, cut in half
- 2 celery ribs, washed, cut in thirds
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 2 bay leaves
- Matzo Balls (recipe follows)
- 1 cup cooked white beans, such as cannellini
- 6 baby carrots, peeled, halved, blanched
- 2 heads escarole, washed, blanched, chopped coarsely
- 10 cherry tomatoes, cut in half
- salt
- 4 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Remove excess fat from chicken. Rinse chicken under cold running water; place in a large pot. Cover chicken with cold water; slowly bring to a simmer over low heat. Skim off all foam and fat as it rises to the top. Continue cooking on low simmer until chicken is fork tender, about 45 minutes. Add onions, carrots, celery, salt, and bay leaves; continue cooking partially covered on lowest possible heat, for 3 hours.

“

I’m not in the business of competing with grandmothers, but I do want y’all to know, the cook who made these matzo balls is from Cut-Off, Louisiana.”

Chef Alon Shaya

Remove chicken; cool. Remove all meat; save for another use.

Carefully add Matzo Balls to broth; cook slowly for 45 minutes. At this point, soup may be held warm until ready to serve. When ready to serve, add cannellini beans, escarole, and tomatoes; cook until heated through, about 10 minutes on medium heat. Season with lemon juice and salt if necessary, and drizzle with extra-virgin olive oil just before serving. **Serves 6.**

Matzo Balls

- 1 cup matzo meal
- 4 teaspoons kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- ½ cup duck fat (or chicken fat)
- 4 whole eggs, lightly beaten

Mix matzo meal with salt, onion powder, and garlic powder. Warm duck fat until it becomes liquid, but not hot. Add eggs and duck fat to other ingredients. Mix thoroughly. Let mixture rest in refrigerator for one hour before rolling into one-ounce balls about the size of ping-pong balls. **Makes about 24 balls.**

Creole Pot Roast Piquant

Mrs. Mildred Covert

At Passover, when I was a child in New Orleans, everyone in our big family looked forward to “real meat,” since we were usually “chickened” and “turkeyed” to death. And when that roast was laid on the table—the sweet and spicy aroma, the hearty presentation, and the texture that was crisp on the outside, moist through and through—we knew a culinary tradition had been honored.

- ¼ cup potato starch
- 2 teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon cracked black pepper
- 1 3- to 4-pound beef pot roast
- 2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 cup chopped ripe tomatoes, preferably Creole
- 2 onions, halved and sliced
- ½ teaspoon grated ginger or ¼ teaspoon ground, dried ginger
- 1 cup orange juice
- ¼ cup red wine (labeled kosher for Passover)

Combine potato starch, salt, and pepper. Coat meat with mixture. Add oil to a Dutch oven, preferably cast iron, set over high heat; add meat and brown on all sides. Add tomatoes and onions; reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer two hours. Add ginger, orange juice, and wine; stir. Cover and continue simmering until meat is tender, about one hour. **Serves 8.**

Galilee Glazed Carrots

Mrs. Mildred Covert

With so many Seder dishes to serve to so many people, these holiday carrots were always a simple addition that required little fanfare. Just clean them, cut them, boil them, and add the condiments. Inevitably, several guests always asked for this “simply sweet” recipe they knew they could handle.

- 12 to 14 large carrots, peeled salt
- 4 tablespoons melted pareve margarine
- 4 tablespoons local honey
- ¼ teaspoons cinnamon juice and rind of 1 orange

Cook carrots in boiling, salted water until crisp-tender; drain. Set aside.

Combine margarine, honey, and cinnamon in vessel within which carrots were cooked. Blend well; set over medium heat. Add orange juice and zest, and carrots. Cook until carrots are glazed, carefully turning to coat evenly. **Serves 6.**



Guest
Ben Shenck

Nicole Glickman, daughter
of the host and hostess



Coal-Roasted Eggplant with Tahini and Olive Oil-Roasted Vegetables

Chef Alon Shaya

As a child, my grandmother would roast peppers and eggplant in the house over an open flame. It is one of my first food memories. This dish allows me to relive those memories through its wonderful aromas and flavors.

