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Mulling why bialys faded as bagels rolled along

Taste, preparation cited as factors

June 12, 2002 | By Arthur Hirsch | Arthur Hirsch,SUN STAFF

Van Hoven says his bialy dough is different from his bagel dough, but made with the same ingredients: high-gluten flour, water, yeast, salt and barley malt syrup. He says he's following the bialy formula he learned back in New York as an apprentice during the Eisenhower years.

According to Mimi Sheraton, the former New York Times food writer who followed the bialy to its roots in Bialystok, the authentic bialy was/is made with flour, water, yeast, salt. That's it. The dough recipe includes no malt, an ingredient in traditional bagel dough that sweetens the taste.

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For what it's worth, Sheraton's book, *The Bialy Eaters: The Story of a Bread and a Lost World* (Broadway Books, 2002, \$12.95), gives the imprimatur of authenticity to the approach used by Kossar's Bialys on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Kossar's traces its origins to Eastern European immigrants who established their bakery early in the 20th century.

Juda Engelmayer, one of four co-owners of Kossar's, says in a phone interview that the dough recipe has never changed: high-gluten flour, water, salt and yeast. Nothing more or less.

"There's a very big difference in the taste" if you make bialys with malt, says Engelmayer. "I'm not going to knock them, some people like it. But they're not authentic."

Engelmayer reckons that the taste of the dough is the reason the bialy "always has been, and I believe always will be" much less popular in America than the bagel, even in New York.

"The issue is, I believe, Americans have sweet teeth," says Engelmayer. "The bagel is a fast-food taste. ... Bialys are more of an acquired taste. It's like chopped liver, you don't like it until you're 50."

Debra Engelmayer, Juda's wife and partner in the business, suggests another reason for the Bialy Gap: "It's a lot of work. It is labor-intensive. Bagels are much easier to just knock out."

That's because bialy dough is lighter and more difficult to handle. While most if not all the bagels sold by the franchise operations are machine-made, bialys are rolled by hand. Perhaps for lack of an economic incentive, no one has yet built a bialy-making machine.

New World Restaurant Group Inc., the country's biggest chain and franchise bagel operation with more than 740 locations under four company names - Einstein Bros., Chesapeake Bagel Bakery, Manhattan Bagel and Noah's - has had very limited success with its version of the bialy.

"We just can't sell them," says Chad Thompson, New World's senior director of research and [development](#). "People just don't know what they are."

Using a "slightly altered version of our bagel dough," Thompson says, a few stores under the Noah's and Manhattan Bagel name produce a hand-rolled bialy. At the Chesapeake Bagel Bakery in Crofton, owner John Pilkins says the [shop](#) tries to accommodate the transplanted New Yorkers among its customers with a little bialy legerdemain.

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"We do them but it's not really a bialy," says Pilkins. "We just take the bagel before it's cooked, squeeze the dough back in the hole."

On the West Coast, Noah's offers varieties meant to appeal to folks who don't like the traditional - some would say defining - topping of onion. It's a long way from the Bialystoker kuchen of northeastern Poland to the Oakland, Calif., interpretations featuring artichokes, spinach, tomato, rosemary and mushrooms.

Nowhere near an American household word, the bialy nonetheless may yet lose its foreign accent.

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