

# The bagel: How a simple bread lost its ethnic roots

By Jeremy N. Smith

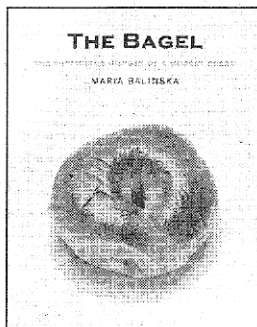
Twenty-five years ago, 80 percent of Americans had yet to taste a bagel. Now they are ubiquitous and, almost invariably, awful. How did it come to this?

In "The Bagel," as told by Maria Balinska, the story starts in medieval Poland where Jews had been driven by French and German persecution. Bagels, like their central ingredient, wheat, were first a luxury, consumed with cake and challah, the Sabbath bread, to celebrate the circumcision of a baby boy. When wheat prices fell, the ceremonial item became a staple. Then, as poverty and pogroms imperiled late 19th and early 20th Century European Jewry, bagel bakers by the hundreds immigrated to America.

One such immigrant was Lubin-born Harry Lender, and it is he and his sons Balinska credits and blames for the modern bagel. Like the proverbial Hollywood producer, when the Lender family went national they wrote Jewish but cast Protestant. "A bagel has versatility," master salesman Murray Lender told the Hartford Courant in 1969. "When most people call it a Jewish product, it hurts us. It's a roll, a roll with personality. If you must be ethnic you can call it a Jewish English muffin."

From 1971 to 1979, driven by supermarket sales, Lender's revenue rose tenfold, from \$2.25 million to \$22 million, and Kraft bought the company in 1984. Two years later a new factory capable of manufacturing 1 million bagels a day opened in rural Mattoon, Ill., population 17,000, three hours south of Chicago. Curious locals who had never heard of their new chief export were invited to a bagel, cream cheese and coffee picnic. So, within a decade, the swarthy, chewy Jewish Sunday morning staple transformed into the pale, vaguely-circular breadsticks suddenly pestiferous, like "Baywatch" reruns, everywhere around the world.

An irony of bagels' recent culinary deracination is that few foods could originally be called more mongrel. Relatives among boiled-and-baked, ring-shaped breads include the Italian tarallo, Chinese girde and Polish obwarzanek. None of these, however, immigrated en masse to New York City. Until the early 1970s, when Lender's-led mechanization broke the once-proud bagel baker's union, Local 338, members made more than teachers and policemen. Average output per



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person was a bagel every four or five seconds—about 800 per hour.

With mechanization, refrigeration then freezing spread the mass-produced product far beyond the five boroughs. Aficionados could complain—"a doughnut dipped in cement and then frozen" was the verdict of Manhattan bagel bakery owner Helen Katzman—but the year the Lender's factory opened in Mattoon, total domestic sales reached \$500 million. By 2000, bagels enjoyed their own category in the U.S. Department of Commerce's U.S. Industrial Outlook. "The public," Balinska concludes, "[got] the bagel they deserved."

"The Bagel" is not a shopping guide, but Balinska notes they still make good bagels in Montreal, and London boasts the superlative Brick Lane Beigel Bakery. When Dunkin' Donuts first opened a franchise in Tel Aviv, it imported frozen bagel dough shipped by plane from Manhattan's Upper West Side.

These days New Yorkers themselves may be the export. This August, during the Olympic Games, Jennifer 8. Lee of the New York Times surveyed Mrs. Shanen's Bagels in Beijing, owned and operated by a Chinese-American raised in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. "Pretty decent," Lee decided. "They are not simply rolls with holes that you find in some parts of the United States."

That leaves Kazimierz, the Jewish district of Krakow, Poland, where religious elders first mentioned bagels in writing in 1610. Today, Balinska reports in a postscript, the only bagel shop there, Bagelmama, is owned by an American expatriate. He advertises his wares as "one of the most popular breads in America." Also available are burritos.

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