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## Will Matzoh Go Mainstream?

## Jewish Food in America

Food has the power to evoke memory, to quell fear, to provide comfort, or even to alienate when we see or taste things that are strange. The foods that we eat mark us as belonging to a particular cultural, social, ethnic, or religious group; they can be a source of pride or embarrassment (and sometimes simultaneously both). The history of Jewish food in America clearly reflects this ambivalence. Among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jewish immigrants, Mama's cooking -- *vi di mame hot es gekokht* -- could represent the most cherished attributes of a lost culture as well as the vestiges of a greenhorn past that needed to be shed in favor of modernity. The larger question of what constitutes Jewish food continues to be pertinent today. In twenty-first-century America, the definition of Jewish food is no longer a philosophical discussion limited to the Jewish community. Apart from foods prescribed by the religion, such ritual foods as matzoh (flatbread) for Passover, or traditional ones like the slow-simmered Sabbath stews, which foods distinguish Jews? Which dishes hold the most meaning for Jews as individuals, and as American Jews?

To some degree, of course, the answer is “It depends,” for food is literally a matter of taste.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the concept of Jewishness as it relates to food can be perceived differently by different groups; it can also be politically fraught. Palestinians fault Israelis for having co-opted the falafel, a Palestinian dish, and turned it into an iconic Israeli food (Raviv). Conversely, the decision to privilege one food over another can reveal political savvy rather than insensitivity. Although Proust’s mother was Jewish, it was French madeleines, not Jewish rugelach, that spawned his magnum opus, and these teacakes bespeak Proust’s artistry and assimilation rather than his Jewishness. But we may ask: were madeleines indeed the stuff of Proust’s dreams, or were they simply a more convenient choice in early twentieth-century France, in the wake of the Dreyfus affair? Historically, the foods we choose to eat have revealed our identity, or the identity to which we aspire. Particularly in the context of twenty-first-century America, the boundaries of ethnicity, as it relates to food, are surprisingly shifting.

In a certain way, “Jewish food” is a misnomer. With the exception of matzoh, which all Jews, regardless of their background, consume at Passover, “Jewish food” is simply the food Jews have eaten wherever they have lived. In other words, the foods became Jewish because Jews were eating them. One of the current buzzwords in our food-obsessed culture is “local.” We’re admonished to eat locally to take advantage of the best seasonal produce and also to support community agriculture. But eating locally is what the Jews have always done.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of what constitutes Jewish food in late twentieth-century America see Alan Mintz, “Sushi and Other Jewish Foods,” *Commentary*, October 1998, pp. 43-47.

They assimilated the foods of the countries they lived in, adapting them creatively to their purposes. If they lived in Greece, in the vibrant community of Salonika, for instance, they ate artichokes and rice pilafs and lamb with eggplant. In Calcutta they ate sweet and sour chicken and okra, or roast duck seasoned with garam masala and turmeric. In Spain, they ate fried noodles. To this day at Passover Sephardic Jews eat beans and rice, while Ashkenazim eschew them as not *pesadig* (suitable for Passover). This practice goes back to local tradition, to the practical decision to have staple carbohydrates to eat during the week of Passover (after the Columbian Exchange Ashkenazic Jews relied on potatoes to fill this need).

For most Americans, Jewish food is synonymous with Ashkenazic culture, which represents the mainstream of Jewish culture in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The large immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries introduced an entirely new culture to American shores, one that was to have an enduring impact on American life in music, film, literature, comedy, theater, and, of course, food.<sup>3</sup> These Jews came from the Pale of Settlement, which covered much of the territory of present-day Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus.

But the foods that these immigrants ate that we consider so Jewish – herring in sour cream, rye bread, dill pickles, borscht – were not actually

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<sup>2</sup> There are large Sephardic Jewish communities in Los Angeles and New York, but those outside these communities consider their foods to be Middle Eastern rather than stereotypically Jewish.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Jewish contributions to American culture see, for instance, Merwin and Rovner.

considered Jewish in the old country. These foods were simply what everyone in the region ate. Rye bread was the staple throughout Russia and Eastern Europe, where the climate is harsh. Rye grain is hearty in places where wheat is not, so refined white bread was an expensive luxury reserved for the Sabbath, in the form of challah, the braided loaf that is further enriched with oil and eggs to welcome in the Sabbath Queen. Furthermore, the lactic acid in sour rye bread and in pickles provided a necessary nutrient that would otherwise have been lacking in the diet.<sup>4</sup> Studies have shown that even given a wide latitude of choice, people instinctively will choose a nutritious diet (Birch). Although they did not consciously decide that sour foods were important to eat, the poorest Jews in both the Old World and the New often enjoyed a simple meal of nothing more than sour pickles and rye bread (Cooper, 149), thereby gaining a nutrient crucial for metabolism and confirming their taste for the sour. As for borscht, a soup often associated in the United States with Jewish cuisine, it is actually the oldest, and most national, of Ukrainian soups; it is what the Cossacks ate. Of course, there are many versions of borscht, and the Jews did not add pork or pork sausage to theirs, as the Ukrainians often did. Instead they made theirs with flanken or other cuts of beef. Yet the erroneous identification of borscht as a dish originating in Russia, or even in the Jewish shtetl, persists, demonstrating how closely associated the foods of Russia and Eastern Europe are with Jewish life.

