

עולש – Chicory – Cichorium Intybus

Is Romaine Lettuce Really the Best Choice of Bitter Herb for the Seder?

I prefer doing my 'spring-cleaning' before Chanukah, and only remove the Halachic required chametz before Pesach so I can enjoy the awakening of nature at this most beautiful time of the year. While everyone is at the peak of spring-cleaning, I'm researching bitter herbs for the Pesach Seder. The Torah directs us to eat the Pesach sacrifice with matzah and bitter herbs – (מֵרֹרִים/*merorim*):



ספר שמות פרק יב פסוק ח וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־הַבֶּשֶׂר בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה צֹלֵי־אֵשׁ וּמִצּוֹת עַל־מֵרֹרִים יֹאכְלֶהוּ: אֶל־תֹּאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ נָא וּבִשֶׁל מִבֶּשֶׂל בְּמַיִם כִּי אִם־צֹלֵי־אֵשׁ רֹאשׁוֹ עַל־כֶּרְעִיו וְעַל־קֶרְבּוֹ:

“They shall eat the meat that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs...” (*Shemot 12:8*).

Even when we are unable to partake in the Pascal lamb, we are still obligated to eat matzah and bitter herbs during the Seder. There is no lack of bitter herbs cultivated or growing wild in Israel at this time of year. Many different greens more bitter than lettuce grow in my garden, including swiss chard, horehound and chicory. I usually bring a selection to the Seder table in addition to the traditional lettuce and horseradish. I was never fully satisfied with using lettuce and horseradish to fulfill the requirement of eating bitter herbs on Pesach. If the purpose of eating bitter herbs is to re-experience the bitter Egyptian exile, why not eat any of the various herbs, which are much bitterer than lettuce? The Mishna deals with the question of what qualifies as *maror* and lists the following five vegetables that may be used as *maror* during the Seder in order of preference: חֲזַרֶת/*chazeret*, עֲלִשִׁין/*ulshin*, בֵּתְמָכָא/*tamcha*, בְּחַרְחַבִּינָא/*charchavina* and מְרוֹר/*maror* (*Pesachim 2:6*). Because the Mishnah does not provide the identities of the vegetables, the *Gemara* provides further detail. Although in Modern Hebrew, the first on the list, חֲזַרֶת/*chazeret* means horseradish, according to the Talmud and commentaries including Rashi it refers to חֲסָא/*chassa* – lettuce. “What does *chassa* [symbolize]? That the Merciful One had pity upon us...” (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 39a*). חֲסָא/*chassa* has popularly been identified with romaine lettuce, however, it is not for sure that this was the kind referred to in the Talmud. Wild or [prickly lettuce \(*Lactuca serriola*\)](#) is a bitter vegetable that best fits all descriptions of *chazeret* in the Talmud. It neither looks nor tastes like the lettuce sold in the supermarkets today but has a central stalk with loose, prickly dark green leaves. This lettuce is bitter, especially as it ages, and when its stalk is cut, it oozes a considerable amount of white, bitter sap according to the specification of the Talmud: “Others say: Every bitter herb contains an acrid sap and its leaves are faded... R. Huna said, ‘The halacha is according to the ‘Others.’” (*Ibid.*).

Why Use Horseradish for *Maror*?

How did the custom arise to eat horseradish for *maror* at the Seder? While בֵּתְמָכָא/*tamcha*, the third item mentioned in the Mishna as qualifying for *maror*, is often translated in rabbinic literature as horseradish, this is disputed, because it is unlikely that horseradish existed in the Middle East in the Talmudic times. Rav Tzvi Ashkenazi (1660-1718) explains that horseradish

