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All around the world Easter is a celebration of spring. The air warms, the sun shines, daffodils bloom, supermarket shelves fill up with marshmallow peeps and spirits soar. In New England, the air tries to warm up, rain pours and dirt roads turn to seas of mud. The snow is melting or at least trying and a few early blooms are blooming. In a spirit of optimism, we don summer dresses on Easter Sunday, put on a sweater and our rubber boots and head out the door to celebrate.

Easter is a strange mix of Christian and pagan rites. When Christian missionaries traveled north to convert the Celts, Anglos and Saxons, they realized that a merger might be more successful than a takeover. Their celebration of Jesus' resurrection fell at the same time as the North's spring rituals. The northern tribes were celebrating the end of winter, an end to the harsh cold and long dark nights. In a way, both festivities celebrated rebirth, the triumph of light over dark and life over death. A few compromises were negotiated and the two celebrations merged.

It was that very spirit of compromise that created our jumbled mix of Easter traditions. It is all rather curious how bunnies, eggs and parades, even the name came into the picture. It may be a sacred Christian holiday, but the name Easter comes from the ancient Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, Eostre.

Now, what's with the eggs? Eggs have been a symbol of new life and fertility since the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. They were a natural part of spring fertility rituals and celebrations. On a more practical note, eggs were forbidden during Lent in Medieval Europe. Not wanting to waste the eggs laid during Lent, they were boiled or preserved. With forty days of eggs waiting to be consumed, they became a mainstay of Easter meals.

With so many eggs around, it only made sense that they become part of the entertainment. Eggs were used in games and given as gifts. Not just any old egg, after all it was a holiday. Decorating eggs with dyes and paints made its way into the celebrations. Long before the big festivities on the White House lawn, families celebrated the day and the season with egg hunts, eggs tosses and egg rolls. (That's rolling the egg across the lawn not the crispy treats from your favorite Chinese restaurant.) And those sweet little chicks and marshmallow peeps? Just an extension of the egg theme.

Now the Easter Bunny has always been a bit of a mystery. What does a rabbit have to do with Jesus or even eggs? The rabbit was an ancient fertility symbol in northern Europe, particularly Germany. The tradition of the Easter rabbit was brought to the US by German immigrants. I guess someone or something had to deliver all those eggs.

I've never celebrated Easter in New York, but I always thought that it would be fun to parade down 5th Avenue. Better yet, dance down the avenue like Judy Garland and Fred Astaire. In spite of its fame, New Yorkers did not invent the Easter parade. Easter parades have been around since ancient times. Early Christians celebrated their baptisms with new white robes and a parade to celebrate their new lives. In Medieval Europe, everyone paraded through the town after Easter Mass. I'm not sure if they wore straw bonnets festooned with flowers, ribbons and bows.

And finally the big Easter feast. Easter dinner celebrates the end of Lent and, at least in warmer climates, the first spring harvest. If you are lucky enough to live in one of those warmer climates, Easter dinner has always been about eating local foods. Artichokes in Italy, lamb in France and lemons in Greece. In New England, we should be savoring maple syrup! Or maybe bear. Beware, they are out and about and wandering around the neighborhood looking for birdfeeders.

Have a Happy Easter with family and friends and,

Bon appétit! -- Susan

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Tarte au Citron

I don't think that this lemon tart is traditional for Easter anywhere. But it is wonderful and lemons are a perfect addition to any spring feast. Enjoy!

Serves 8

5 whole eggs
2 cups sugar
Grated peel of 2 lemons
Juice of 3-4 lemons
2-3 tablespoons melted butter
4 tablespoons heavy cream
1 9-inch unbaked flakey pie crust, recipe follows

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Whisk together the eggs, sugar, lemon peel and juice, butter and cream.
3. Pour into the pie shell and bake at 350 degrees for 1 hour or until firm. Let cool and serve.

Flakey Pastry:

1 cup all purpose flour
1 teaspoon sugar
1/2 teaspoon salt
4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) cold butter, cut into pieces
3 tablespoons solid vegetable shortening, cold
2-4 tablespoons ice water

1. Blend flour, sugar and salt in a food processor. Add butter and shortening. Process until mixture resembles coarse meal.
2. Sprinkle with ice water, 1-2 tablespoons at a time, and process until dough comes together in a ball. Remove the dough from the food processor and flatten it into a disk. Wrap the dough in plastic; chill until firm, at least 30 minutes.
3. Roll the dough out on a lightly floured surface. Gently press it into a 9-inch pie plate. Crimp the edges and chill until firm.