My great-grandmother, Sophie, fled Russia at 16. But for the rest of her life, she cooked dishes from the old country, and her grandchildren—my dad, his sisters and their cousins—remember her preparing foods like borscht and schav. “The great aunts and uncles who came from Russia regarded these as Old World delicacies,” explains my dad’s cousin Paul. “We kids (who ate in the kitchen while the adults ate in the dining room) found them disgusting.”

On Passover, she served homemade gefilte fish, which she would skin, filet, grind in a meat grinder and then use the bones to make stock. She also served chopped liver, which my Aunt Barb remembers her preparing with a metal hand grinder resting on the countertop, and then mixing with hard-boiled eggs, chopped onions and schmaltz.

My relatives still love gefilte fish, but these days they almost always experience it as a dish that comes from a jar. And while my Aunt Barb remembers enjoying Sophie’s handmade chopped liver on matzah, she has never made it herself and concedes that it “may die off with your generation.” In my family, she is right. “I have heard of chopped liver,” my brother says, “but I couldn’t tell you what it is.”

Younger generations’ cluelessness is easy fodder for the outraged defenders of beloved Passover dishes. But it’s always been true that, as tastes change and new ingredients proliferate, popular holiday recipes fade into obscurity. When I asked Paula Shoyer, a Jewish cookbook author, about Passover foods that are going out of style, homemade gefilte fish was the first dish that came to mind. The reason: These days, making gefilte fish by hand—rather than purchasing it in a jar or doctoring up frozen loaves—is seen as a massive undertaking. “People think gefilte fish is a big fuss,” Shoyer says. “It smells up your house, and ‘Where am I going to buy the fish?’ It has to be really fresh.”

But while gefilte fish and chopped liver are still widely known, many other dishes have largely disappeared from Ashkenazi Jewish collective consciousness. (It’s worth noting that these are Ashkenazi holiday staples; Sephardic Jews have different memories of their family’s food traditions.) In particular, there is a whole class of Passover foods that have gone out of style because they’re heavy or unhealthy. Take farfel, an egg noodle dish, though the Passover version is made with broken pieces of matzah. For years, farfel was served as a popular side dish, says Shoyer. But these days, modern chefs are more likely to choose a healthier alternative, like quinoa.

Another Passover favorite that has gone MIA is stuffed veal. For centuries, it was a favorite special-occasion dish, particularly in Europe, says Joan Nathan, cookbook author and expert on Jewish cooking. But these days, “veal is out of fashion,” she says. “It’s very, very fatty and people just don’t like that.” But health concerns aren’t the whole story, and veal is a fitting example of how a collection of cultural forces can take down a popular dish. Soon after the Civil War, because of changes in the meat industry, “brisket took over,” Nathan says, and it supplanted veal in many American diets. Veal is also expensive,
and securing kosher veal can be difficult in some areas. And then there are ethical issues: “It’s something that’s not correct to eat anymore,” Nathan says. “Nobody wants to eat a veal, a young calf. A lot of people will not eat it because they think it’s cruel.”

Another old Passover stalwart is russell, a fermented beet juice, which often serves as a base for borscht. “Russell was eaten in Eastern Europe when there was nothing else around for Passover,” says Nathan. It also required a lot of planning, as it takes four to six weeks to prepare. In the weeks before Passover, Eastern European Jews would place beets “into large earthenware crocks to ferment,” writes the late Gil Marks in The World of Jewish Cooking. “By Passover, the mixture had been transformed into russel [sic] (the Slavic word for ‘brine’),” which could be used “to flavor soups, drinks, preserves, horseradish, kugels, and other traditional dishes, while the liquid was used as a vinegar.” The timing makes sense: Beets were one of the few items capable of surviving Eastern European winters, according to Mark’s Encyclopedia of Jewish Food, and by winter’s end, enough remained to provide “a note of brightness and sweetness for the Passover holiday.”