Jewish food is the result of centuries of adaptation and experimentation; it is a *cultural* rather than a religious phenomenon. Partly for this reason we now

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<sup>4</sup> On lactic acid in the Russian peasant diet see Aleksandr Nikolaevich Engelhardt, "Iz derevni," Otechestvennye zapiski (Notes from the Fatherland), vol. 242 (January 1879), 111-112.

encounter such modern adaptations as low-fat latkes (potato pancakes) that are baked in the oven instead of being fried in oil. Even though it is the oil that gives latkes their symbolic meaning, for calorie-conscious Americans, eating latkes even in this adulterated form is symbolic enough. This stance is merely the latest instance of resistance to what nineteenth-century Reform rabbis termed “kitchen Judaism.” Many contemporary Jews, even Orthodox ones, have no trouble ignoring the religious underpinnings of food for the sake of a slender waistline. Latkes remain Jewish by association. As Jenna Weissman Joselit has written of the Jewish penchant to adapt and transform traditional foods, “what count[s] is not the authenticity of the recipe but its symbolic power and presentational value as a touchstone of authentic Jewish culture” (Joselit 1994, 217).

Perhaps the greatest iteration of food as a cultural symbol independent of its original meaning is to be found in the deli food of contemporary America, where by the late twentieth century certain Jewish foods had entered the mainstream of our country’s dining habits – for better or worse. The foods Americans think of as stereotypically Jewish include bagels, lox, chopped liver, corned beef or pastrami on rye, chicken soup, borscht, cheesecake, rugelach, latkes, honey cake, brisket, and gefilte fish. The so-called Borscht Belt of New York’s Catskill region spawned many Jewish comedians who went on to national fame; through their routines they familiarized the public with Jewish food; certain phrases, such as “What am I, chopped liver?” even entered the American idiom. Significantly, nearly all of these foods are closely associated with New York City delicatessens, a type of Jewish food that appeared in the United States only very late in the nineteenth century.

The first Jews to arrive in America were actually Sephardim who had escaped the Inquisition and settled in Recife, Brazil. When the Portuguese wrested control of Brazil from the Dutch, the Jews fled to New Amsterdam (present-day New York), where they settled in 1654. These early Sephardic immigrants subsequently founded important communities along the East Coast, especially in Newport, Rhode Island, and Savannah, Georgia (Weinstein 1993).

Sephardic Jews did not prepare dishes that resemble deli-style food in any way. Instead of eating whitefish salad or pickled herring, they fried fish in olive oil (their Portuguese compatriots would have used lard). In the Old World they would have prepared sardines and mackerels, but in their new home they applied this method of cooking to haddock and cod, with delicious results. They introduced *escabeche* – pickled fish – to America, as well as almond desserts and sponge cake, which they called *pandespanya* or “bread of Spain” (this light cake dates back to medieval Spain and Portugal).<sup>5</sup> They also prepared so-called “Jew beef” – salted beef (Nathan, 11). But the dietary customs of these Sephardim did not strongly affect American eating habits, partly because these Jews were so few

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<sup>5</sup> For contemporary Sephardic-Jewish cookbooks see, for example, Joyce Goldstein, [Sephardic Flavors: Jewish Cooking of the Mediterranean](#) (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000); Sternberg, Rabbi Robert, [The Sephardic Kitchen: The Healthful Food and Rich Culture of the Mediterranean Jews](#) (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), Copeland Marks, [Sephardic Cooking](#) (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1992), David M. Gitlitz and Linda Kay Davidson, [A Drizzle of Honey: The Lives and Recipes of Spain’s Secret Jews](#) (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) and Jennifer Felicia Abadi, [A Fistful of Lentils: Syrian-Jewish Recipes from Grandma Fritzie’s Kitchen](#) (Boston: The Harvard Common Press, 2002).

There are also numerous community cookbooks published by Sephardic congregations.

in number. Neither did the practices of a larger, second wave of Jews to immigrate to the United States, the German Jews who came between 1830 and 1880. Unlike the Sephardim, many of these immigrants moved beyond the East Coast. They established Cincinnati as a center of Judaism but also founded large communities in places not automatically associated with Jewish culture, such as Nebraska.

It was the third wave of Jewish emigration, beginning in 1880 and continuing into the twentieth century, which ultimately defined Jewish culture in America. Like the German Jews before them, these new immigrants were also Ashkenazim, but they came largely from Russia and Eastern Europe. In the decades immediately preceding World War I, more than 500,000 Jews flooded into New York, forming a square-mile ghetto in an area bounded by Houston Street, The Bowery, and the East River. No other place in the United States has ever been so crowded. Eventually, life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan had an enormous impact on numerous facets of American life, food among them. The foods of the Jewish immigrants living in this square mile became synonymous with Jewish food in America.

