Serve up sweet bread for Easter

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There's paska, pane di Pasqua, tsoureki and of course, the famous hot cross buns. But whether you're in Eastern Europe, Italy, Greece or Britain, Easter brings out the bread.

"Almost every nationality produces some kind of bread," said Chef Charles Imondi of Keiser University-Melbourne. For instance, he grew up in an Italian family eating a round coffee style cake decorated with colored eggs. Sometimes his mom and grandmother would fold candied fruit into the bread before baking. "We just called it an Easter sweet bread."

An Easter sweet bread can take many forms, and like soda bread on St. Patrick's Day or fruitcake at Christmas, local bakers are preparing for a rise in the breads eaten around the Easter holiday.

Croissant Chateau Bakery in downtown Melbourne is making its usual Portuguese sweet bread, a braided breakfast bread with colored eggs that some use as a centerpiece for the table, manager Karen Interval said.

Heavenly Bake Shoppe in Cocoa Village has a braided sweet Easter egg bread similar to challah with colored eggs, and hot cross buns, the soft, slightly sweet buns with a cross on top. The hot cross buns are made with cinnamon, nutmeg, candied citron, raisins or currants and covered with an apricot glaze.

Sunrise Bread Company in downtown Titusville also is making hot cross buns Friday and Saturday.

Even The Yellow Dog Café in Malabar is including hot cross buns in its bread basket. The restaurant's version is a sweet egg bread with raisins, sun-dried cherries and cranberries, owner Stuart Borton said.

"It has a butter top on it," he said. "It also will have a cross on the top."

Bread long has played a role in religious ceremonies, according to food historian Lynne Olver of foodtimeline.org.

Christ shared bread with his disciples during the Last Supper -- brioche or egg
bread. Egyptians offered small round cakes to the goddess of the moon, each marked with the horns of an ox, according to the information on her site. In ancient Greece, bread with flour and honey was called bous, meaning ox. In time, the representation of the horns became a cross, the site said.

Hot cross buns were baked in honor of Eostre, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring. Archaeologists found two small loaves, each with a cross on it, among the ruins of Herculaneum in southwestern Italy, which had been buried under volcanic ash and lava since 79 A.D., according to Sue Ellen Thompson’s "Holiday Symbols and Customs."

Nowadays, in England, hot cross buns are served at breakfast on Good Friday, she wrote. "The English believe that hanging a hot cross bun in the house on this day offers protection from bad luck in the coming year."

Hot cross buns may be one of the most popular breads close to home. Even the Publix Bakery stocks them. But other countries have their own Easter bread.

The Russian Easter bread is called kulich. It has a tall, narrow shape and is decorated with citrus peel. In Greece, tsourekis is a braided sweet egg bread with red hard-boiled eggs. It is traditionally flavored with ground cherry pits, called mahlepi, mahlab or mahleb.

Italy’s Easter bread (pane di Pasqua) varies from region to region, according to poet, playwright and novelist Mary Melfi, who is of Italian descent. She also is the author of "Italy Revisited: Conversations With My Mother."

She said in an e-mail that in some areas of Italy, pane di Pasqua refers to a braided yeast bread, while in others it is a tall sponge-like cake. She said in Molise, where she lived as a child, pane di Pasqua was a tall cake, similar to panettone.

Pane di Pasqua also can be savory bread made with deli meats, cheeses and olives.

Imondi said on Easter, he always had rustica pie, also known as pizza gain, with prosciutto, salami, pepperoni, mozzarella, ricotta cheese and hard boiled eggs baked between two crusts.

"There was no worry about cholesterol on this day," he said. Indeed, Easter desserts included ricotta cheesecake and rice pie, made with rice, eggs, ricotta, cream cheese, sugar and crushed pineapple.
Chef Patrice Shuback, whose grandparents were Slavic, said for Easter, she ate paska, a traditional egg bread, along with ham, smoked sausage, vegetables and greens and beets with horseradish.

She grew up Catholic, and her mom really was into holidays and traditions, she said in an e-mail. "She used to even make dresses for us three girls and herself that matched, and we always wore hats to church, with hers being the most glam," she said.

Shuback, a personal chef and consultant based in Cocoa, said she no longer practices the religion, but she still enjoys the traditional foods and the meaning behind them all.

"One of my favorites remains the paska, because it was one of my grandfather's favorites," she said, "with the rich, sweet taste and smell and sometimes the addition of colored, whole cooked eggs."

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