

Legumes and Rice on Passover

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Source: Rabbi Thomas Louchheim

Do you have Ashkenazi roots? Do you trace your family back to the Mediterranean or Poland? If you do, you might have a Sephardic background. In either case, for most of us these terms have lost their significance in today's "melting pot" North American society. Nevertheless, there still seems to be some debate about what you may or may not eat on Passover. Let me see if I can clarify this for you (or complicate your menu for your seder).

On [Passover](#), one is not to have *chametz* – leavening – in your home. By *chametz*, the tradition means those grains from which matzah may be baked: wheat, barley, oats, rye, and spelt. No other foodstuffs are regarded as *chametz*. In 1810 the Reform Movement in Germany determined that they would be following the Sephardic practice of not categorizing any legumes or rice as *chametz*. Therefore, for more than 200 years, my family has been following this Reform (not "Sephardic") practice by eating string beans and rice with our matzah ball soup.

The prohibition found its roots in France in the thirteenth century and then spread through Europe. There was no explanation, at the time, for excluding these foods during Passover. In actuality, allowing rice and legumes predates Sephardic Jews. Prohibiting these foods actually contradicts the Talmud (*Pesachim* 35a and 114b), which allows them. The Talmud even disputes the claim that these foods are *chametz* because they can be dried and made into flour.