Significantly, the Jews emigrated largely as families, not as single men, a pattern more typical of the Italian and Chinese workers who came alone but sent home the money they earned. In the Jewish emigration women constituted nearly 50 percent of all immigrants (Joselit 1990, 23), so it is not surprising that the kitchen should be the center of domestic life. This centrality was no mere metaphor, however. The kitchen in New York City tenements was literally at the center of the apartment, with the other rooms opening off of it. Living conditions in these tenements were typically squalid. For the most part, the new Eastern

European immigrants were poor and unsophisticated, the “wretched refuse” of Emma Lazarus’s famous poem. By contrast, the earlier German-Jewish immigrants were, for the most part, wealthy and assimilated. They strove to be accepted into American society and considered their newly arrived brethren an embarrassment, a reminder of everything that made Jews seem different. In a pattern typical of the Jewish diaspora throughout the world, they were eager to incorporate the local foods and eating habits into their diet. Many of these German Jews no longer kept kosher, preferring instead to eat “kosher style,” retaining the flavors of the foods without the proscriptions. They looked with disdain upon the foods of the new Eastern European arrivals, considering most of their traditional dishes heavy and unhealthy, overly rich and overly seasoned. Meat and fish tended to be brined, heavily salted, and smoked, and there weren’t enough green vegetables.

Many German Jewish women were affluent enough to have household help, so with time on their hands they took it upon themselves to educate their lowlier Eastern European sisters in the ways of the New World, setting up courses in language instruction, hygiene, moral responsibility, and cooking.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> One German Jewish rabbi’s remarks regarding the Eastern European Jews were typical: they have, he warned, “habits repulsive to propriety...sentiments foreign to civilization...[W]ink at it, let it go unchecked, and you will imperil the good reputation of Philadelphia Hebrews most seriously.” (Cited in Rose, 6). Eli Lederhendler, however, believes that the role of Germany Jewry in encouraging the Eastern European Jews to assimilate has been exaggerated; he contends that the Eastern European Jews wanted to acculturate into American society for their own reasons, and not simply because the German Jews found their habits embarrassing. See Lederhendler, 152.

Cooking classes were designed to teach Jewish women and girls, often of marriageable age, how to prepare meals from the standard American repertoire. In keeping with the fervid domestic science movement of the late nineteenth century – which produced the classic Fanny Farmer Cookbook and America’s continuing (and unfortunate) preoccupation with precise measurements – these classes also aimed to make Jewish cooking more scientific and hygienic.

Knowing how to “cook American” was highly valued in the Jewish community because it offered Jewish girls a step up in the world (Joselit 1990, 30). These classes were effective enough that younger generations of Eastern European Jews became sensitive to the class differences in food. Writing to a friend in 1911, Maimie Pinzer, a onetime “working girl” (i.e., prostitute) from a Russian-Polish family, complained about the smells emanating from her landlords’ kitchen. Although the apartment she rented from them was “scrupulously clean and the furnishings very nice... [m]y chief objection to the place was that the people from whom we rented were Jewish of a very low order...I also objected to the very pungent odors that camp up from the kitchen. They use garlic and onions and cabbage in their food, and I could not stand it, for it always permeated my room as well as the halls” (Pinzer, 19).

Pinzer’s letter reveals how aware even lower-class Jews were of the food habits that identified them as Jewish. Significantly, the Americanization of Jewish food occurred initially through a mixing of the American into the Jewish, rather than the other way around. This process of acculturation is visible in the Jewish cookbooks that were published in America. The earliest known Jewish cookbook to appear in the United States was Esther Levy’s 1871 Jewish Cookery Book. Levy’s recipes were kosher, in reaction to the laxness in regard to dietary

law that she saw among her fellow German Jews. She presents her book as an attempt to prove that the modern Jewish hostess could lay an elegant table with excellent food while still observing the rules of *kashrut* (the Jewish dietary laws).<sup>7</sup> The Jewish Cookery Book shows considerable sophistication in its range of recipes, which include American and international dishes like Corn Oysters (i.e., fried corn cakes), Hominy Fritters, Sally Lunn Cakes, Yorkshire Pudding and Spanish Charlotte alongside such classic Jewish dishes as Matzo Cleis Soup, Calf's Feet Jelly (presented in the section with marmalades and jams), Spiced Beef, and a Nice Butter Soup "for the (nine tag) nine days of lamentation" (Levy, 31).

The assimilation that Levy reacted against was becoming increasingly widespread. In 1883 the first American Reform rabbis were ordained in Cincinnati, an event that marked a great schism between Orthodox Judaism and the nascent Reform movement. The meal held in celebration at the posh Highland House has gone down in history as the "*trefa* [non-kosher] banquet," even though it was catered by a Jew, Gus Lindeman, who supervised the food service of the Allemania Club frequented by Cincinnati's wealthiest (and most assimilated) German Jews.<sup>8</sup> The menu included shrimp salad, littleneck clams on

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<sup>7</sup> For a thorough discussion of Levy's book and the subsequent Jewish cookbooks published in America, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.

<sup>8</sup> One commentator has written that "Apparently the Jewish caterer thought that 'kosher' food meant only the exclusion of pork products; sea foods were so good they had to be kosher." The commentary goes on to say that the leader of the Reform movement, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, "himself observed the biblical laws of *kashrut*, but made an exception for oysters, which he said were legally

the half shell, soft-shell crabs “a l’Amerique,” and frogs legs “a la crème”; dairy products including cream, ice cream, and cheese were also served even though the meal included a filet of beef (Appel, 75). Significantly for the development of cultural Judaism, as opposed to religious or “kitchen” Judaism, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the leader of the Reform movement, made light of the incident. In the aftermath of the banquet, in a lecture on the Jewish dietary laws Wise stated that “There is a law which stands higher than all dietary laws, and that is ‘Be no fanatic,’ which translated in our vulgar language would sound somewhat like this: ‘Be intelligent, and allow your reason to govern your passions, propensities and superstitions’” (Appel, 78).

