



# Kosher Catering

**P**lan on attending your cousin's Bar Mitzvah party next week? Or your neighbor's daughter's wedding next month? As an increasing number of *semachot* are catered at non-kosher hotels, it is important for the kosher consumer to be aware of what takes place in hotel kitchens. Indeed, oftentimes guests enjoy a lavish smorgasbord (replete with roast rack of lamb and endive and radicchio salad) at a catered hotel affair but have little idea of what, from a *kashrut* perspective, goes on behind the scenes.

It is important to keep in mind that as a guest at a kosher affair you should never hesitate to question the *mashgiach*. It is your right to know the standards of the *kashrut* organization and to feel confident that the *mashgiach* is doing everything necessary to adhere to the highest *kashrut* standards.

To better understand the world of kosher catering, let's take a look at a fictitious evening wedding held at the Sharriot Hotel in New York City.

**6 AM:** Two *mashgichim* enter the hotel kitchen to begin preparations. Depending on the size of the event, sometimes as many as three or four *mashgichim* are needed.

The *mashgichim* begin to *kasher* (make kosher) the ovens and sinks. The caterer's cleaning crew is already

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there scrubbing various appliances. Ovens and stovetops are usually very dirty and can take an hour or longer to clean.

Even though the kosher caterer has sent along kosher china for the affair, numerous pieces of silverware and other equipment provided by the hotel need to be *kashered*. For this 500-guest wedding, the *mashgichim* must *kasher* 2,000 reception forks, 1,200 salad forks, 600 dinner forks, 600 dinner knives, 500 soup spoons, 1,000 teaspoons, 50 soup tureens, 50 ladles and 50 coffee pots. Every piece of equipment must be checked to ensure that it is spotlessly clean. This process is time consuming and laborious. Next, each item must be purged (heat is used to remove any trace of *tarfus*). Depending on the item being *kashered*, either *hagolah* (purging using boiling water) or *libun* (purging using dry heat, such as a blowtorch) is performed.

Since *mashgichim* often use various harsh cleaning agents and scalding water, they are trained to take the necessary safety precautions (such as using firefighter gloves to prevent accidental burning). In fact, in some locations, *mashgichim* must be licensed by the local fire department in order to use certain equipment.

A non-kosher hotel often hosts non-kosher events at the same time as the kosher affair; this obviously presents a challenge. *Mashgichim* must remain alert constantly to avoid mix-ups.

Some hotels, however, have separate kosher kitchens. While this helps make the *mashgiach's* job somewhat easier since he doesn't have to monitor

the non-kosher traffic, the policy of many kosher certifying agencies, including the Orthodox Union (OU), is that a kosher kitchen in a hotel must be under a reliable *mashgiach's* lock and key (only the *mashgiach* can have access to the kitchen). In cases where this is not possible, the kitchen designated kosher will require *kashering*.

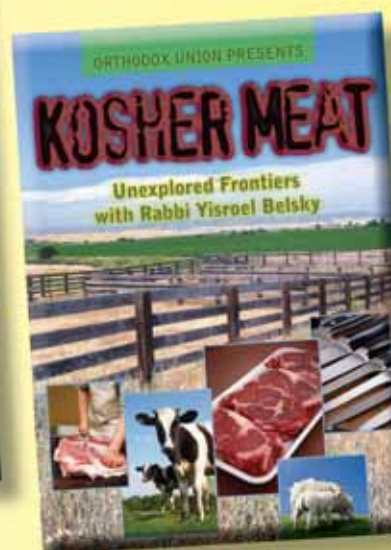
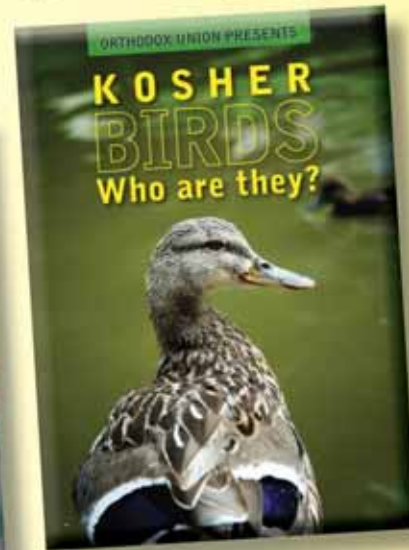
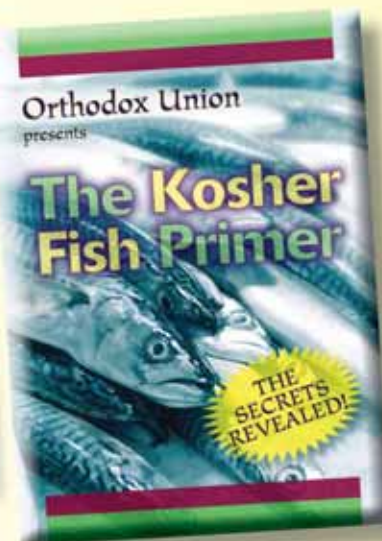
**11 AM:** The caterer arrives with the food, most of which was cooked offsite at the caterer's commissary. By this time, the majority of the utensils have been *kashered* and all the worktables that cannot be *kashered* have been covered with double layers of heavy-duty aluminum foil and kraft paper. (There are many reasons why a *mashgiach* would not want to *kasher* a worktable. Some worktables are made of wood, which is difficult to *kasher*. Other times, there may simply not be enough time to *kasher* all of them.)

