

FAMISHED



An avatar of Bay Area Jewveau cuisine: Gefilte fish on a bed of kale from Saul's Restaurant & Delicatessen.

Noshing and Gnashing

Is the city a Jewish-food desert? One Jew weighs the evidence. ➤ by Rebecca Flint Marx

AFTER I PACKED UP MY APARTMENT AND SAID GOOD-BYE TO MY friends, the last thing I did before leaving New York in early October was make one final trip to Russ & Daughters. One of the city's few remaining appetizing shops ("appetizing," in this case, being a noun that generally describes food eaten on or with bagels), Russ's is a century-old smoked-fish mecca. I'd spent untold hours and calories there, and placing the order for one last whitefish salad sandwich—horseradish cream cheese, wasabi-flavored roe, everything bagel—carried an oppressive finality. I knew I wouldn't find anything like it where I was going, because I was going to San Francisco.

This city, I had been told, was a Jewish-food desert. Yes, there were bagels, but they were abominations. And yes, there was Wise Sons, the two-year-old Mission delicatessen slinging updated, conscientiously sourced Semitic staples—or Jewveau cuisine, as I prefer to call it. But, the kvetch went, one or two decent pastrami sandwiches do not a Jewish-food hub make. Shortly after I arrived, the scope of the region's supposed deprivation was exposed when a pop-up trafficking \$6, day-old Russ & Daughters bagels drew two-hour lines. It made me wonder what, exactly, those people were waiting for: an overpriced bagel, or what it represented?

In considering the question, I've been weighing my own assumptions, not only about food but also about Jews, immigration patterns, assimilation, and context. And unfair comparisons: According to Yaron Milgrom, a fellow expat New York Jew and an owner of the growing Local Mission empire, complaining that San Francisco's Jewish food isn't as good as New York's is "like saying that our Japanese food isn't as good as Tokyo's." Or, to put it another way, what did you expect? New York has more of everything: people, lox, Jews. And not just any Jews, but Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews.

This last detail, says local writer and cookbook author Joyce Goldstein, is a big part of why the streets of San Francisco aren't heaving with matzo balls and brisket—and also betrays our limited concept of Jewish cuisine. While there is Jewish food in the Bay Area, Goldstein explains, "there isn't a lot of Ashkenazi food. The heavy Ashkenazi food that everyone thinks of as Jewish food—pastrami, kugel, blintzes—that's more well-known, but shows a lockstep thought about what is Jewish food."

It's our clichéd, dated notions, Goldstein says, that prevent us from seeing that there are many Jewish recipes being served here. They just happen to be the Sephardic dishes eaten by the Jews of Spain and Portugal, as well as Jewish Mediterranean dishes. See, for example, Aziza's lamb shank with barley and prunes, or Firefly's seared cauliflower with falafel, grain pilaf, and tahini. Or, for that matter, hummus.

But if the average diner can't discern dishes with Jewish origins from garden-variety Cal-Med cuisine, can you really say that there's a lot of Jewish food in the Bay Area? I don't think so. If you have to be a culinary historian to see and taste

it, it misses the point. We Bay Areans may need to broaden our understanding of Jewish food beyond the beige repertoire favored by my Eastern European ancestors, but in the meantime, Goldstein's assertion has made me see what's really at issue: We have no soul.

Allow me to explain. Since arriving here, I have found good Jewish food (see some highlights at right). Beauty's Bagel Shop in Oakland turns out lovely specimens. Paulie's Pickling sells exquisite house-smoked lox and whitefish salad, although the latter is admittedly imported from Brooklyn. And Marla Bakery makes hands down the best matzo I've ever eaten—no, I don't care that it's not kosher for Passover.

This is Jewish food as good as any you'll eat in New York—where, by the way, it's eminently possible to find bad bagels and shoddy pastrami. The problem is that all of these places exist in a cultural vacuum. Through no fault of their own, they're missing the sort of history and memory that allow food to transcend time and space and enter the sanctified realm of nostalgia. You might have a bad meal at Katz's, but the fact that you're having it there, surrounded by the old photos and signs exhorting you to "Send a Salami to Your Boy in the Army," has a way of softening the blow. The Bay Area doesn't lack Jewish food, but it does lack Jewish-food institutions—and the particular brand of Jews who built them.

Although Jews have been part of San Francisco life since the beginning, they were largely Germanic Jews who tended to assimilate, arguably identifying more as Californians than as Jews. New York, meanwhile, got what Goldstein calls "the shtetl transplants": the Eastern Europeans who maintained a distinct cultural, religious, and dietary identity.

"Jewishness feels different here," Milgrom says, and I agree. Stereotypical as it may sound, I know how to identify my own in New York. Here, my Jewdar seems to have short-circuited. Where is the kvetching, the noshing, the fatalistic "meh"-ing, the yarmulkes? It's enough to make me sentimental—and that's the point.

"We're in a cuisine where so much of what people experience is nostalgia," says Evan Bloom, Wise Sons' co-owner. "Why they will enjoy or not enjoy something is purely based on their past." People, he adds, "are always going to whine" when something doesn't meet their memory's standards.

For my part, I'll continue to whine about the Bay Area's lack of an appetizing shop. You may be able to find Jewish food here, but you can't find anything remotely reminiscent of Russ & Daughters. Forget the pastrami: I dream that someone will open a veritable appetizing Xanadu, boasting a display case groaning with smoked salmon, sablefish, whitefish, and herring. Seriously, guys: If you build it, I will nosh. □

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Matzo ball soup, Beauty's Bagel Shop

In the eternal floaters-versus-sinkers skirmish, the matzo balls at Beauty's Bagel Shop fall defiantly into the latter faction. Despite their croquet-ball dimensions, they're actually rather refined specimens, served in a vibrant vegetable broth. \$5 PER SERVING; 3838 TELEGRAPH AVE. (NEAR 38TH ST.), OAKLAND, 510-788-6098



Smoked black cod, Cap'n Mike's Holy Smoked Salmon

Also known as sablefish, smoked black cod used to be referred to as "the poor man's sturgeon." But the rich, silky fish sold by Cap'n Mike's Holy Smoked Salmon is fit for royalty. \$69.95/LB.; FERRY PLAZA FARMERS MARKET (EMBARCADERO AT MARKET ST.), 707-585-2000

Whitefish salad, Paulie's Pickling

The folks at Paulie's Pickling turned to the mother country for their creamy, utterly addictive smoked-whitefish salad. Made in Brooklyn by Blue Hill Bay, the simple mashup of smoked fish and mayonnaise is worthy of its own religious celebration. \$3 FOR 4 OZ.; 331 CORTLAND AVE. (NEAR BENNINGTON ST.), 415-285-0800



Charoset, Local Mission Market

Charoset is typically made with apples and walnuts, but Local Mission Market's takes its compulsively delicious cues from Sephardic tradition, mingling dates, dried peaches, Livermore walnuts, and toasted almonds with blood orange zest and verjus. \$10 FOR 16 OZ.; 2670 HARRISON ST. (AT 23RD ST.), 415-795-3355

Matzo, Marla Bakery

Historically a symbol of deprivation, matzo doesn't tend to inspire exclamations of pleasure—unless it's the improbably crispy and lightly blistered matzo from Amy Brown at Marla Bakery. \$5 PER PACK OF 2; 613 YORK ST. (NEAR 18TH ST.), 415-824-2253

