

Reimagining Mom's brisket

Tradition! Why yes, but a Portland chef puts a personal twist on this recipe for Passover

The East Side Dining Club will enjoy a Passover-themed meal for April, complete with chef David Siegel's irreverent — but very tender — brisket, and his mom's matzo ball soup, using carbonated water in the matzo balls.



MICHAEL RUBENSTEIN/SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

By **LESLIE COLE**
THE OREGONIAN

Everyone knows that mother knows best, but on Passover, that's especially so.

At least that's how chef David Siegel sees it.

Siegel, who with creative partner Megan Walhood oversees the East Side Dining Club, figured that a Passover theme only made sense for an upcoming dinner on April 9, the last night of the eight-day Jewish holiday.

The supper club, a kind of culinary playground for the two friends who met in the kitchen at Nostana, serves fixed-price dinners one Monday a month in the space occupied the rest of the week by Le Pigeon.

"A lot of people are expecting a Seder" — the ritual meal that begins the holiday — but this will be more casual, says Siegel, 27, who moved to Portland a year and a half ago and spends most evenings cooking and doing charcuterie work at Meriwether's. "What we really wanted to do is celebrate the holiday and some of the things I grew up with."

As at other meals Siegel and Walhood have hosted since starting the venture in January, guests can expect multiple courses, cooked by Siegel and sous chef Anthony Cafiero, paired with wine. This time, they'll also get a heavy dose of Mom. Siegel will bring out dishes from his childhood in Stamford, Conn. And home cooks planning a Passover meal would do well to follow his lead: Traditional foods done

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Passover meal:

Sweet wine is 'secret' to brisket's sauce

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well are hard to beat.

Brisket, the centerpiece, "is not actually specific to Passover for me," Siegel says, "but something we ate for almost every Jewish holiday where we had friends over."

He cooks it long, on low heat, in an onion-laced beef stock, which turns the humble cut tender and succulent. He adds roasted whole carrots, potatoes and parsnips for flavor, and he thickens the pan juices before serving, but time does most of the work.

A few tips when doing yours at home: Don't be tempted to break the meat up into pieces midway through cooking to speed the process. That just makes it more likely to dry out, Siegel says. Use an oven thermometer to make sure the meat braises low and slow. And check it often when you think it's nearly cooked. "The brisket will tell you when it's done," he says, by offering no resistance when you poke it with a toothpick. "You want it to be incredibly tender but not falling apart like pulled pork."

New thoughts

But don't expect all straight-ahead food from Siegel, who's partial to charcuterie work and dabbles in such techniques as cooking *sous vide* (meat or fish that's vacuum sealed in plastic and poached in a water bath).

Gefilte fish — ground fish patties poached in fish stock and typically served cold for Passover — will come to the table as a terrine. "Gefilte fish is kind of a charcuterie recipe, even though people don't recognize it as such. I'm going to make a terrine out of it instead of poaching the fish in stock, but it's really the same principle."

He'll make matzo brei (a Jewish frittata using matzo) and incorporate locally foraged stinging nettles. And he'll offer a Seder plate — the dish that holds ritual foods at traditional Passover celebrations — of sorts as a salad course: His will have boiled eggs, fresh parsley and other symbolic foods, plus lamb shank rillettes, a meat dish similar to *pâté*.

And no Passover would be complete without plenty of matzo, the crisp, unleavened bread that's the only bread eaten during Passover. (The holiday commemorates the exodus of Jews from Egypt, who could not wait for bread to rise when they fled to freedom.) At Siegel's dinner, it will be freshly baked in a wood-fired oven outside the restaurant's doors by Mark Doxtader of Tastebud.

Sweet wine

Oh, and there's one secret ingredient in his new-old recipe: Manischewitz, Concord grape wine, the kosher-for-Passover wine no Seder would be complete without. Siegel tried using it on a lark (no surprise from a guy who made Green Eggs and Ham for last month's supper club), and thinks that the cloyingly sweet wine actually worked well in the dish, plus added a dash of humor. "It's one of those funny things about being Jewish," he says. "It's just a terrible wine, but it's part of your life, it's a part of all Jewish holidays, and especially Passover. I don't think I've ever been to a Seder where we've actually drank good wine," he laughs.

Another family tradition making the leap to the restaurant table will be matzo ball soup, one of the first things Siegel made on his own as a child. "I don't think there needs to be anything crazy or special about it," Siegel says. "It's about making an intensely flavored chicken broth, and matzo balls that are light and fluffy with a little bit of firmness to them."

Mom's recipe is the best, he says, and her trick is using carbonated water in the matzo balls. Siegel's only change is making the matzo balls with rendered chicken fat instead of vegetable oil. It's not only thrifty — you skim it off the top of the soup as it simmers — it boosts the flavor.

Don't stress

As impressive as this multi-course meal might sound, the brisket alone can carry the day at home (see accompanying recipe). Serve it with buttered egg noodles (Manischewitz makes some that are kosher for Passover) showered with a handful of chopped parsley, or a traditional side dish such the baked pudding called kugel. We've included a recipe for haroset, a fruit-and-nut relish that's one of the symbolic foods on a Seder plate but also delicious as an accompaniment to the brisket.

Whatever you decide to cook, take some motherly advice from this young chef as you head into the kitchen: Relax. Siegel has grown used to last-minute menu changes and cooking on the fly, a necessity in the tiny open kitchen at Le Pigeon. At a recent supper-club dinner, the English muffins destined for the first course "turned into croutons" while waiting near the hot stove. "My sous chef, Anthony, was like, 'Dude, throw them in egg and toss them in the oven and serve them as French toast.' So that's what we did."

East Side Dining Club's Passover dinner begins at 6:30 p.m. Monday, April 9, at Le Pigeon, 738 E. Burnside St.; \$50 per person including wine but not gratuity; for reservations, send e-mail to eastsidedining@gmail.com.

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