Herbal Remedies from the Judean Hills - Months of Nissan/Iyar

came to be used for *maror* in Ashkenaz either because lettuce was not available in cold climates or because those dwelling far from Israel lost the ability to identify the correct species of lettuce. There are several problems with the custom to use horseradish for *maror* as one must fulfill the obligation to eat *maror* with either the leaves or the stem of the plant (*Shulchan Aruch* OC 473:5). Ironically, the reason horseradish was available in the colder northern climates was precisely because it is a root and not a leafy plant. Furthermore, horseradish is sharp – חריף/*charif* rather than bitter. Rav Tzvi Ashkenazi writes, “Those who are not careful about keeping mitzvot do not fulfill their obligation to eat the required amount of *maror* because horseradish is too sharp, while those who try to be meticulous about keeping mitzvot eat the requisite amount and thereby endanger their health” (*Shu"t Chacham Tzvi* 119). The ultimate legitimization of horseradish use occurred in 1822 when Rav Moshe Sofer wrote that horseradish may indeed be preferable to lettuce, because it is difficult to clean the lettuce of bugs (*Chatam Sofer* OC:132; cited in *Mishnah Berurah* 473:42). Others preferred horseradish to lettuce because there are various types of lettuce, and today we are unsure which type(s) the Mishnah was referring to. Whereas horseradish are indeed one of the five bitter herbs mentioned in the Mishnah, there are doubts as to whether the various types of lettuce available today meet the criteria of the ‘lettuce’ referred to in the Mishnah (Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, *Ezrat Torah Luach*). In our time, we have the privilege to live in the Land of Israel where various kinds of bitter greens grow in abundance around Pesach time. Does that mean that we no longer need horseradish to enhance our Seder? Personally, I feel that horseradish serves a nostalgic reminder of our Ashkenazi ancestors who lived in exile, from which we have fortunately been redeemed. Eating horseradish at the Seder helps us shed some tears for all the numerous exiles we have endured throughout the generations, what can be more cathartic than that?

Chicory – One of the Bitter Herbs Mentioned in the Mishna?

In the Mishna’s list of bitter herbs qualifying for *maror* at the Seder, chicory – עולש/*olesh* ranks second. Although we can’t be 100% sure of the identity of any of the five herbs mentioned, most commentaries explain עֲלִשִׁין/*ulshin* to refer to either endive or chicory. According to Rambam בְּתַמְכָּא/*tamcha* – the third herb mentioned may also refer to “wild chicory.” The Talmudic definition of *maror* as plants whose common features are “bitterness, possessing [a milk like] sap, with [leaves] and a [green] grayish appearance” (*Pesachim* 39a), applies beautifully to chicory. Thus, the second item on the Mishna’s list, *ulshin*, is nearly universally understood to refer to *Cichorium endiva* – endives, or *Cichorium intybus* – chicory which are closely related. Belgian endive is the same species as chicory and is used for *maror* by some people. Chicory is a woody, herbaceous plant that has been used for hundreds of years as an herbal remedy with a wealth of health benefits. These include its ability to ease digestive problems, prevent heartburn, reduce arthritis pain, detoxify the liver and gallbladder, prevent bacterial infections, boost the immune system, prevent cancer, reduce anxiety, treat kidney disorders and reduce the chances of heart disease. It is a great source of vitamins and minerals, including zinc, magnesium, manganese, calcium, iron-folic acid, and potassium, as well as vitamin A, B6, C, E, and K. All these properties and more make this small plant is a powerful addition to any diet. The leaves are used in a similar way as spinach and eaten as a spring tonic in many cultures. The root is often ground into a powder and used as a coffee substitute.

Letting Go of Control and Removing Blockages with Chicory

The energy of chicory is considered mothering teaching us to attain proper balance to prevent becoming overprotective and energetically smother those we love. According to Bach’s flower

Herbal Remedies from the Judean Hills - Months of Nissan/Iyar

remedies, the negative chicory state mirrors our neediness and control-taking through emotional manipulation manifesting in expressions such as, "I'll love you more if you..." or "how can you do this to me after everything I've done for you." On the bright side, the beautiful, bright blue chicory flower helps us let go of our fear-driven controlling behaviors so that we can receive and embrace what we need for our soul's evolution. It can shift our perspective to an awareness that supports recognition of what's holding us back and what needs to go in order to pursue the positive. Chicory activates the hidden strength buried deep within us. When we are connected with this awareness we can do anything, and with very little materials or necessities. Perhaps this is why the character trait of frugality (lack of wastefulness). Chicory, when used as an incense is a great cleanser to purify. It is also believed that chicory promotes a positive outlook, removes obstacles and blockages. How appropriate for emerging from the Egyptian slavery.