- 5 whole eggplants
- 1 cup finely chopped heirloom tomatoes
- 1 roasted red pepper, finely chopped
- bottom of 1 leek, washed, finely chopped
- 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme leaves
- oil for frying
- tops from 1 leek, washed and julienned
- salt

Tahini Sauce (recipe follows)

If you have a wood-burning oven, remove enough hot coals to cover five whole eggplants. Place half on bottom of a hotel pan; place eggplants atop. Cover eggplants with remaining hot coals. If you do not have a wood-burning oven, char eggplants on stove top over high heat, using a metal grate to hold them steady. Turn until charred all over, then place in a 400°F oven until tender throughout, about 15 minutes.

Combine reserved tomatoes, roasted peppers, and leek bottoms in a sauce pot with olive oil and thyme. Cook over lowest possible heat until vegetables are soft but still identifiable, about 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat oil to 375°F.

Fill a small sauce pot with water and bring to a boil over high heat. Blanch and shock julienned leek tops. Dry thoroughly, then fry until oil stops bubbling. Remove with a slotted spoon; drain on paper towels; season with salt.

To serve, cut each roasted eggplant in half lengthwise; season with salt.

Drizzle Tahini Sauce over eggplant and spoon some atop the vegetable “confit” atop; top with fried leek tops. **Serves 10 as an appetizer.**

Tahini Sauce

- ½ cup raw Tahini paste
- 3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon salt

Combine all ingredients in a food processor; process until very smooth. Some water may need to be added to create a texture that is conducive to drizzling.

Makes about ¾ cup.



Jaffa Jazzy Beets

Mrs. Mildred Covert

Fresh beets “beat” everything, especially when we went to buy them downtown at the French Market—long before there were so many convenient, neighborhood farmers markets everywhere you turn. The sweet tooth takes over with the combination of fresh vegetables and juicy fruits that turned this into another one of our family’s signature Passover dishes. No substitutions allowed here. My Polish-immigrant grandmother insisted on white raisins, and white raisins only!

- 2 bunches fresh beets, peeled, thinly sliced
- 2 medium apples, thinly sliced
- 2 oranges, peeled and sliced
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 cup orange juice
- 2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 tablespoon local honey
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon orange zest
- ¼ cup sultanas (white raisins)

In a one-and-a-half-quart casserole dish, layer arrange beets, apples, and orange slices in alternating layers, sprinkling each layer with cinnamon. Combine orange juice, oil, honey, salt, and orange zest; pour over layers in casserole dish. Top with raisins.

Cover; bake until tender, about one hour. **Serves 6 to 8.**

Bitter Herb Salad

Chef Alon Shaya

This is a fun salad to make, because it really combines a piece of biblical history with beautiful and fresh ingredients that are easy to find. The bitter herbs, also known as maror, symbolize the bitterness the Jews experienced when they were slaves in Egypt. I like to use herbs growing close to my home in New Orleans, but any herbs may be used based on what is available to you and your taste.

- 2 cups frisée lettuce
- 1 cup red mustard frills
- 1 cup flat-leaf parsley leaves
- 2 cups dandelion greens
- 1 red endive, sliced
- 4 baby red beets
- 4 baby pink beets (Chioggia)
- 4 baby yellow beets
- 1 cup rice wine vinegar
- ½ cup sliced green onions
- ¼ cup spearmint leaves
- ¼ cup sorrel leaves

Horseradish Vinaigrette (recipe follows)

Wash and dry all lettuces. Set aside.

Bring a pot of water to boil; add beets and cook until just tender, about 10 minutes. Drain, cool, peel, and cut into quarters. Place beets in a container with one cup of rice wine vinegar; set aside.

To serve, drain vinegar from beets. Combine reserved lettuces, beets, and green onions in a large bowl; toss with just enough Horseradish Vinaigrette to lightly coat salad. **Serves 4.**



Horseradish Vinaigrette

- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup sherry vinegar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 4 tablespoons freshly grated horseradish
- 2 tablespoons Creole mustard
- ½ clove garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice

Combine all ingredients in a mixing bowl and whisk together.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Seder table with Coal-Roasted Eggplant at the foreground; writer Rien Fertel with Mrs. Mildred Covert; Mrs. Covert’s Jaffa Jazzy Beets; Seder host Jimmy Glickman raises a glass to his guests.