The *mashgichim* check that each food container is sealed and has the appropriate labels ("*simanim*") indicating that it came directly from the kosher commissary. The food is then placed into the refrigerator until it can be warmed. Most hotels do not designate a refrigerator only for kosher foods; in this regard, too, the *mashgichim* must be vigilant since the catering staff can mistakenly grab *treif* food when in a rush.

**1 PM:** The caterer begins preparing the salad, vegetable platters and the rest of the menu. In the meantime, one *mashgiach* stands nearby, observing everything he does. He also keeps an eye on the non-kosher area in the kitchen, making sure that no non-kosher food or equipment goes near the kosher section. Another *mashgiach* finishes any *kashering* that still needs to be done and reviews *kashrut* issues with the caterer (such as which ovens and sinks may be used). There is no time at this point for a *mashgiach* to start checking vegetables. OU policy is that all vegetables must be checked at the commissary the day before such an event.

**3 PM:** The staff, consisting of waiters, busboys and bartenders, arrives. The *mashgichim* provide them with instruc-

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tions specific to the kosher event, such as which silverware and china should be used and where they should be returned. Generally, at a non-kosher affair, once china is used it is returned to the hotel's *treif* dishwasher. At a kosher affair, however, there are designated boxes for the return of dishes, supplied by the kosher caterer. Explicit instructions must be provided to the busboys to avoid mix-ups. At this point, the *mashgichim* turn on all fires to prevent *bishul akum* concerns.

**4 PM:** At the bar, the *mashgichim* check the kosher status of all wines, whiskies, liqueurs and drink mixes. They remove the knives and cutting board used to cut lemons and limes; the fruit must be sliced in the kitchen, under supervision. They also ensure that all approved wines, whiskies, liqueurs and drink mixes are in sealed bottles. Once the event starts, the *mashgichim* must constantly check the bar. When a bartender runs out of a particular item, he generally goes into the storeroom for more and could possibly fill an empty glass bottle with a non-kosher drink. To avoid this, many *mashgichim* will only allow bartenders to pour the wines out of their original bottles.

**5 PM:** The smorgasbord is prepared and the guests begin to arrive. The *mashgichim* ensure that fish dishes are placed at a distance from meat dishes. If possible, they place a sign to alert guests which dishes contain fish.

Many items at the smorgasbord, such as crepes and blintzes, are cooked from scratch. As this could result in *bishul akum*, it is necessary for the *mashgichim* to turn on all the burners. Unfortunately, often the fires on the burners extinguish due to the air conditioning in the hall. The *mashgichim* must therefore remain alert throughout the smorgasbord.

**6 PM:** At this point, the *mashgichim* have been on their feet for twelve hours, but their day is far from being over. While the courses are being served, they must ensure that the waiters use only the caterer's kosher utensils or the *kashered* hotel utensils. Waiters must be constantly watched as they dash in and out of the kitchen. Sometimes waiters run low on silverware and may be tempted to grab utensils from the non-kosher area; often, a *mashgiach* will be stationed by the non-kosher silverware to redirect them.

**10 PM:** The Viennese table is rolled out. A major *kashrut* concern is that the waiters will, out of habit, grab milk for coffee. To avoid such a mistake, the OU requires that caterers place one- or two-ounce servings or containers of nondairy creamer instead of using pitchers.

**11 PM:** The event is over, but before the *mashgichim* can leave, they must ensure that the utensils of the caterer do not get mixed up with those of the hotel, and that they are sent back to the commissary. Additionally, all food going back to the commissary must be properly sealed to prevent *kashrut* problems such as *basar shenitalemin ha'ayin*.

**12 AM:** After working an eighteen-hour day, the *mashgichim* go home to get some much-needed sleep! ■

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