Rabbi Wise’s words were taken to heart by most of the authors of Jewish cookbooks published in English before World War I, who included recipes for shellfish and even cured pork products in their books. There was no absolute consensus about what was kosher and what wasn’t. Shellfish and cured pork products like bacon and ham were considered acceptable, but fresh pork was taboo, and so was lard. One of the most enduring of these cookbooks was “Aunt Babette’s” Cook Book, first published in 1889. In addition to recipes reflecting the standard German Jewish repertoire, “Aunt Babette” offered instructions for preparing ham and shellfish, explaining that “NOTHING is ‘Trefa’ that is healthy and clean” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 79). In this way the assimilated German Jewish community affirmed their participation in the larger, American world. At the table, their books seemed to say, you could still be Jewish even if you did not strictly obey the rules of *kashrut*.

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permissible. On his farm he kept two pigs to consume the leftovers; one was called ‘Kosher,’ the other ‘Tref’” (“The First Ordination, 128).

Although a few kosher cookbooks were published, such as Florence Kreisler Greenbaum's 1918 Jewish Cook Book, by World War II Jewish cooking had largely become Americanized, following the adaptive pattern of Jewish cooking throughout the world, and throughout the ages—although, in a significant departure from previous practice, for many Jews this assimilation meant disregard for *kashrut*. The process of Americanization was aided by corporations, which had early on recognized the Jewish market as potentially profitable. By the 1910s American food companies were already advertising in Yiddish publications (Diner, 211-212); the Yiddish press itself introduced readers to American cuisine in such popular columns as “What’s Cooking” (Joselit 1994, 173). But it was a particular American invention that revolutionized Jewish cooking in the U.S.: Crisco, introduced by Procter & Gamble in 1911.

A promotional cookbook published by Procter & Gamble in 1913 features a picture of the kosher seal of approval and states that

Crisco is Kosher. Rabbi Margolies of New York said that the Hebrew Race had been waiting 4,000 years for Crisco. It conforms to the strict Dietary Laws of the Jews. It is what is known in the Hebrew language as a ‘parava,’ or neutral fat. Crisco can be used with both ‘milchig’ and ‘fleischig’ (milk and flesh) foods. Special Kosher packages, bearing the seals of Rabbi Margolies of New York, and Rabbi Lifszitz of Cincinnati, are sold the Jewish trade [*sic*]. But all Crisco is Kosher and all of the same purity. (Neil, 19)

In our own time, when the very thought of trans fats makes us shudder, it may be hard to imagine the joy with which kosher cooks greeted Crisco. For the first time they could make flaky pastries without butter to serve at meat meals; they could add dairy-free shortening to breads to make them tender. In 1933, recognizing that the Jewish market was still largely untapped, Procter & Gamble published a Jewish cookbook touting Crisco's benefits, with recipes in both Yiddish and English. In this way Crisco proved to be a highly American enabler for the continuation of culinary orthodoxy. But Crisco's impact was felt in the opposite direction, as well. Because it was sold as a strictly kosher product, with the Parve (non-animal or dairy) symbol prominently displayed on all packages, the kosher seal came to represent a mark of reliability even outside of the Jewish market. If the use of Crisco among Jews signaled an adaptation to American life, then the American consumers' acceptance of Crisco as a hygienic food marked a recognition, and acceptance, of the Jewish seal as a mark of purity – an important first step in the assimilation of Jewish foods into mainstream America. Other corporations capitalized on the identification of kosher and pure in the minds of American consumers. As early as 1910 Borden's Condensed Milk Company touted its product with the slogan "Pure Means Kosher – Kosher Means Pure" (Heinze, 176-177). Such advertising suggests that Jews enjoyed the power to represent standards of purity: instead of being the "dirty" Other, they – or at least their foods – were held up as models of cleanliness and goodness. In an era when American consumers were horrified by reports of adulteration in processed foods, the image of the devoted and particular Jewish mother as a seal of approval did much to make Jewish foods popular with the American public.

As the twentieth century progressed, American Jews became ever more assimilated, a fact reflected in the Jewish cookbooks that continued to appear. Even those from strictly Jewish publishing houses reveal that American Jews were eating a wider variety of foods than ever before as well as adapting familiar dishes to incorporate new ingredients. For instance, the Jewish-American Cookbook, published in 1946 by the Jewish Daily Forward, contains twenty-four recipes for knishes. A knish is basically poor man's food, dough wrapped around a filling to stretch it further. The traditional Eastern European fillings were potato, cabbage, curd cheese, and kasha. The Jewish-American Cookbook offers these fillings (except for the kasha, which was already falling out of favor with the domesticated, Americanized palate), but in addition includes many newfangled ones: apple, banana, green pepper, lima bean, molasses, nut, pea, pineapple, raspberry, raisin, and jelly (Goodman). Knishes do not even appear in the 1947 edition of Mildred Grossberg Bellin's Jewish Cook Book, originally published by Bloch Publishing Company ("The Jewish Book Concern") in 1941, though she does offer recipes for quintessentially American Washington Pie and New Orleans Pralines. Readers learn not only how to make Vishnick, a cherry liqueur, but also a non-alcoholic Tom and Jerry and a Boston Cooler—what we know as a root beer float.