Medicinal Properties of Chicory

For at least 5,000 years, people have cultivated chicory for its medicinal benefits. According to the 'doctrine of signatures' (a renaissance theory that a plant's appearance indicates its healing properties) the milky sap of chicory demonstrated its efficacy in regulating milk flow in nursing mothers. It has been prescribed for both promoting or diminishing the milk flow if it were too abundant. The blue of the blossoms and their tendency to close as if in sleep at noon (in England) suggested the plant's use in treating inflamed eyes. The poultice of the bruised leaves treats swellings. Laboratory research has shown root extracts to be antibacterial, anti-inflammatory and slightly sedative. They also slow and weaken the pulse and lower blood sugar. Leaf extracts have similar, though weaker, effects. Root extracts are diuretic and laxative, and treat fevers and jaundice. The second-century physician Galen called chicory a "friend of the liver," and contemporary research has shown that it can increase the flow of bile, which could be helpful in treating gallstones.

Digestive Aid

One of the most common reasons for adding chicory to a diet is to improve various functions of the digestive system. Chicory contains prebiotic which is a beneficial bacteria that aids the digestive system. It also contains inulin, which in addition to reducing LDL cholesterol, promoting weight-loss and treating constipation, is used to combat a number of intestinal and digestive concerns, including acid reflux disease, indigestion, and heartburn because it actively reduces the acidity of the body's systems. Thus, chicory can help digest the heavy Pesach meal eaten late on an almost empty stomach. What a wonderful addition to the Seder table!

Culinary Uses

Today, with sweeter, cultivated greens available, wild chicory is seldom seen in the kitchen. Nevertheless, wild-food enthusiasts who know how to prepare it enjoy its lively flavor in several forms. The young basal leaves taste almost identical to dandelion greens, they are good in salad or cooked as a potherb. Older and tougher leaves are apt to be bitter, but simmering them with several changes of water will decrease their bitterness. When cooked, the roots taste like parsnips, but they are almost too skinny to bother with. Instead of boiling them, however, you can scrub them and roast them slowly until brittle and dark brown inside.

Hands On

Chicory is a bitter, versatile leaf that can be eaten raw in salads, baked, stir-fried or braised.

To preserve its precious enzymes I mainly use it raw in salads.

Simple Chicory Carrot Salad

Sweet orange or red vegetable complement the bitter cleansing taste of chicory.

2 cups grated carrot, or thinly sliced red pepper, or a mixture of both

1 cup finely chopped chicory

½ cup slivered almonds

Olive oil, lemon, sea-salt, freshly ground pepper and garlic to taste

A dash of cinnamon

1. Soak and check the chicory for bugs
2. Drain and dry
3. Grate the carrots
4. Mix carrots and chicory leaves and coat with olive oil
5. Add almonds and spices and mix well
6. Squeeze lemon juice on the salad and mix again.

Chicory Coffee

Chicory-based coffee rather than regular coffee can significantly improve the balance of blood and plasma in the body, which reduces the chances of cardiovascular diseases. Furthermore, chicory root is considered a tonic for PMS. It is quite simple to make your own chicory coffee. You can use the wild variety, or the root of the endive, however, the best variety for this is *Chicorium Intybus Sativum*. Chicory yields a beverage that tastes much like coffee without containing caffeine.

1. Harvest the chicory roots, if you want to use the wild variety, look for a tall plant with a beautiful blue flower.
2. Wash and peel the roots so that they are perfectly clean.
3. Cut the roots in small even pieces. They have to be roughly the same width, so they roast evenly.
4. Toast the minced roots in a shallow pan, or a baking sheet at 350 degree Fahrenheit.
5. Grind the roasted pieces in a good burr grinder, according to your preferred brewing method, (fine grind for [espresso](#), coarse for French press).
6. Brew as is, or mixed with real coffee.

Shortcut method:

Pour boiling water on ½ to ¾ teaspoons of dried Chicory root, steep for 10 minutes, then strain. Combines well with cinnamon & dandelion root.