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SOAPBOX; A Chewy Relic of the Old World

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ALTHOUGH I have never felt worried or threatened by corporate mergers and acquisitions, I panicked in the winter of 1998. Kossar's Bialystoker Kuchen Bakery was sold! For over 65 years this Lower East Side landmark has been the home of the world's best hand-crafted bialys, those yeasty, chewy rolls with the identifying center well and a topping of toasted brown onions.

Even more, Kossar's was my ground zero during seven years of research for a book on the history of the bialy and the Jews of Bialystok who invented and cherished it. In the towns around that northeastern Polish city, they were dubbed "Bialystoker kuchen fressers," prodigious eaters (fressers) of the yeast, flour, water and salt rolls. The bread was known there as kuchen, although that word usually denotes sweet cake in German as well as in Yiddish. When emigres from Poland began baking those rolls in New York, around 1920, as far as I can tell, Bialystoker kuchen were quickly nicknamed bialys.

I feared that Danny Scheinin, who took over the bakery in 1956 from his father-in-law, Morris Kossar, one of the bakery's founders, was selling out in more ways than one. Surely a new owner would modernize, and bialys would never be the same again. But two and a half years later, after much monitoring and munching, I finally feel secure. The two purchasers, Juda Engelmayer and Danny Cohen, thirty-something brothers-in-law, apparently love Kossar's bialys as much as I do, and their few changes have not compromised the earthy savoriness, best described as geshmack.

Kossar's, at 367 Grand Street, is still the same bright, no-frills bakery with a small, makeshift sales counter. In the morning and late afternoon, the air is veiled in flour and heady with scents of yeast, onions and hot bread. Silent bakers in white T-shirts work with assurance, shaping, pressing and stretching small balls of soft, cuddly dough to form the well. Then they smear on ground fresh onions instead of the acrid dehydrated specimens commonly used elsewhere. Shoppers idle in and out, schmoozing, making purchases and, usually, buying one extra bialy to be eaten out of hand. Late Saturday night, bearded, black-hatted Orthodox Jews line up for Sunday breakfast bialys alongside green-haired, tattooed hipsters from the clubs around nearby Ludlow and Forsyth Streets.

Although most bialys in the United States are made of the sweeter, malt-flavored bagel dough in bakeries where bagels are the big sellers, Kossar's remains true to the bialy recipe, shaping it into other traditional products like garlic bialys (awful), delicious long, thin bulkas, and the large, round, level-topped pletzel encrusted with poppy seeds and onions that are most wonderful in the new mini-disk version. They are also experimenting with flavorful but overly large bagels prepared with a separate dough and which so far are best in the mini-size that can be special ordered.

A few changes were made because the new owners are observant Jews, and want to offer kosher bialys. The bakery now closes from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday, as well as during Passover week and on many other Jewish holidays. Otherwise, they maintain the Kossar tradition of staying open 24 hours a day.

For bialys to be truly kosher, bakers must sacrifice a portion of each batch of dough by burning it in the oven, a ritual known as "separating challah." (In Hebrew, "challah" means "the priest's portion," as described in the Old Testament, Numbers 15:20 and Ezekiel 44:30.) However, if 51 percent of the liquid used in the dough were apple juice instead of water, the bialys would officially, talmudically, be designated cake, because of the sugar in the juice, and so it would be unnecessary to sacrifice dough.

Kossar's new owners wisely rejected the apple juice option. In saving the sacrificial dough, they surely would have sacrificed the bialy's flavor and texture. The sacrificed portion is 2 to 3 percent of each dough batch, which usually is prepared around 4:30 a.m., when a broche (prayer) must said by an Orthodox Jew. This early hour would be difficult for the new owners, who have both kept their day jobs: Danny Cohen as an investment banker and Juda Engelmayer as executive assistant to the State Comptroller, H. Carl McCall. So an Orthodox baker who works for a nearby kosher pastry shop, Gertel's, stops by to perform the ceremony.

The one disturbing change made early on was the preponderance of lightly baked, pale bialys over those that are well done, with dark brown blistered tops and crisp bottoms. The choice appears to be generational. Mr. Enegelmayer says customers over 55 or 60 generally choose the dark bialys, while the proprietors, like their younger customers, favor the light. There are always, however, several batches of the properly burnished beauties that I prefer.

Deciding how to eat the bialy is the final, most delightful step, and here too there is controversy. Like most Americans, I slice each bialy horizontally through the middle, bagel-style. But back in Bialystok, I learned, the beloved kuchen were never sliced. Butter or cream cheese was spread on the bottom or over the top and smoked fish was never added, a touch considered strictly American.

Oddly, halvah was eaten with bialys, and before World War II was made and served in Bialystok at the Macedonian, a much-loved cafe that -- like so many other graceful aspects of life there -- disappeared with the Holocaust. New York is really the last repository of bialys and the culture that surrounded them.

Mimi Sheraton is a former restaurant critic of The New York Times. Her latest book, ''The Bialy Eaters: The Story of a Bread and a Lost

World" will be published this week by Broadway Books.