The emphasis in these and similar cookbooks of the postwar era is on modernity and assimilation. Lost in the translation from the old culture to the new were such traditional dishes as *p'tcha* (calf's foot jelly), *kishke* (stuffed derma), *krushka* (a stew of veal mesentery), and *Lungenvoursht* (lung sausage), all seen as too labor-intensive to prepare, too heavy, or too fatty. Culinary assimilation is especially evident in the myriad Jewish community cookbooks

that appeared, whose recipes can, at times, be startling. Although most contain a special section of traditional Jewish foods, particularly holiday ones, they largely reflect American tastes, specifically the local tastes of the communities they represent.

Typical of these community efforts is a little paperback called "Our Cookery": Recipes from Around the World Including Treasured "Jewish Recipes" (tellingly, both "Our Cookery" and "Treasured Jewish Recipes" are in quotes). This book was published in 1973 by Temple B'Nai Israel Sisterhood of Amarillo, Texas, with an introduction by the congregation's rabbi. On the very first page, under Salads, are listed Lime-Pineapple Mold, Hot Curried Fruit Compote, Shrimp and CrabMeat Dip, and Mexican Salad. The recipe for Mexican Salad reads:

Brown 1 lb. of hamburger meat (or as much as needed). Add brown beans if you have any cooked. **No Canned Beans.** Cut or chop lettuce, tomatoes and green onions; add shredded longhorn cheese and crumbled Doritos. Use Poco Picante sauce for dressing. Toss. (Ellis, 5)

Beans and beef certainly go together, and the combination is well known to Jews throughout the world in the classic slow-cooked Sabbath stew called cholent (Sephardic families might substitute lamb for the beef, or add cumin to the beans). But the addition of longhorn cheese obviously carries this dish far from kosher practice, while the Doritos and Poco Picante sauce are a quintessentially American touch, reflecting both our culture's love of convenience foods and the local Tex-Mex cuisine.

As in other community cookbooks, the “treasured” Jewish recipes here are found in a separate section at the end of the book. The most intriguing recipe in this collection is for Passover Lettuce Muffins, which call for matzo meal, sugar, oil, eggs, and half a head of shredded lettuce, no doubt to keep the muffins moist. But what’s most fascinating is the cultural point of reference: the headnote informs the reader that “these muffins taste like Egg Foo Young” (Neil, 49). By the late twentieth century, American Jews were familiar enough with Chinese cuisine (or an Americanized version of it) that a Chinese dish could be invoked as a point of comparison.

As this community cookbook and so many others show, Jewish food had, without question, become Americanized, in terms of both ingredients and preparation. But the process of assimilation works both ways. Already aware of kosher foods as “pure” and “hygienic,” American consumers in the second half of the twentieth century began to absorb Jewish foods into their diet, a process accelerated by none other than Madison Avenue. The genius behind the Jewish ad campaigns was William Bernbach of the DDB agency, who convinced the Brooklyn-based Levy’s rye bread company to look beyond its Jewish clientele. He urged Levy’s to target an audience outside of the Jewish community by advertising not in the New York Post, 80 percent of whose readers were Jewish, but in the food sections of the World-Telegram and the Journal-American.<sup>9</sup> Levy’s soon became the best-selling rye bread in New York. Levy’s became

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on William Bernbach see the Web site of the Center for Interactive Advertising at the University of Texas at [http://www.ciadvertising.org/student\\_account/fall\\_01/adv382j/lrahma/bernbach/levy.html](http://www.ciadvertising.org/student_account/fall_01/adv382j/lrahma/bernbach/levy.html).

almost a household word thanks to the wildly successful posters designed by William Taubin displayed in the New York City Subway system in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These posters depicted various ethnic faces – a Native American, a black boy, a Chinese boy, a Chinese man, an Italian mama, an Irish cop, and a Catholic choirboy – each with the tag line “You Don’t Have To Be Jewish To Love Levy’s Real Jewish Rye.”

Trends set in New York eventually spread throughout the rest of the United States, and food is no exception. As lovers of rye bread know, Jewish rye is a staple in New York delicatessens, and the increasing visibility accorded to Jewish foods in New York gradually spread throughout the country. Ultimately, New York-style Jewish deli food has been more important than any other influence to the dissemination of Jewish food in America. But the delicatessen itself saw significant changes over the course of the twentieth century, evolving from the bare-bones *schlacht* (butcher) store of the Lower East Side that sold only salamis and other cured meats into the strictly kosher delicatessen with other prepared foods and a restaurant section, and from there to the kosher-style delicatessen, the type most commonly found today, which displays roast beef (a non-kosher cut) and sometimes even ham along with the pastrami and corned beef in its cases. The mainstreaming of the Jewish delicatessen reflects the Jewish migration from the Lower East Side into other parts of metropolitan New York and beyond, into the suburbs and other cities. The new delis that opened in areas still unfamiliar with Jewish food took cues from American practice, adapting, for instance, the beloved BLT club sandwich into a triple-decker pastrami on rye (Glazer, 61). The daughter of one Jewish deli owner who established a store outside of Manhattan recalls that

