

Eating Concrete: The Fall of the Bagel

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A mere seventy years ago, eating a bagel might have been described as similar to “taking a bite out of concrete.” They were small, dense circles of bread with a tough outer crust, charred from hours of baking. A dozen bagels would take hours to produce, requiring specialized knowledge and a team of four to work the oven. Today, however, bagels bear little resemblance to those found in Jewish delis in the 1950’s. Technology played a large part in the bagel’s transition into the mainstream. Whereas a team of bagel bakers could produce maybe 1200 bagels on a good day, the bagel machine increased daily production to over 10,000 (Goodman 95). Other factors, such as the frozen bagel, mass marketing campaigns, and an increasing variety of flavors also contributed to the rise of the bagel. But these advancements were not without cost. The bagel, once a flavorful, crusty Jewish ethnic food, now is nothing more than a roll with a hole. Even as it diminished in relation to the Jewish people, so too did it diminish in flavor.

The first record of the bagel was four centuries ago. As Darra Goldstein, a professor at Williams College and the founding editor of *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, writes, “The precise origin of the bagel is unclear, though its written record has been traced back to 1610, when rings of dough were mentioned in the community regulations of Krakow, Poland, as appropriate to give to women in childbirth” (20). It is possible to infer, then, that the bagel began its journey to America in Krakow, where there was a vibrant Jewish community (Hundert 261). Bagels were unique in Eastern Europe in that, unlike other breads, they would be prepared not in a bakery, but in home kitchens. Subsequently, they were sold on the street (Marks 35). Joan Nathan, a contributor to the *New York Times* food section and the author of *Jewish Cooking in America*, speculates that it is possible the hole in the bagel originated to facilitate hawking on street corners, as the opening would allow the seller of a bagel to “thread such a roll on a stick or a string, facilitating transport.”

There are numerous theories of where the bagel may have come from prior to being in Poland. Some suggestions have included the *taralli* or *buccellatum* from Italy, or the *girde* from China. There are even references to circular breads with holes in Egyptian hieroglyphs (Nathan 1). There is a tale that “the bagel was born in Vienna in 1683, as a tribute to the Polish cavalry that had helped save the city from the invading Turks. In honor of the cavalry’s efforts...a Viennese baker produced a roll in the shape of a horse’s stirrup, known in German as a *Steighbügel*” (Goodman 92). Some have postulated it comes from the Jews in Spain, who had a boiled bread. Yet others have suggested it comes from the Jews in Central Asia (Marks 35). Even in its earliest days, the bagel likely had a link to the Jewish people.

The bagel came to the United States in the 1890’s with the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe, and its consumption was largely limited to Jews at this point (Goldstein 20). Many of these immigrants came to New York. At the time, the city had the largest German population in the country, and while the Germans brought with them many things that entered the American mainstream, perhaps the most relevant is the delicatessen (Levine 67). Harry Levine, a professor of sociology at Queens College, explains that the German Jews opened their own delis in New York, and there were more

than 1000 of these delis across the country at one point (68). The quick expansion of the Jewish deli, along with the iconic bagels they sold, no doubt contributed to “the rise of the bagel in American culinary consciousness” (Goldstein 20).

Before the 1950’s, bagel baking was the sole providence of the Bagel Bakers Union Local 338 in New York City. The knowledge of how to bake a bagel was tightly controlled, and only sons or nephews of members were allowed to join. As such, the Union had a lot of power, and bagel bakers rose to middle class standing around this time. They received pensions, vacation, and other benefits, along with a high wage. Perhaps the greatest testament to Local 338 was that the owners of bagel bakeries often were not even allowed to set foot in their own establishment (Goodman 93-4). Prior to the 1920’s the minutes for Union meetings were taken entirely in Yiddish, a language spoken by German and Polish Jews (Goodman 93). After that, they transitioned to English, but the organization was still entirely Jewish due to the familial relation membership rule. Local 338 reached the height of its power in the 1950’s, but that was short lived. At the time, the Union supplied almost every deli that served bagels in the area. Bagels were entirely controlled by the Jewish population of New York. This would all change in 1963.

That year, the first bagel machine was sold by Daniel Thompson. Back in 1910, Meyer Thompson bought a bagel bakery in Canada. It was there he would develop the first-ever bagel machine. After moving to Los Angeles, his son, Daniel Thompson, began helping him refine the machine. By 1958, Daniel’s prototype was able to produce 2,400 bagels an hour. In 1963, his machine was complete, and he sent letters to every large bagel bakery in the country. Only Lender’s bagels, owned by Murray Lender, responded (Goldstein 21).

