



Schmear campaign

In 1859, the United States War Department published *The Prairie Traveler*, a handbook for westbound pioneers. Author and U.S. Army Capt. Randolph B. Marcy wrote, “Provisions for each grown person ... should suffice for 110 days.” Besides salt and pepper, coffee and sugar, bacon and beef, Macy advised bringing flour and baking soda and yeast sufficient “for making bread.”

Add malt syrup, and Manifest Destiny might have brought bagels to the needy settlements of our great West. But this was not to be.

I love bagels, and I live in Missoula, Mont. This July marks the seventh anniversary of my move. Big Sky Country is beautiful. In terms of bagels, however, it is still a wilderness. And how can you settle somewhere, however wonderful, that does not meet such a basic human need?

We are all tribal, and my tribe believes in bagels. I was initiated in stages, starting when I was six months old. My parents tied string through the middle of a frozen bagel and attached it to my stroller. They pushed, I teathed. By my 10th birthday, I was biking with my father to nearby Skokie, Ill., home of New York Bagel & Bialy. Only a see-through counter separated the small shop’s kitchen from its customers. You could almost tap the bakers’ shoulders as they dunked plump rings of dough in bubbling pots of water, then shoveled them into a ceiling-high oven. As one heavy door closed, another opened: Finished bagels tumbled into metal baskets placed under the counter.

In those days, each treasure cost 25 cents. The price of 12 bought a baker’s dozen. Our “bonus” bagel, invariably poppy, never made it into the bag. I asked to have it handed to me directly over the counter, still alive and steaming.

One afternoon in Missoula, feeling nos-

talgic, I called my father’s cell phone and reached him at a downtown Chicago branch of a nationwide bagel chain, where he had holed up to prepare for an important meeting. “I’m having what *they* call a bagel, if you know what I mean,” he said. I knew what he meant.

It was my decision to move West. It was my problem that the bike ride to New York Bagel & Bialy now stretched 1,600 miles. “Want what you have, give what you need,” I was once advised by a bumper sticker. To achieve that enlightened state, would I have to open a Montana bagel bakery?

Making bagels at home is hard. Very hard. The meticulous Peter Reinhart’s *The Bread Baker’s Apprentice* presents, to my knowledge, the only complete recipe for the prospective amateur bagel baker. It totals eight pages, longer than the United States Constitution and all 27 amendments, longer even than the lyrics to Don McLean’s *American Pie*. Key terms include “hydration range” and “liquid nondiastatic malt.” Instruments as imprecise as measuring cups are discouraged. Reinhart recommends, for example, a 57.1:51.3 ratio by weight of water to flour.

And so, for four years, I imported bagels instead. When I visited my family, I brought an extra suitcase, which I filled at New York Bagel & Bialy on my return to the airport. I sliced and froze those bagels the moment I returned home, no matter how tired I was from the multiple long flights. My supply was supposed to last at least six months, but all too often it dwindled precipitously. Sometimes I tried to content myself with simply sniffing the designated bagel suitcase. Long after the myriad other odors had vanished, fragrant whiffs of onion and pumpernickel remained.

Three years ago, I married. Trained as an environmental scientist, Crissie seldom cooks, as cooking is work for the weaker sex. But she, too, has needs. Born and bred in

Mississippi, Crissie on occasion craves genuine peach cobbler the way I seek the one true bagel. Exactly one orchard in the entire state of Montana grows peaches to her specifications. Each summer we transfer the entire contents of our joint bank account to that orchard. Crissie cuts and freezes the fruit for year-round access. When appetite moves her, she thaws her prize. She steals my rolling pin and apron. And she bakes.

It’s a cliché that cooking is art, and baking is science. Now I had, in my home, a professional. The only question was: How could I convince a 28-year-old former Southern Baptist in Missoula, Mont., to channel her inner Jewish grandmother? Crissie, as ever, cut to the chase. Bring me the recipe, she said.

On my cutting board at the moment are four perfect homemade poppyseed bagels. The kitchen windowsill holds chives to spread into our cream cheese. Ten more bagels hide from me in our basement chest freezer. We are trading them with the Australian owner of a dog-boarding business nestled in the nearby Mission Mountains. An avid fisherman, he smokes his own salmon to make the best of all bagel toppings: lox.

Tribes wander, intermarry, change tastes, and order takeout. But we are what we eat, and people of substance regularly require the sort of food that should never change. I believe that, with bagels, Lewis and Clark might have blazed a trail all the way to Siberia. If I have briefly become a pioneer myself, it is only out of necessity. Life was tougher in the 19th century, and it is tough in the 21st. There are worse problems in the world than making do without bagels. Few are best contemplated before breakfast. □

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