The Gentiles of the neighborhood regarded my father's store as a curiosity at first. They would come in at the urging of a Jewish friend and order "pastrami," pronouncing it in a way that made my mother giggle. Some wandered in by accident, thought it strange that we didn't have some staple like boiled ham, but would generally settle for something else. Undeniably the food was good, satisfying, but different. After a while it even ceased to be different. Without a tremor of strangeness, they would order gefilte fish on "fish night." (Glazer, 63)

This passage clearly demonstrates the local community's cultural acceptance of the Jews—a necessary precondition for assimilation. Once Jewish food had lost its differentness, it became something that even non-Jews could enjoy.

The blurring of boundaries led to the creation of such deli staples as Beef-Frye, also known as "Jewish Bacon" or "Kosher Bacon," which went perfectly with eggs. The shifting culture was especially visible in the creation of the Jewish holy trinity of bagels, lox, and cream cheese. In Eastern Europe the bagel was eaten plain; here, in America, it was topped with a "bloodlike fish that bore a resemblance to ham [while the cream] cheese subtly challenged the dietary laws: a forbidden food appeared to be relished, while meat and milk foods appeared to be enjoyed together" (Cooper, 151). Even as Jewish delicatessens served food in the form of the forbidden, American diners and lunch counters began putting more and more Jewish foods on their menus, dishes like blintzes and borscht. In 1949 one Cleveland drugstore listed "Kosher Salami Sandwiches" and "Hot

Kosher Corned Beef de Luxe” among its regular offerings, while both Baked Virginia Ham Sandwich and Kosher Corned Beef Sandwich appear among the sandwiches offered at a Cleveland restaurant that same year, next to a special *Kosher Korner* with blintzes and chopped liver (Duker, 407-408).

In New York, Lindy’s and Reuben’s delicatessens, both opened by immigrants, vied to serve the city’s best cheesecake, which thanks to copious amounts of smooth, processed cream cheese differed radically from the Eastern-European-style cheesecakes made with quark or other curd cheese. Such delicious desserts attracted non-Jews. As one New Yorker wrote in a letter to the Jewish monthly magazine Commentary, in response to an article dismissing the notion of Mama’s home cooking: “Most of us have disdained and discarded that adolescence which prompted us to come back to Delancey Street boasting of miraculous culinary discoveries in Little China or Little Italy...We proclaim to the world that we have returned to ma’s cooking. Not only that, but in the process of returning, have brought with us hordes of converts” (Nussbaum). The identification of the best Jewish food with New York and its delis continues even today. Russ & Daughters, a thriving deli on New York’s Lower East Side, advertises a “New York Nostalgia” package that can be had for \$130.00, including shipping. It contains all the necessities for the perfect New York brunch:

For a taste of New York, look no further. One pound of  
 Russ & Daughters’ famous Gaspé Atlantic Smoked salmon,  
 1/2 pound sliced smoked sable, one pint house-cured herring  
 fillets in cream sauce with pickled onions, one pound of natural

cream cheese with chive, 8 authentic New York bagels, one pound of old-fashioned Rugelach and a piece of old-fashioned marble halvah.<sup>10</sup>

The identification of Jewish food with New York is perhaps most visible in the “authentic New York” bagel. What’s more, the rise of the bagel in the American culinary consciousness reflects a quintessentially American penchant to experiment with foods, to mix and match gastronomic cultures.

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 women in childbirth -- most likely because their circular form symbolized the circle of life. Bagels migrated from Eastern Europe to the United States with the influx of Jews from that region, and in the 1890s their consumption was limited to the Eastern European Jewish population. These rolls were an everyday food, not central culinary icons like the chicken soup or gefilte fish that were considered luxurious and therefore reserved for special occasions like the Sabbath.

As originally made in New York, bagels were much smaller than those we see today: they weighed only 3 ounces. They were dense, not spongy, with a crackly crust and chewy interior. Bagel making was the domain of the Bagel Bakers’ Local #338, a New York trade union formed early in the first decade of the twentieth century, with membership so select that it was passed down from father to son. Working in teams of four at the thirty-six union bagel shops that

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.russanddaughters.com/>.

they controlled, the bakers mixed the dough and shaped it into rings by hand, then turned the breads over to the kettleman, who boiled them. The breads were finished off in the oven.

Though New York was the center of bagel-making activity, not all bagels were made in the city. A notable exception was the bakery opened in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1927 by Harry Lender, an immigrant from Lublin, Poland, who not only sold his bagels (spelled “beigels”) to the local Jewish clientele but also supplied New York bakeries. Lender’s made history in 1962 when the bakery purchased the first industrial bagel-making machine, developed by Daniel Thompson. Thompson’s father, Mickey, had for many years worked on a prototype for a machine that formed bagels by extruding the dough through rings. Daniel Thompson perfected this machine in 1961 and tried to market it. Lender’s was one of the few bakeries to respond. They had begun freezing their bagels for sale in supermarkets and needed a way to keep up with demand. The first machine was installed at the Lender’s Bagels operation in 1963. Thompson’s technology meant that instead of producing only dozens of bagels an hour by hand, Lender’s could turn out 400 bagels an hour (Gabaccia, 2). (Today’s super machines can produce an astonishing 5,000 bagels an hour.<sup>11</sup>) Industrial-style bagels were often steamed, rather than boiled, to yield a softer roll, and Lender’s frozen, pre-sliced bagels could be popped right into the toaster—a perfect convenience food. Thus began the bagel’s dissemination throughout America. Soon bagels were popping up everywhere, in a variety of flavors.

