

# Vermatzah, ideal for Jewish locavores



COREY HENDRICKSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Vermatzah co-owners Julie Sperling and Doug Freilich make round artisan matzo, made from organic Vermont grains, spring water, and kosher salt.**

**By Stacey Morris** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 31, 2015

---

MIDDLETOWN SPRINGS, Vt. – Doug Freilich adds another log to the embers in his

wood-burning oven. Tugging the door partway open for a peek at the wares, he inhales and smiles. “Almost crisp,” Freilich announces, cheeks ruddy from the fireside vigil that began at 4 a.m. Across the room, morning sun pours through the picture window as his wife, Julie Sperling, hand-cranks sturdy pellets of wheat berries and emmer through a mill, transforming them into a hearty flour.

The duo, owners of Naga Bakehouse in this southwest Vermont town, are baking handmade matzo for Passover. The Jewish holiday begins in the evening on April 3 and lasts seven to eight days, depending on whether participants are Reformed or not. During that time, anything leavened and fermented from wheat, barley, rye, oats, and spelt is forbidden. Matzo is permitted because the mixing and baking process take less than 18 minutes — Naga bakes its rounds in under 2 minutes — and so the grain does not ferment.

---

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

---

For the past dozen years, the couple have plied their trade at Naga, producing a line of organic, fire-baked focaccia, sourdough, and whole-wheat breads sold at Massachusetts, New York, and Vermont food co-ops and farmers’ markets. Seven years ago, rather than take a winter break when farmers’ markets are mostly dark, the couple and their two teenage daughters took a different course. They threw themselves into a nearly four-month marathon of crafting an eco-kosher product for Passover, which they call Vermatzah. Like their breads, the matzo is made with organic, sustainable, and locally sourced winter wheats and emmer. Vermatzah is so popular, says Freilich, 55, that they can’t make it fast enough. “We’re not trying to keep up with demand because we know we can’t,” he says.



COREY HENDRICKSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

### **Vermatzah dough wrapped and ready for boxing and shipment.**

Naga's eco-kosher label reflects a reconstructionist philosophy that combines traditional dietary laws with new concerns about industrial agriculture, climate change, and fair treatment of workers. "And it's about the daily impact of raising environmental consciousness on the food we eat and the importance of local-sustainable-organic," says Freilich. "The eco-kosher label affirms that we live in two cultures: one religious and one secular, and the nexus of these cultures."

What began as an effort to supply specialty markets within driving distance soon expanded into a mail-order business that reaches California and England (online orders are closed for the year, but some shops have a supply). Gourmet markets in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco now carry black and white boxes of Vermatzah. "Right now we're weighing whether to stay where we are or take production to the next level," says Sperling, 50. "Sometimes we get grumpy because of the long hours," she says. "But when we're all well-fed and in a groove, the process is amazing."





COREY HENDRICKSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Doug Freilich.**



COREY HENDRICKSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Doug Freilich.**

---

CONTINUE READING IT BELOW ▼

---



## Lighter meals replacing traditional Passover menu

In some Jewish homes, the perennial gefilte fish, matzo ball soup, brisket, and potato kugel are sharing menu space with fresher fare.

**■ In the Jewish culinary tradition,  
foods nourish the soul**

**■ Recipe for Passover walnut torte  
with mocha cream**

---

Demand for Vermatzah, with its pedigreed ingredients and homespun name, grows each year, in spite of the \$18 to \$20 price tag (for a box of six rounds). “We make the matzo in a very careful and intentional fashion,” explains Sperling, who has now shifted gears and is folding Vermatzah’s cardboard boxes into position, which will eventually be filled with the pieces of unleavened bread, but not until they’re tenderly wrapped in white parchment paper, tied with black twine, and crowned with a seed packet of emmer to encourage customers to plant quality wheat themselves.

“There are a lot of steps involved, from the mixing of the dough to dividing, shaping, rounding, and then flattening it before baking,” she says. With 16-year-old daughter Tikko away on a field trip, 13-year-old Ellis steps in to help on a late-March morning, wielding a round, cake-size cookie cutter to excise perfect circles in swaths of flattened dough. Sperling then rolls each rounded loaf with a spiked docker to prevent them from puffing up while baking.

As the perfumed scent of burning wood and crisping matzo fills the room, Freilich recites the short ingredient list: organic Vermont wheat, spring water, kosher salt, and fire. But it becomes clear there’s a fifth element: vigilance. “Loaves bake between 30 and 90 seconds, depending on variables like water temperature, and the ratio of wood to ash in the oven,” he says, whisking out a tray of perfectly browned matzo in the nick of time.

“It’s like painting with fire.”

*Vermatzah is available at Cambridge Naturals, 23 White St., Porter Square Shopping Center, Cambridge, 617-492-4452. For a list of stores in Western Massachusetts and Vermont that carry the matzo, go to [www.vermatzah.com](http://www.vermatzah.com).*

## More holiday coverage:

- **Lighter meals replacing traditional Passover menu**
- **Vermatzah, ideal for Jewish locavores**
- **Adding ‘magic’ and meaning to the Passover Seder**
- **Recipe for Passover walnut-wine cake**
- **In the Jewish culinary tradition, foods nourish the soul**

Stacey Morris can be reached at [info@staceymorris.com](mailto:info@staceymorris.com).

### Get **Today's Headlines** from the Globe in your inbox:

**SIGN UP**

[Privacy Policy](#)

 0 COMMENTS

© 2015 BOSTON GLOBE MEDIA PARTNERS, LLC