



Easter is thought of primarily as a religious occasion but originally it was a festival that celebrated events that were taking place in nature. It marked the arrival of the light and warmth of spring after the cold darkness of winter.

Like most festivals, Easter is a rite of passage. It marks the end of winter and the beginning of spring. And all spring festivals have a similar message—death is merely a passage into new life. Because food is so important to life, all spring festivals that deal with rebirth or the return of the growing season use food as a symbol.

The Easter festival runs for four days. Thursday marks the evening of the Last Supper. Good Friday is the day of the Crucifixion. Holy Saturday was the day Christ lay in his tomb and Easter Sunday recalls his resurrection.



On Thursday, there is a Mass, a procession to remove the bread and wine of the Eucharist to a separate place, stripping of the altar and private prayer either until midnight or through the night and into the dawn.

In many Christian churches there is a pre-Mass Seder feast, often held with Jewish groups in remembrance of the fact that Christ's Last Supper was actually a seder.

Traditionally, the Easter Vigil which can begin at any time after sundown on Saturday was considered the high point of the four days of Easter, but in the United States many churches now consider Easter Sunday as the most significant element in the celebration.

In many churches, the primary visual element of the Easter Vigil is the Paschal candle. It is a symbol of Christ himself, rising from the dead and shining the True Light. Customarily, the candle is made of beeswax, which is a symbol of purity, and over the centuries, the bee itself has become a symbol of the Resurrection. The light given off by the Paschal candle is a reference to Jesus being called "the light of the world" and saying "he who

follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Light symbolizes the resurrection of Christ and the hope that God brought to the world through that resurrection. It also celebrates the idea that new beginnings can come from old endings.



On Easter, the church is ablaze with light, and the church bells ring. In some places the bells ring from every church in the city. The altar is draped with white,

which is the color of Easter. Flowers have been brought in and the priest appears in his finest white vestments. The Mass will include the baptism of adult converts, who have been receiving instructions during Lent. Christian baptism involves the idea of drowning in the waters, and rising out of them again into a new life: each baptism is a mini Easter.

Lent runs for forty days, from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. The forty days is a reference to the forty days that Christ, Elijah, and Moses fasted in the desert. The foods of Lent should be lean and practicing Christians often give up meat, sweets, alcohol, butter, milk, coffee or tea. One of my friends gives up lunch and donates her lunch money to charity.

### THE FOODS OF EASTER

One of the ways to understand the message of this celebration is to take a look at the simple acts of eating and drinking. We must eat and drink in order to stay alive. The food exists outside us. We must find it and bring it inside. It's a very simple way of learning that there are things outside ourselves that we must discover and



bring inside in order to survive. And that is one of the central messages of the Eucharist, the communion. God becomes food. We eat the food and become one with God. Because bread and wine are used in the communion, they are the most important foods at the meal. But there are other foods on the Easter table that



also have the sense of the holiday.

One of the best places to take a look at the foods of Easter is Italy. I visited the kitchen of the Villa di Capezzana, a wine and olive estate just outside of Florence. It's the home of Count Ugo Contini Bonacossi and his family.

At the Villa di Capezzana, and in most Christian households, the Easter lamb is a very important element in the meal. It recalls the Passover lamb, which was originally the animal sacrificed in the Temple of Jerusalem. The lamb is also a reference to Christ, who was the "Lamb of God" and Himself became the sacrifice, in order to take away the sins of the world. Lamb will often come to the Easter table in the form of a roast. It is the main course of the meal and can be very elaborate — or very simple — in its presentation.

Along with the lamb served in the Villa di Capezzana there is a dish that is made by sauteing some pancetta, which is a form of Italian bacon, fresh garlic and peas. The peas are a local sign that spring has arrived.

The main course of the meal is served to Count Ugo and his family from a single dish, as opposed to having individual plates brought to each place. It symbolizes the unity of the family, from which each individual person is derived and—especially during Easter—the unity of each person with God.