Passover Almond Cake with Figs, Orange, and Honey

Chef Alon Shaya

- 2 tablespoons matzo meal, plus some for dusting pan
- 2 cups almond flour (or finely ground almonds)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar, in all
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup brown sugar
- 6 whole eggs, whites and yolks separated
- 6 tablespoons pure olive oil
- 2 tablespoons orange juice
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons orange zest
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon kosher salt
- Honey Syrup** (recipe follows)
- Nut Topping** (recipe follows)
- Fig Marmellata** (recipe follows)

Brush the inside of a 10-inch Bundt pan with olive oil, then dust with matzo meal.

Preheat oven to 350°F.

In a mixing bowl, combine matzo meal, almond flour, a quarter cup of granulated sugar and the brown sugar.

In a separate bowl, combine egg yolks and another quarter cup of granulated sugar; beat with a whip attachment until thick and fluffy, about six minutes. Drizzle in olive oil; when combined, add juices and zest.

Fold dry ingredients into egg-yolk mixture.

In a separate bowl, whisk egg whites and salt to soft peaks. Slowly add remaining sugar; keep beating until stiff peaks form.

Fold whipped egg whites into egg yolk mixture to form a thick batter. Spoon into prepared pan.

Bake until a toothpick inserted near the center comes out clean, about 30 minutes; brush cake it with Honey Syrup and sprinkle Nut Topping evenly atop cake. When cool, fill center with room-temperature Fig Marmellata. **Serves 10.**

Fig Marmellata

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup honey
- 3 cups Manischewitz wine
- zest and juice of 1 orange
- zest and juice of 1 lemon
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon kosher salt
- 4 cups dried figs, cut into fourths
- 2 cups dates, seeded, cut into fourths

Combine all ingredients into a medium pot. Place on low heat until mixture thickens, about 30 minutes. Let cool to room temperature.



Honey Syrup

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup honey
- 3 tablespoons Manischewitz wine
- pinch kosher salt
- pinch ground black pepper

In a saucepan over medium heat, combine all ingredients; cook until honey begins to bubble. Remove from heat; set aside to cool to room temperature.

Nut Topping

- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup roasted pistachios
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup roasted hazelnuts
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup roasted pine nuts
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar
- zest of 1 orange

Place all ingredients in food processor and pulse several times until nuts are coarsely chopped.

Mrs. Mildred Covert looks on approvingly as Chef Alon Shaya carefully drizzles his signature Passover Almond Cakes with Honey Syrup.



My immediate family long ago left the faith, so this traditional Passover dinner counted as my first. From the *Kadeish*—the opening blessing and imbibing of the first cup of wine—to the *Yachatz*—the breaking of the matzo bread—and the concluding prayer of *Nirtzah* (“Next year in Jerusalem!”) many glasses of wine later, each ceremonial step ranked as decidedly new.

I wouldn’t say I was taking the first steps in rediscovering my lost heritage, but I was connecting to a past that both is and is not my own. Speaking to Alon Shaya, I learned that he also reconnected to his past through food. After years migrating along the national chef circuit, and finally settling in New Orleans a decade ago, a frequent patron asked the chef to cook his family a Passover dinner. The recipes and ritual renewed Shaya’s interest in Judaism. “I do it all through cooking,” he affirms.

Mildred Covert agrees. When she started cooking, and later began compiling her first cookbook, she remembered that her Polish grandmother did not know what a banana or tomato was before immigrating to the United States. But within years, she adopted to the local cuisine, marrying it with her own until the family ate enough Louisiana produce to have, in Covert’s words, “tomato gravy coming out of our ears.”

Jewish people adopt, amalgamate, and transform culinary cultures. They unite the past and present to construct entirely unique cooking styles. That is the beauty of Shaya and Covert’s distinct contributions to Jewish and Louisiana foodways. This is Jewish cooking, and this is Creole cuisine. Fluid yet orthodox. Mildred Covert tells me, “We must be doing something right after all these centuries.” ♦



TOP: Jimmy and Patricia Glickman gathered family and friends for a Louisiana-style Passover Seder featuring a menu of foods from Chef Alon Shaya of Domenica and Mrs. Mildred Covert’s *Kosher Creole Cookbook*. Chef Shaya and Mrs. Covert were guests of honor. **LEFT:** Seder guest Marcy Nathan



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