Lender had a long history of innovation in bagel baking. Many of his ideas were directed at non-Jewish clientele. One of Lender’s most successful innovations was his line of frozen bagels. Whereas bagels of the time were cooked fresh and without preservatives, Lender’s frozen bagels could be shipped and stored for long periods (Goodman 95). This allowed consumers to get their bagel directly from grocery stores. Lender could also supply distant bagel stores that had no local bakeries. But it was his purchase of the bagel machine that would ultimately create the Lender’s Bagel Empire. Not only could Lender now produce upwards of 10,000 bagels a day, whereas his competitors could only produce about 1,200 (Goodman 65), but he could also ship anywhere in the country due to the preservative nature of freezing. This, combined with his added flavors and the even further invention of pre-slicing the bagel before it got to the consumer, led the bagel to be a viable national product. Within two years of Lender’s buying that first bagel machine, eighteen of the largest bakeries had also purchased one (Goodman 95).

Nonetheless, the knowledge of bagel baking was still consolidated to a few people. Even if these large bakeries could produce the ring of dough needed to bake the bagel quickly, the bakers couldn’t cook that fast. Around this time, however, extreme advancements in the oven were made. Whereas the previous coal or wood fire oven required skill to use, the new gas powered one did not. As one member of Local 338 put it, “It took the skill out of it...Anybody could be taught to bake in an hour and a half. So now all you needed was a little bagel machine, a little kettle, and a little rack oven. Everybody and his mother started going into the bagel business” (Goodman 96). The advancements meant that bagel bakeries could increase production by using unskilled labor

and not having to deal with stubborn unions. This oven would prove to be the downfall of Bagel Baker's Union Local 338.

The bagel's history provides insight into the cultural background of the food. Many of the origin stories of the bagel were related to Jews or Poland, which has a strong Jewish population. Bagels were first known to be baked and sold by Jewish families in Krakow. But the bagel truly became Jewish in New York, where it was baked and eaten exclusively by Jews until the 1950's. It was at this time that the bagel began to enter the mainstream, and the cultural associations of the bagel became more nuanced. Donna Gabaccia, a US food historian, wrote about that transition:

[Bagels] became firmly identified as "Jewish" only as Jewish bakers began selling them to their multiethnic urban neighbors. When bagels emerged from ghetto stores as a Jewish novelty, bagels with cream cheese quickly became a staple of the cuisine known as "New York deli," and was marketed and mass-produced throughout the country under this new regional identity. When international trade brought bagels to Israel, they acquired a third identity as "American." And finally, coming full circle so to speak, the bagel's Americanization sent purists off in search of bagels that seemed more authentically "New York Jewish." (38)

The bagel was largely found in "New York delis" (even if the deli was nowhere near New York). It was also often marketed in grocery stores as the "New York Style Bagel." Nonetheless, bagels are usually considered Jewish ethnic food in the United States. Yet they are known as American food in Israel (Goldstein 27). This suggests a significant cultural shift in the view of the bagel, as many Israelites were originally Jews from Germany, Austria, and Poland, where the bagel originated. In order to further understand the "Americanization" of bagels that Gabaccia proposes, it is necessary to examine how the entrance of the bagel into the American mainstream altered it fundamentally.

While the first bagels were made in home kitchens in Eastern Europe, the production process was quickly industrialized after it came to America. The members of Local 338 would bake in teams of four. Two "benchmen" rolled the dough, which was made of flour, water, yeast, salt, and malt syrup. They passed the bagel onto the "kettleman," who boiled the rings for two to three minutes. After that, the "ovenman" put the bagels in the oven, which was wood or coal fired and produced uneven pockets of heat. Baking required a great deal of skill, as the ovenman would have to move the bagels around so the bagel would cook evenly and not burn. This produced a dense bread with a crackly crust that was difficult to chew. At this point, bagels were three inches in diameter (Goodman 94-7).

The new technology brought with it several changes to the bagel. While bagels were originally made in only two flavors, plain and salt, Lender's Bagels began to sell others, such as the wildly popular pumpernickel and onion. Lender's also added eggs and shortening to the dough to soften the bagel and make it more palatable to non-Jews. The invention of the bagel machine required dough to be less stiff, and so water was added, which further softened the bagel. Improvements to the oven around this time completely changed how the bagel was produced. The bagel basically cooked itself in the new rack ovens and lost the charred and smoky flavor it had from the wood or coal. The new ovens were gas or oil powered, and it was easy to train new bakers to use them (Goodman 95-97).

Another new method of bagel cooking was steaming, which was quicker and easier than boiling. Instead of the crackly, chewy crust previous bagels had, steamed bagels were softer and had only a thin, flimsy lamina. Further advancements to the bagel machine were made, allowing bagels to be produced at a rate of 5,000 per hour (Goldstein 21). Bagel dough also had to become even softer and less sticky to be placed through these improved machines, so oil was added as a lubricant. Soon after came “bagel conditioners.” Though bagels previously had to rise and ferment for several hours, bagel conditioners allowed bakeries to skip this step. Now used by an estimated fifty percent of bagel shops, bagel conditioners are known to completely eliminate the traditional taste—or any taste at all—of bagels (Goodman 97).

