

Tell me Podcast Episode 3



Why do we eat lamb at Easter?

Hello and thank you for following the Tell me mini podcast, produced by the Alimentaryrium Food Museum in Vevey. My name's Marc and I'm an information officer there. This episode continues our exploration of food eaten at Easter as I answer Jeanne, aged fourteen, who wants to know why we eat lamb at Easter. So, here we go!

As you know, lambs are young sheep, and these animals have lived alongside humans for over ten thousand years. When humans began farming various animals, sheep were near the top of the list. They are generous animals because, as well as giving us meat and milk, they also provide wool which we can then use to knit warm winter clothes!

Lambs also play an important role in religious scripture, such as in the Christian Bible, the Muslim Quran and the Jewish Torah.

To better understand the link between lambs and the Christian celebration of Easter, let's first take a look at Jewish celebrations, and Passover in particular. This commemorates the story of the Exodus, which is when the Jews fled from Egypt. According to this religious account, the Jews were the pharaoh's slaves. To free the Jews and punish the pharaoh, God created ten disasters, known as the Plagues of Egypt. In order to protect the Jews during these disasters, God told them to paint their doors with lamb's blood. This blood then guarded them from the wrath of God, and they were set free.

A lamb also plays the role of saviour in the Christian celebration of Easter, which commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible compares Jesus with a lamb as he died to save the world from sin. Thus, during his Last Supper, Jesus shared bread and wine with his followers, called his disciples. Wine was therefore associated with the blood of Christ, but it also recalls the lamb's blood which saved the Jews.

These are all reasons why lamb is a traditional Easter dish. Not just as meat though. In some regions, in Alsace for example, people make Easter cakes shaped like lambs.

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We don't just eat lamb, eggs and chocolate at Easter though, but other things too. Some people prefer fish, especially carp! There's no clear proof though as to why carp became a festive dish, but we do have a few possible explanations. When we celebrate something, we generally like to eat rich food. Carp is a big oily fish and is easy to share, so likely more popular on a festive occasion than other 'leaner' kinds of fish.

If you aren't too sure what we mean by 'lean fish', well, in Europe, during the Middle Ages, it was only the monks and the upper class who had the privilege of rearing fish in ponds and then eating them. Carp was a kind of fish that was particularly suited to breeding like this.

Over hundreds of years, breeding carp advanced considerably in central Europe and in Eastern Europe too, as the emperor Charles IV wanted to develop pisciculture, another word for fish farming. Hence, on Holy Saturday, Polish families traditionally eat a Jewish dish, a recipe for carp known as Gefilte Fish. Holy Saturday is the day before Easter Sunday, so that means it's the last day of Lent. As we mentioned in the last episode, Lent is also known as the 'lean period' when Christians were prohibited from eating meat.

Here's another interesting fact...The link between fish and the Christian religion goes back to the ancient past, when the first Christians used an image of a fish as a secret symbol of their belief, to avoid drawing the attention of the Roman authorities. We still sometimes see this sign of a fish, called ichthus in Greek, on stickers on the back of cars for example.

Some people eat young goats (called kids) at Easter, but this is less common than lamb. It seems that they choose to eat young goats simply because goats give birth just before Easter. There's no apparent religious explanation though.

So, there you have it! Now you know the history behind Easter food. If you have questions about food, please send us an email to community@alimentarium.org or contact us via social media. We'll be happy to answer them in our next episodes. Otherwise, there's much more to explore on www.alimentarium.org. Have you seen the Museum's collection, magazine articles, games, courses and quizzes there? You can also listen to other episodes of our Tell me podcast, as well as download the scripts and interactive illustrations.

Thanks for listening!

We hope you'll join us again soon!