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“Iconic Jewish Deli Foods”

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I used to be a *very* picky eater when I was younger. At least two years ago I started experimenting with my taste buds. I wanted to eat everything. I loved trying foods, and most foods I tried I loved. When I started to think about my big project for my Bat Mitzvah I knew exactly what I wanted to do. FOOD! I didn't have to think twice. But, I did need to narrow down my topic. That was the hard part. I had at least ten different ideas. My parents, Carol, and Rabbi Peter all helped me figure out how to focus my topic. Eventually we got it. **Iconic Jewish Deli Food**. (Don't worry I'll tell you what iconic means.) I had to learn what it means too. It means symbolic. But still I had to choose which *iconic* foods I wanted to study. I had to research the foods and eat them (but that really wasn't the hard part...).

I picked five of my favorite Jewish foods, the ones I enjoy eating the most. In this talk you will learn about the Knish, Matzo Balls, Pastrami, the Bagel and Cheesecake. I know, right, now I am hungry too. But first I am going to tell you a little about the history of the Jewish Deli.

The History of the Deli

The first Jewish delis in America started on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In the beginning, they were strictly takeout. In the 1900s, they changed into restaurants where people could sit, eat and talk. Delis offered a sense of identity to recent immigrants and a feeling of belonging in their new country. A deli was a gathering place where Jews could find a community and spend time in each other's company. The Jews would come together to talk about religion and politics and to get news about their homeland.

In the delis, foods of the Eastern European Jews were combined with dishes from Lithuania, Russia and Hungary. At that time, most deli food was peasant food. Now the treats we associate with the Jewish deli (for example, chopped liver, matzo ball soup, and gigantic meat-filled sandwiches) are more American than Eastern European. The Jews from Eastern Europe could not afford to eat like that.

The importance of the deli began to decline by the 1950s and 1960s. This is because the food was seen as too ethnic. Also, some of the more popular Jewish foods like deli meats and hotdogs could be found at the supermarket. Today, the traditional Jewish deli is struggling. The rent is high, people are more health conscious (Jewish food is not that healthy), and Jewish food is not trendy. In 1936, there were 5,000 delis in New York City, but now there are just a few. Many famous delis in the city have closed.

I have been to Katz's Deli, the 2nd Avenue Deli, Yonah Schimmels, Barney Greengrass, Russ and Daughters, Pastrami Queen, and Junior's. I still want to go to a lot more. What I like is that the people are nice, they give you a lot of samples, there is always food on the table when you sit down (pickles and coleslaw), and they give you a good amount of food. The only thing that I dislike is that it is *always* crowded.

The Knish

The first food I want to talk you about is the knish. A Knish is a Jewish food that Russian immigrants brought to America in the early 1900s. It is the Yiddish word meaning pastry or turnover. A knish is made from dough that can be shaped to be round, rectangular or square with a filling in the middle of it. A knish can be baked, grilled or deep-fried. There are a variety of fillings that could be inside a knish: potato, ground meat, sauerkraut, onions, kasha (buckwheat groats) or cheese. More modern varieties are filled with sweet potatoes, black beans, fruit, broccoli, tofu or spinach.

The dough of a knish is made differently depending on the place where the knish is being made. In New York City, knish dough is made with egg and potato. In Europe, the pastry is made from yeast dough. In France, knishes are known by their Russian name "piroshky" and also "belglach."

The History of the Knish is lost. In Russia, knishes were legendary and were usually served at feasts. When the Jews from Russia migrated to the U.S at the beginning of the 20th century, they brought their cooking and foods with them and knishes were sold from pushcarts on the streets of New York City. Today in Russia and Eastern Europe, the knish is no longer as popular as it is in New York City where knishes are HUGE.

In 1910, Yonah Schimmel opened a Knishery on Manhattan's Lower East Side. It is the only knishery left in New York City. They make the knish dough very thin. At Yonah Schimmels, they believe a "real" knish is round, baked, and made with potato filling.

When I went to Yonah Schimmel, my mom and I bought a bunch of knishes—potato, vegetable, sweet potato and spinach. We first ate the potato knish. IT WAS HUGE! It weighed at least a full pound! When we each took our first bite, we were in love. It was all potato-- you couldn't even taste the dough at all. It was so soft inside, it was amazing. The store looked exactly like it did in the old days and was still being run by the Schimmel family itself. It was great.