Russell was widespread until the 19th century, when potatoes became a popular alternative. Many Jews from Eastern Europe, like my great-grandmother, brought beet-based dishes. “That’s how beautiful it is to think half the year these dishes spoke to this priority, as well as to how beautiful it is to think half the year about how to make this one week special.”

Looking through mid-century cookbooks, Nora Rubel, a Jewish studies professor at the University of Rochester, discovered recipes for several Passover desserts, such as chremslach, a fried matzah pancake (or “glorified latkes,” as one of the recipes describes them) and charlotte. A European dish, charlotte is a type of Passover cake, “often lumped in the same category as a kugel,” although it looks more like a trifle, says Rubel. “That’s one thing that shows up everywhere that I don’t think anyone I know has ever made—or had.” She has found recipes for matzah charlotte, farfel charlotte, apple charlotte and prune charlotte, made of matzah farfel, prune or apple juice, lemon juice, grated lemon rind, melted shortening, eggs, salt, sugar, chopped nuts and sliced bananas or apples.

Many other Passover desserts are becoming obsolete simply because tastier alternatives are replacing them. Shoyer is happy to say goodbye to the “cake meal-y cakes and cookies that have that pasty taste. You know what I’m talking about?” she says. “That Passover taste.” For many decades, “if you wanted to make a cake for Passover, you were using cake meal and potato starch.” But Shoyer is confident these kinds of Passover desserts—a category that also includes sponge cakes, Passover brownies, macaroons—are on their way out.

Today we’re much more aware of ingredients like almond flour, coconut flour and tapioca. This is partly due to the proliferation of tasty gluten-free recipes. While not all gluten-free foods are kosher for Passover—and not all Passover foods are gluten-free—there is a great deal of overlap. “The gluten-free world has opened up the eyes of the Passover bakers and the Passover cooks to a whole new range of possibilities,” says Shoyer.

Some foods, however, are unlikely to fade without a fight. Perhaps the most controversial Passover paradigm shift? Kugel, a casserole made with eggs, a fat and a starch—usually potatoes or noodles. “I don’t think people are making them as much at Passover,” Nathan says. “It’s just too much.” Shoyer agrees, though she often runs into passionate kugel fans. “I get abused sometimes at events where I criticize kugel,” she says. “People get very upset.”

But preserving culinary traditions doesn’t mean never changing them. “I don’t necessarily want to go back to exactly how people were eating in Poland in the 1890s,” says Yoskowitz. At the same time, he hopes Passover cooks will return to preparing dishes from scratch. When we stick to “the same Manischewitz gefilte fish and the same store-bought foods,” he says, “we’re losing those flavors—both metaphorical and actual flavors—that make us who we are.”—Ellen Wexler

How have your family’s Passover meals changed?
Let us know at editor@momentmag.com

Matzah Charlotte

Michael Wex, author of Rhapsody in Schmaltz, shares his late friend Libby Sklamberg’s recipe on his website.

INGREDIENTS

3 large eggs, separated | 4 matzahs | 1/2 cup sugar or more (to taste) | 1/2 cup raisins | 1 tsp. kosher-for-Pesach vanilla 1 tbsp. lemon juice | 1 tsp. grated zest | 1/4 tsp. salt | 1 can Comstock apples or 3 large fresh apples—peeled, cored and sliced thin Topping: 1/2 cup brown sugar | 1/2 tsp. cinnamon | 1/4 cup finely chopped nuts | 1 tbsp. butter

Mix all together and sprinkle on top of the apple mixture.

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees fahrenheit.
2. Beat the egg whites until stiff and set them aside. Break the matzahs into pieces and soak them in hot water for a few minutes. Drain.
3. Add the sugar, egg yolks, raisins, vanilla, lemon and salt. Mix well.
4. Add the apples, folding them in so as not to break the slices. Fold in the beaten egg whites. Pour the mixture into a greased casserole dish.
5. Sprinkle with the topping. Bake for one hour. This dessert may be served warm with whipped cream (for a dairy meal).