Bagel shops soon realized they needed to stay open for lunch in order to increase profitability. This required changing a breakfast food into a lunch sandwich. In order to allow for a greater variety of fillings, the bagel was enlarged to its current supersized state. This allowed for many cold cuts to be added, such as ham and cheese or pastrami. These bagel shops would play a large role in bringing the bagel in to the American mainstream, as soon there would be one in almost every city in the country (Goldstein 22).

Today, bagels can be found in many fast food chains, signaling a complete shift into the American mainstream. Burger King, McDonald’s, and Dunkin Donuts all sell bagels. There are even many bagel chains, such as Einstein Bros Bagels, which can be found across the country. Bagels are an everyday food here in America. Indeed, the pillowy soft roll with a hole we identify as a bagel today bears little resemblance to the hard, chewy ring served in Krakow several centuries ago.

One of Lender’s “greatest” achievements was the world’s largest bagel. Weighing in at a whopping 714 pounds, the ring in the center was large enough to fit around a man. Clearly a promotional stunt, this event perfectly illustrated the American need to make everything bigger and “better.” Lender led numerous marketing stunts, including successfully declaring March “Frozen Foods Month” in response to declining sales of frozen bagels in 1984. He started to cross-promote with companies such as Kraft and Minute Maid by placing coupons for their foods on his packaging. He created green bagels for St. Patrick’s Day, and produced bagels in the shape of world leaders during a G7 summit. He even sent oval-shaped bagels to the Oval Office, where President Lyndon B. Johnson ate them on national television. He played off the health food craze by creating “all natural” and “whole grain” bagels (“Murray Lender”).

Continuing Lender’s trend of ridiculous marketing strategies, Heinz created the first bagel monstrosity, Bagel Bites. These miniature bagels are topped with small amounts of cheese and marinara sauce before being frozen. After microwaving, they are steamy little bites of pizza bagel. Sara Lee created the “fortified bagel,” with all the extra nutrients and vitamins you need to go about your day. Due to the popularity of low-carb diets, the “low-carb bagel” was invented, which has significantly fewer carbs and calories and is ironically the same size as the original bagel. Bagels and cream cheese have also been turned into a breakfast bar called “Bagelers,” which are about as hideous as they sound. “Flagels” are a new phenomenon sweeping the nation, which are flatter and thinner versions of a regular bagel. Lastly, a strangely square bagel known as a “squagel” has recently entered the market (Goldstein 26).

The Americanization of the bagel is truly complete. The food has been supersized, all flavor has been removed, and mass production has begun. We even see alternative forms of the food that claim to differentiate themselves from the competition, such as the flagel and the squagel. Bagels are now built to maximize efficiency for the producer and the consumer. No longer does the baker need to bother themselves with baking, they just need to steam. No longer does the consumer need to work hard to “enjoy” a bagel sandwich. It is clear that the market structure of America set up this travesty. Daniel Young, a food writer for the *New York Times*, interviewed many of the executives in bagel companies about the reasons for changes in the bagel market: “[Americans are] used to hamburger rolls, hot-dog buns and white bread,” said Broney Gadman, president of Bakery Machinery Distributors of Bohemia, L.I., the company that introduced bagel-steaming equipment in 1982. ‘They prefer a less crusty, less chewy, less tough product. As the market expands, bagels will change from a mouth-feel point of view.’” Lender simply capitalized upon this. His ability to supply anyone with a bland, tasteless food that upon which any number of delicacies could be heaped was unrivaled. The changes to the bagel were made with the consumer in mind. “‘We chose the steaming process because we felt most new bagel customers would appreciate the mouth appeal of the softer bagel,’” said Lance Rembar, the chief executive officer of Big Apple Baking Company ... ‘They are not familiar with it as a traditional, ethnic product centered in New York’” (Young). This has some interesting implications. Considering the consumer’s preference for an unbroken surface on which to place cream cheese, Young postulates that the hole in bagels could eventually be removed completely.

Even as some of the more terrifying takes on the bagel are entering the mainstream, we can see how the bagel only vaguely resembles the Jewish ethnic food it once was. As the technology that allowed the bagel to enter the national market improved, it required the taste of bagels to be diminished. So, too, was the bagels relation to the Jewish people diminished. What was once a food that was only eaten by Jews on weekends is now consumed every morning by millions of Americans. This alteration of the bagel as it enters the American culinary consciousness has been mimicked by several other foods; consider the “improved” version of Mexican food known as Tex-Mex or the Americanization of pizza. Americans have an interesting propensity for snatching up foods that are easily produced and changing them to suit the mainstream. Thus was the American bagel born, with only a vague resemblance to the small, crusty rings of bread hawked on the street corners by children in Krakow.

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