Matzo Balls

A second iconic Jewish food - may be first on some people's lists - is the matzoh ball. A Matzo Ball is a traditional Ashkenazi "dumpling" made from matzo meal. The Yiddish word for matzo ball or dumpling is *Kneydlekh*. It is the food of hardship—the poor man's food. This is because it's made out of only simple ingredients like matzo flour and water. Matzo balls are one of the best known Jewish foods and one of the most powerful symbols of Jewish cuisine.

Matzo balls became a part of the Jewish diet in the early Middle Ages. They were especially popular in German, Czech and Austrian cooking. Matzo balls are traditionally served at Passover. But matzo balls are so popular and well liked, they are served everyday and everywhere. Jews have intense arguments about which way is the right way to cook a matzo ball. Should they be light (floaters)? Or should they be dense (sinkers)? Dense matzo balls are heavier and doughier. Light matzo balls are softer and less doughy; they melt in your mouth.

When I went to the 2nd Avenue Deli, I fell in love with their matzo balls. They are big but when you put them into your mouth, they melt with flavor. I guess this is what is called a floater. But when I went to Pastrami Queen and tasted their matzo ball, I wasn't pleased. It was big and heavy with no flavor. It was dense and hard to swallow. Judging from that experience, I vote for the "lighter" kind of matzo ball.

I love matzo balls, especially during Passover. We go to our friends the Kreppels and Midge cooks amazing matzo balls (they are "floaters"). I had my very first matzo ball there.

The Bagel

Now who doesn't know what a bagel is? A bagel is round bread with a hole in it. While bagels are considered a Jewish food, their origins are actually more varied. Today, many *different* types of people eat and sell bagels that are not Jewish.

Bread and crackers similar to the bagel were eaten centuries ago in China, Italy and Ancient Egypt. You can even see rolls with holes in Egyptian hieroglyphics. There is a well-known story about the origins of the bagel, but no one knows if it is true or not. According to the story, the bagel came out of the 1683 battle of Vienna. King Sobieski of Poland was the first king who did not limit the production of bread. This meant that Jews could bake bread in the city of Krakow. When King Sobieski saved Austria from Turkish invaders, a baker made a roll in the shape of the King's stirrup and called it a beugel.

Bagels also became popular in Germany. Bagel means bracelet in German. In Eastern Europe, bagels were known as good luck because they were the perfect shape, round with no end or no beginning. The shape symbolizes the eternal cycle of life. This is why they were given to women in labor and are often eaten after funerals.

When Jews immigrated to America, they brought the bagel to Manhattan's Lower East Side. In America, the bagels are distinguished because they are boiled. Rings of risen dough are thrown into boiling water for a few seconds, then drained, cooled, and baked until they are golden, shiny and crisp. The boiling helps the bagels last longer. In 1907, a union was created that monopolized bagel production in NYC. The Jews made their bagels by hand with only exactly five ingredients: flour, yeast, water, salt and malt flavoring. Bagels made in NYC are supposed to taste the best because of the mineral content in NYC water. In the 1950s, Jews started moving to other parts of the city, which expanded the reach of the bagel.

Murray Lender was the first person to create frozen bagels. In 1956 when Murray returned from the Korean War, he bought a freezer. He and his father figured out that they could sell and deliver frozen bagels in batches of six. This enabled the bagels to last much longer. In the 1960s, the automated bagel machine was invented. The machine allowed bagels to be made more easily, faster, and it enabled the Lenders to make *a lot* more bagels. They shipped their bagels across the country. Today some of the best known bagel stores in NYC are not run by Jews. For instance, H&H Bagels is run by a Puerto Rican family.

Modern bagels are much bigger in size than they were before and come in many more flavors, including poppy seed, raisin, garlic, onion, sourdough, sesame, pumpernickel, whole wheat and blueberry.

I have tasted bagels from Tal Bagels, which is Israeli, Bagel Bobs, Ess-a-Bagel, and H&H. The bagels at Tal are big and doughy and they do have a lot of flavor. The bagels at Bagel Bobs are smaller and softer with less taste, unless there is cream cheese or butter or lox on it. The bagels at H&H are my least favorite because you never know if you are going to get a soft bagel or a hard one. Finally, the Ess-a-Bagel are my *favorite* bagel. What I love about the Ess-a-Bagel is that the bagel is fluffy and doughy, the taste is delicious and flavorful. And I love the mouth-watering smell of fresh bagels baking when you walk into the Ess-a-Bagel store!

Pastrami

And then there is the king of Jewish foods, Pastrami. In the late 1800s to early 1900s, a large population of Jews immigrated to the Lower East Side. These immigrants crowded into tenements. One to ten families would live in these tenements and there was just no room to hang out inside. So they spent time outdoors, which is how pushcarts and delis started! The pushcarts served knishes, pickles and bagels and people would hang out and talk.