The dessert at Villa di Capezzana is La Colomba, a sweetened bread presented in the shape of a dove. For tens of thousands of years the dove has been a symbol of the return of spring and for almost the last two thousand years, a sign of the Holy Spirit of Christianity. In Italy, La Colomba has become an almost essential part of the foods of Easter.

Pan de Ramerino is also part of the Easter table. It's Italy's Hot Cross Bun. Originally a Florentine specialty, it was made on Holy Thursday and eaten on Good Friday. It is baked with raisins and rosemary, and has a shiny top which is sometimes marked with a cross. Rosemary is a sign of spring and sacred to the Virgin

Mary. Rosemary is also a symbol of remembrance. The bun says, "Remember the meaning of Easter".



A favorite Easter cake in Mediterranean countries is in the shape of a lamb with intricate curly "wool," and bearing a flag. The cake represents Christ with the flag of victory over death—the Old Testament's Suffering Servant, the Messiah who went "as a sheep to the slaughter and dumb as a lamb before his shearer".

One of the gastronomic responsibilities of a festival is to produce a series of foods that are associated with that specific celebration and underline the symbols of that particular festival. Ideally, they should be unlike anything you are going to eat or even see during the rest of the year.



At Easter time there are a series of breads enclosing whole colored eggs. The breads may be shaped into a basket with eggs inside, or a heart with eggs underneath, or a cross. Festival foods help us remember the festivals of previous years and make us feel that we belong, body as well as soul, to our culture.

### THE EASTER BUNNY IN THE MOON

There is a Hindu tale describing where the rabbit came from and how he got to be in the moon. It is said that the rabbit was traveling together with a duck, a monkey and a fox. They were walking along a road, when a Hindu god materialized from heaven to test their faith. He pretended to be a beggar, and asked them to make a sacrifice to him. The fox, immediately went off and brought back a pail of milk. The monkey went up the tree and grabbed some mangoes. The duck brought the gift of a fish. And when the rabbit was confronted by the deity, he said, "All I eat is grass. I don't know what I can give you, but my flesh." The Hindu deity says, "I'm going to put this cauldron over a fire and you can jump into it. When you are cooked I'll eat your flesh." The rabbit went to the top of the rock and jumped. At that moment, the Hindu deity had such admiration and compassion for him that he caught the rabbit, cradled him in his arms and threw



him up to the moon, where his image still exists, as a sign that we should all behave more like the rabbit, and give something that comes from the heart.



Rabbits reproduce at extraordinary rates and accordingly have often been one of the fertility symbols of spring. They express the ability of life to keep returning, like the moon. At Easter we see chocolate rabbits carrying eggs. The egg is a symbol of birth and because it contains a bright yellow yolk, it is also a sign of the sun. Like most holidays, Easter tries to combine opposites—life and death, darkness and light, moon and sun.

### EGGED ON

Christians saw life breaking out of an egg as the perfect symbol for Christ breaking out of his tomb and eggs became a central element in the celebration of Easter. The decorating of Easter Eggs is part of the culture of Northern and Eastern Europe and dates back for thousands of years.



Egg decorating traditions in Ukraine began before Christianity, in the Pagan days. Ukrainian society depended on agriculture, and the cyclical movements of the sun were very important to them. They used a chicken egg to represent

the life-giving powers of the sun. If you break the egg open, the shape and color of the egg yolk resembles the sun. For ancient society, not only in Ukraine, but all over the world, they believed that the rooster was the sun bird and that the sun came out because the rooster was crowing in the morning. The most important pattern or symbol that is applied upon the decorated egg is the sun motif. It can be in the shape of a star, in the shape of a square cross or in the shape of a four-petaled flower.

### THE CZAR AND THE GOLDEN EGG

The ultimate Easter Eggs are probably those that were created by Peter Carl Faberge, a master jeweler who lived in Russia during the second half of the 1800s. In 1965, Malcolm Forbes, who at the time was the owner and editor of Forbes Magazine, purchased one of the eggs and soon after became a serious



collector of the works of Faberge. His collection is on display to the public in the Forbes Building in New York City.