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<sup>11</sup> To find out more about Thompson bagel machines see [http://bagelproducts.com/bagel\\_formers/tprodm.htm](http://bagelproducts.com/bagel_formers/tprodm.htm).

So-called bagel cafés took the bagel even further, advertising them in flavors as antithetical to the genuine bagel as blueberry, chocolate chip, sun-dried tomato, and chipotle. In a further iteration of the bagel's multicultural evolution, some cafés and bars dyed bagels green for St. Patrick's Day. The names of the first bagel cafés were explicitly chosen to evoke Jewish life in one form or another, whether Germanic, Yiddish, biblical, or New York: Einstein Bros., Bagel Nosh, Noah's Bagels, Manhattan Bagels. But the Americanization of the bagel is now so complete that consumers are just as likely to encounter names like The Great American Bagel, Chesapeake Bagel Bakery, and Alpine Bagels. The cafés began by selling bagels only for breakfast, as a trendy, and healthy, substitute for doughnuts. But soon they realized that for greater profitability they needed to remain open for lunch. The decision to transform the bagel into a base for any number of toppings contributed to the demise of the genuine bagel, even as it popularized the bread's generic form. Bagels became larger in order to hold sandwich fillings, and soon the bagel became a vehicle rather than a food unto itself. The large fast-food chains got in on the act, too, and before too long bagels, like so many other American fast-food products, had become super-sized. At McDonald's customers could order a ham, egg, and cheese bagel; Burger King offered a bagel sandwich. The ultimate grotesque bagel was the blueberry one prepared in 1998 by Lender's Bagels as a stunt for the Guinness Book of World Records; it was 13.75 inches high, with a diameter of 59 inches, and weighed in at 714 pounds. No doubt this bagel was as edible as the giant, 15-inch -wide novelty bagel made of hand-painted PVC and touted as "So true-to-life you'll be tempted

to add cream cheese! A clever conversation piece to prop on the kitchen counter or hang on the wall in the breakfast nook or family room.”<sup>12</sup> So thoroughly have bagels entered the American mainstream that when the New York Yankees opened their 2004 season in Toyko, New York City bars responded to diehard baseball fans by offering bagels and coffee at their live television broadcasts. One sidewalk chalkboard lured passersby inside with the promise of “Yanks Game Here. Baseball and Bagels” (Kilgannon). What more convincing proof is needed that bagels have become an essential part of American life?

By the 1990s bagel sales were big business. Between 1994 and 1997 the number of bagel stores in the United States increased fivefold, and industry analysts predicted that the market would continue to expand.<sup>13</sup> Even doughnut chains like Dunkin’ Donuts jumped on the bagel bandwagon, acknowledging the roll’s ascendance over their own sweet confections despite the bagel’s early reputation as “an unsweetened doughnut with rigor mortis” (Levine). Such rosy

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<sup>12</sup> The Great Big Bagel is available for \$96.00 from Great Big Stuff ([www.greatbigstuff.com/bagel](http://www.greatbigstuff.com/bagel)).

<sup>13</sup> As of this writing, though, changes are in the works. Bruegger’s Bagel Bakery, the nation’s second largest bagel chain after Einstein Bros. and a force in the competitive bagel field since 1983, has just changed hands, and the new owners plan to drop the words “Bagel Bakery” from the name and turn it into a “quick casual” restaurant. See Leslie Wright, “Changes afoot at Bruegger’s.” The Burlington Free Press, April 1, 2004. This decision may be a result of the low-carb craze, which is making itself felt among bagel bakers. Information Resources, Inc., a market research company, reports that bagel sales have declined over the past year, perhaps in response to low-carb diets. More bagel statistics and trends are available from the American Institute of Baking at <http://www.aibonline.org/resources/statistics/bagel.html>.

predictions caused bagels to endure other transmogrifications. On the one hand, bagels grew larger; on the other, they were miniaturized. Marketing mavens at Heinz came up with Bagel Bites, an American-Jewish answer to pizza. These snack bagels come in several varieties: Three Cheese, Cheese and Pepperoni, and Cheese, Sausage and Pepperoni—the latter mix of double pork sausage with cheese on a bagel representing a fascinating cultural hybrid. Another product, Stuffed Bagel Bites (counterparts to calzones), have the filling in the middle. Both Bagel Bites and Stuffed Bagel Bites are meant to be microwaved; yet all who cherish crustiness in bread know that the microwave process wreaks havoc, making bread first very soft and subsequently tough. In fact, the microwave irredeemably destroys the (genuine) bagel's quintessential characteristic—its chewy yet crusty texture. But most consumers are unfamiliar with real bagels and don't know what they're missing; and industry analysts say that in any case Americans prefer their bread soft and sweet. Apart from their name, nothing even remotely Jewish remains in these transformed bagels.