One of the greatest inventions of the deli was Pastrami. They served pastrami on rye bread with mustard. Pastrami has Romanian origins, although what was called *pastramă* in Romania is very different from what we call pastrami, which was actually invented in New York City. In 1888, Katz's Deli opened and claimed that *they* invented pastrami, which you might think is true. But actually it was Sussman Volk (a butcher) who invented pastrami. He first got the recipe from a Romanian friend in exchange for storing his friend's luggage. The sandwich became so popular that he converted his butcher shop into a restaurant. Katz's Deli still disputes this and says they were the first.

Pastrami was originally created as a way to preserve meat before modern refrigeration. Pastrami is made with brisket. The raw meat is brined, partly dried, seasoned with various herbs and spices, then smoked, then steamed (which is a lot of work). Modern pastrami is entirely *different* from the cured meats with similar names you would find in Turkey, Romania and the Balkans today.

Pastrami has become very trendy in New York City. One restaurant serves a pastrami eggroll and Russ and Daughters created pastrami-cured salmon. Another place makes a pastrami croissant! Plus, it has gotten so popular that in October 2010, there was a pastrami sculpture in a Brooklyn Park! Every year, New York City delis compete to see which one has the best pastrami. The 2nd Avenue Deli, Katz's, Carnegie Deli, Pastrami Queen and even a deli in Brooklyn all compete.

I have eaten pastrami from Pastrami Queen, the 2nd Avenue Deli and Katz's Deli, which is known to have the *best* pastrami in NYC. The pastrami sandwich I liked best is Katz's by far. What I love about Katz's pastrami is that it is cut thick and is juicy and full of flavor. Plus it melts in your mouth. The pastrami from 2nd Avenue Deli does not have a great taste and is not as juicy. Pastrami Queen is also delicious but I still say Katz's is the best.

Cheesecake

Of course, we all need a nice dessert after dinner, and the iconic Jewish dessert I will discuss is Cheesecake. Cheesecake is probably one of the most well-known desserts. What you might not know is that cheesecake has a Jewish origin. Jews are known for their fondness for desserts, which probably comes from their involvement in the sugar trade. Jews were engaged in sugar refining in Poland and Russia and also ran sugar plantations in the West Indies. Sweets have symbolic significance for Jews. Sweets represent joy and happiness, which is why they play an important role on many Jewish holidays, particularly Shavuot.

Long ago, the ancient Greeks made the first cheesecake. But more recently cheesecake originated from Poland and Russia. In the old days, Eastern European women made soft cheese at home which was used as the basis for cheesecake, among other things. When Jews immigrated to the United States, they brought their cheesecake recipes with them.

In upstate New York in 1872, dairymen were trying to make cheese that tasted like the cheese from France. The cheese that resulted turned out to be much, much creamier than the French cheese, so they called it "cream cheese." But the cream cheese spoiled quickly, so it was not practical to eat. It was not until after 1920, when two Jewish immigrants from Lithuania began to mass market cream cheese, that it became a staple and began to appear in cheesecake fillings. Because cream cheese was invented in New York, cheesecake is often referred to as "New York cheesecake," no matter where it is made!

Today, the most famous Cheesecake is made by Lindy's. Lindy's Cheesecake is the "NYC Cheesecake." Its recipe calls for:

- Heavy cream
- Lots of eggs
- Lots of sugar
- Vanilla Extract
- No less than 2½ pounds of cream cheese (This is at least 2x more than is used in most recipes!)

Just like bagels were originally made to be plain, cheesecake was also made without flavoring or toppings. Now people make strawberry cheesecake, blueberry cheesecake, chocolate cheesecake and carrot cheesecake.

I have eaten many types of cheesecakes. Lindy's is known to have *the best* cheesecake in the city but I disagree. The flavor of the filling was very good but the crust was too cakey, and there was not enough filling. And the slices are just too big! Junior's cheesecake is fluffy, and the filling has lots of flavor. But the crust was not very good, and there was so much filling that it was hard to swallow. My favorite cheesecake was from Katz's Deli. There was a lot of crust, the texture of the filling was nice and creamy, and the flavor was delicious.

Jewish food is an amazing cuisine. I really never knew about these different foods. I had no interest in trying them or going to delis. I didn't even know that the origin of the deli was Jewish before I did this research. Doing this project and going to different delis really helped me experience my culture. Just as food is central to the Jewish culture, trying different cuisines has become one of my most favorite hobbies. I recommend it highly!

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