Today Americans celebrate the Easter season with Easter egg hunts and egg rolls. The hunt theory is that the Easter bunny hid a bunch of eggs while the kids were asleep. On Easter morning, the children search out the eggs and win prizes in accordance with their hunting skills. Sometimes the event is held for the public. In New York, the city government organizes an Eggstravaganza in Central Park. Perhaps the most famous egg roll not including the ones in my local Chinese restaurant takes place on the White House lawn.



The original site of the Easter Monday egg roll was on the grounds of the United States Capitol and by the mid-1870s it was a major event. However, congress was already over budget for landscaping and cancelled the event. In 1878, President Hayes was questioned by a group of children as to why Congress had put an end to the egg roll, the president invited the future voters to roll their eggs on his lawn. Yet again, an example of a president trying to thwart Congress. And to this day, the White House egg roll continues.



### THE WINES OF EASTER

Of all the celebrations in the Christian calendar, none is more clearly associated with wine than Easter. At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples that the wine they were drinking was his blood, and the bread they were eating his body. And in so doing, he made wine an essential element in the future rituals of the church.



Early Romans developed vineyards throughout Western Europe, so it was not difficult for early Christians to find wine for their services. With the fall of Rome in the 400s, the cultivation of many of the vineyards became the responsibility of the Church. The monasteries of the Dark Ages acquired large properties, kept wine-making skills alive and in many areas developed new technology for the craft.

During the Middle Ages, the church played an important role in the feudal system and used its extensive land holdings to consolidate its power. Like other feudal landlords, the Church collected rent from people who lived on its land, and often the rent was paid in the form of wine. Unlike most agricultural products, wine lasts a long time and, in some cases, even improves with age which made wine a favorite form of rent.



The monks loved to stockpile this drinkable form of currency and taught the people who lived on monastery land how to grow grapes and make wine. The monks would take a portion for themselves from each vintage.

They also had one of the all-time great real estate acquisition programs. If you were an aristocrat and somewhat concerned about your morals and how you would be or not be received in heaven, you could take a really nice hunk of one of your vineyards and donate it to the monks in exchange for which they would put in a good word for you upstairs.



If you were an aristocrat and somewhat concerned about your morals and how you would be or not be received in heaven, you could take

### THE AMERICANIZATION OF EASTER

Easter was not a holiday of particular importance in America until the large-scale immigration of Episcopalians and Roman Catholics that began during the middle of the 1800s. During the twentieth century, giving flowers, buying new clothing—especially women’s hats—and displaying your new attire by parading along your city’s major thoroughfare became important activities. We also invented the Easter Card. I never underestimate our extraordinary ability to translate our emotional



needs into “stuff”. Easter (along with Thanksgiving) is one of the only holidays in our American calendar that floats. In a poll that was taken by Business World

magazine in 1972, 52 percent of Americans favored pinning Easter down to a specific Sunday—the third Sunday in April—but this never went to Congress. And so Easter has remained a floating holiday. As one commentator said, “We may be able to fix Lincoln and Washington’s birthday, but we’re never going to change the Resurrection of Christ.”



Of all the holidays and celebrations in the Christian calendar, none is more directly involved with the taste of freedom than Easter. The theme of Easter is liberation—liberation from time, liberation from sin and



liberation from death. Easter celebrates the arrival of spring. It deals with liberation in the past and the present but it also promises liberation in the future. The message that comes with the arrival of spring is very precise: life, in one form or another will always have the capacity to renew itself.

### TO LEARN MORE . . .

**THE BOOK OF THE YEAR: A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR SEASONAL HOLIDAYS**  
BY DR. ANTHONY F. AVENI  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
[HTTP://WWW.OUP.COM/US](http://www.oup.com/us)

**UKRAINIAN MUSEUM**  
203 2ND AVENUE  
NEW YORK, NY 10003  
TEL: (212) 228-0110  
[WWW.UKRAINIANMUSEUM.ORG](http://www.ukrainianmuseum.org)

**THE FORBES COLLECTION**  
60 FIFTH AVENUE  
NEW YORK, NY 10011  
TEL: (212) 206--5548  
[WWW.FORBESCOLLECTION.COM](http://www.forbescollection.com)