



How to Keep Kosher: The Laws of Kashrut

Perhaps the most well-known Jewish religious practice is that of eating only foods that are "kosher." The laws of *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws) can seem puzzling or arbitrary to the outsider, but they have held great meaning for Jewish people throughout history.

The word "kosher" is the Anglicized form of the Hebrew *kasher*, which literally means "good" or "proper," but came to indicate an item "fit for ritual use." *Kashrut* thus means "fitness" for ritual use. The Hebrew word for non-kosher is *trayf*, from the word *terayfa*, "torn" (from the commandment not to eat meat that has been "torn" by other animals).

The following table summarizes the classification of foods under the laws of *kashrut*.

Kosher (permitted)	Trayf (forbidden)
Ritually slaughtered beef, sheep, goats and deer with no flaws or diseases	Pork, camel, rabbit, rodents, reptiles, and any animal that died of natural causes
Chicken, turkey, quail, geese	Eagle, hawk, vulture
Salmon, tuna, carp, herring, cod	Crab, lobster, octopus, clam, swordfish, sturgeon
Meat eaten separately from dairy	Meat with dairy (e.g., cheeseburger, burger with milkshake, chicken cordon bleu, wiener schnitzel, etc.)
Wine or grape juice made under Jewish supervision	Any other wine and grape juice
Soft cheese and kosher hard cheese	Most hard cheese

These prohibitions derive from specific instructions in the Torah, primarily in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. These instructions were then interpreted, expanded and modified by rabbis as Jews encountered new cultures and situations.

All fruits, vegetables and grains are permissible (Gen. 1:29), with the exception of **grape products**. Due to laws against eating or drinking anything offered to idols, and the fact that wine was often made for pagan offerings and celebrations, all wine and grape juice that is not made under Jewish supervision is prohibited.



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Only **domesticated fowl** such as chicken, turkey, quail and geese may be eaten. Birds of prey and scavenger birds, such as eagles, hawks and vultures, are prohibited (Lev. 11:13-19; Deut. 14:11-18). Only **seafood with fins and scales** are kosher.

Meat and dairy products may not be combined or eaten at the same meal. However, **Parve** may be eaten with either meat or dairy foods. Food is considered **Parve** if it does not contain either meat or dairy. Foods such as grains, eggs, tofu, vegetables, and fish are Parve.

The kashrut extends to non-food products. **Utensils** like pots, pans, sinks, dishwashers, potholders and plates take on the status (*fleishig*, *milshig*, *treyf* or *pareve*) of the food they touch in the presence of heat. For example, a pan used to fry a hamburger or a pot used to make stew become *fleishig*. If the *fleishig* pot or pan is then used to boil milk, the *kashrut* has been violated. Similarly, a bowl previously used for chicken soup cannot be used for ice cream. When eating foods prepared away from home, Jews keeping kosher must ensure utensils have not been used to prepare non-kosher foods.

Most Conservative Jews are satisfied to read product ingredient labels to make sure their food is kosher, while Orthodox Jews tend to insist that foods be certified kosher by a trained rabbi, called a *mashgiach*. The "seal of approval" that indicates a *mashgiach* has observed and approved the product's preparation is called a *hechsher*.

Several symbols are used to indicate such approval. The most common are K inside a circle, which stands for "kosher," and a U inside a circle, the certification symbol of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations.

Below are some of the more common symbols (*hechshers*) found on Kosher foods:



The Torah offers no explanation for the dietary laws other than the holiness of God and his chosen people. "You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own" (Lev. 20:26). Nonetheless, various other speculations have been offered by Jews and non-Jews alike.

One definite benefit of the *kashrut* is that it serves to keep the Jewish people **separate and distinct** from their surrounding culture. From a religious perspective, the dietary laws were God's way of unifying his chosen people and preserving them from assimilation. This notion is suggested by the Torah, as seen in the verse quoted above. From a secular perspective, the dietary laws provide a sense of unity and force Jews to rely on one another, which contributes to the survival of the group.



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Kashrut also cultivates **self-control and discipline**, and encourages mindful eating. The great Jewish philosopher Maimonides wrote that the dietary laws "train us to master our appetites, to accustom us to restrain our desires, and to avoid considering the pleasure of eating and drinking as the goal of man's existence."

Given its regulations for humane slaughter and the many restrictions on meat-eating, many Jews have concluded that the *kashrut* teaches **reverence for animal life**. Some say it even encourages **vegetarianism**, which is given as the ideal in Genesis 1:29 and will again prevail in the messianic age.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, keeping kosher is an **act of faith** and obedience to God. Jews may not understand why God has given these regulations, but he has done so, and he is to be trusted and obeyed. The laws of *kashrut* thus provide the opportunity to incorporate religious ritual and the sacred into a necessary daily activity. [^]