

Cleaning with fire for Passover in Hanover Twp.

Blowtorch used to make kitchens kosher for the holiday

BY JAKE REMALY • STAFF WRITER • MARCH 29, 2010

HANOVER — Preparing a kitchen for Passover requires time, effort, an understanding of ancient Jewish customs and lots of fire power.

This year, as in previous years, making kosher the two kitchens at the Lester Senior Housing Center in the Whippany section of the township involved a blowtorch-wielding rabbi, pouring boiling water over surfaces touched by food and setting ovens to 500 degrees Fahrenheit to clean them.

On Friday morning, Rabbi Avner Katz of Brooklyn methodically ran the flame of a propane-fueled torch over the metal counters in one of the center's kitchens, which are glatt kosher. The entire process of making the kitchen kosher for Passover, which begins at sundown tonight, was expected to take up to seven hours.

"We eliminate anything basically that has a resemblance of bread," Katz said.

Mitchell Goldberg, regional director of dining for the Jewish Community Housing Corp., which runs the Lester Senior Housing Center, said employees work overtime as Passover approaches to make sure everything is ready for the holiday.

Passover is the weeklong Jewish commemoration of the deliverance of the ancient Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. As they ran across the desert with flour and water on their backs, the sun baked the mixture into matzo, or unleavened bread, which is still eaten during Passover, Katz said.

Goldberg said the cost of running a kosher kitchen is generally 25 to 30 percent more than the cost of running non-kosher kitchens. Throughout the year, a mashgiach — kosher supervisor — opens and closes the kitchen each day to ensure the food is fit to be eaten. There are separate kitchens for meat and dairy products, and all of the food and ingredients used must be marked kosher.

"You'll never get a cheeseburger here. You'll never get a chicken parmigiana," Goldberg said.

Lester Senior Housing Center has about 60 people in its assisted living building who get three meals a day, seven days a week, and about 135 people in its independent living building, where residents get dinner Monday through Friday.

Passover is always a big holiday, said Alex Gross, administrator of Lester Senior Housing, which is on the campus of the Jewish Community Center. "That's why this process here is so intense," he said.

Residents said the center's kosher kitchen is one of the reasons they stay there.

"We came to a kosher place and expect that they keep everything kosher," said resident Lotte Mandel.

Resident Roslyn Handler said self-cleaning ovens and a wider selection of readily available kosher foods have made eating kosher for Passover much easier for many people. "It's the best holiday for spring cleaning that there is," Handler said.



Rabbi Avner Katz, of Brooklyn, uses a blow torch during the kashering process at the kitchens at the Lester Senior Housing Center in Whippany Friday. The process cleans any remaining food residue and makes the kitchen kosher for Passover. City: WHIPPANY Country: USA Keyword: (Sarah Rice)