Nor did other American food trends leave the bagel unscathed. In 1998 the Sara Lee company saw profits in the growing market for functional foods by releasing a fortified frozen bagel that contained the vitamins and minerals regularly added to commercial white bread (Charlet). Most recently, in the wake of the current low-carb craze and the popularity of the Atkins and South Beach diets, yet another new bagel product has appeared on the American scene: so-called "carb-counting bagels." These bagels are slightly smaller than the previous standard (which actually brings them back to their original New York size). They have 30 percent fewer calories and 40 percent fewer carbohydrates.

Early on in the low-carb fad a revealing exchange appeared on the Web site for Active Low-Carber Forums. Titled “Greetings from the Holy Land,” it contained this thread:

**Harley (12-02-01)**

Hi

Anyone out there from Israel by any chance?

Or am I the only person in the entire country who is low carbing?

**BaileyWS (12-13-01)**

I live in Texas, but grew up in New York...I know the doughnuts and potato cakes. I just LOVE latkas! Too bad.

The cream cheese and smoked salmon is OK, but you have to leave the bagels...this is going to be especially difficult for me on our trip to New York this Christmas...I just love New York Bagels...

**Harley (12-13-01)**

Please tell me you aren't seriously suggesting having the salmon and cream cheese without the bagel? Why, that's just fish and cheese then.

Don't you know that there is a special chemical reaction between the bagel and the salmon and cream cheese that gives it that special taste?

(ggl)

Ads and popular culture have so beatified deli food that the Jewish trinity of bagels, cream cheese, and lox seems inviolable. As this overheard Internet chat reveals, the idea that this earthly combination of foods represents something larger than life is deeply ingrained in the American Jewish psyche, even among expats living in Israel. Forsaking the Sunday-morning ritual of one religion

(Judaism) to accept the strictures of another (low-carb dieting) is akin to blasphemy.

On-the-go Americans who don't want to forsake their bagels and cream cheese but who have no time to spend on a schmear (smear of cream cheese) can turn to Bagelers, "the latest and greatest in grab-and-go food" (Schwartzberg). Devised by Florida's Filled Bagel Industries, Bagelers are individually wrapped bagel and cream cheese bars, in plain, blueberry, and cinnamon and brown sugar varieties. The particular marketing ploy used to sell Bagelers involves invoking the names of teenage heartthrobs like extreme skateboarder Tony Hawk and actress Brittany Murphy, who can now enjoy bagels and cream cheese without having to deal with a "messy knife."

Two other bagel phenomena also warrant mention. The desire for thinner, less dense bagels (because they contain fewer calories) has led to the creation of "flagels" – flat bagels that are less doughy than a true bagel. These bagel knock-offs are crisp on the outside, chewy within, and a growing number of people prefer them for sandwiches. Brooklyn bagel bakeries sell flagels for lunch with an arugula and prosciutto filling, in keeping with the practice of mixing bagels and pork products (Levine). But for those who want to remain culturally kosher, flagels also take a good schmear. Finally, Cosi's Sandwich Bar chain has trademarked the name "squagel" for a square bagel. These perverse manifestations show how fully bagels have been assimilated into American culture, and how far removed they now are from their original identification

with Jewish food.<sup>14</sup> For Israelis, though, bagels never were Jewish; they are considered American.<sup>15</sup>

By no stretch of the imagination do the most recent snack-food-style bagels resemble to the original bread; neither are they meant to provide sustenance. But Bagel Bites aside, it can be argued that Heinz has been instrumental in mainstreaming Jewish food, most visibly with its range of kosher products. Heinz worked with the United Federation of Orthodox Rabbis to develop the “Circle U” kosher certification, which it first printed on the label of Heinz Vegetarian Beans in 1923.<sup>16</sup> This symbol of certification soon spread to other products, most notably kosher dill pickles, of which there are now seventeen varieties, in various shapes and sizes ranging from the standard

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<sup>14</sup> A recently published book shows even more outré bagel permutations. Alan Batt, a New York City photographer, asked seventy-five top chefs to create something new based on the iconic New York combination of bagels and lox. His request resulted in a beautiful volume of photographs ranging from bagel “spoons” dipped in a smoked salmon custard to tequila-cured salmon on a bagel-shaped flour tortilla. See Alan Batt, *The Great Bagel and Lox Book* (New York: Battman Studios, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> In the introduction to *We Are What We Eat*, Donna Gabaccia quotes Gary Heller, the Jerusalem entrepreneur who imported frozen dough from New York City’s H & H bagels: “As Heller noted, Jews born in Israel (sabras) ‘think bagels are American not Jewish.’ Israelis knew ‘bagele’—the closest local products—only as hard, salt-covered rounds, unlike Heller’s product, or as soft sesame ellipses” (Gabaccia, 2). A review of a new Jerusalem restaurant, Brunch Bagel, states that “The bagels are real American—crunchy (but not too crunchy) on the outside and chewy (but not too chewy) on the inside” (Draiman).

<sup>16</sup> For more on Heinz and kosher processing, see <http://www.heinz.com/jsp/seal.jsp>. A complete list of Heinz kosher products is available at <http://www.heinz.com/jsp/kosher.jsp>.

Kosher Dills to Old Fashioned Kosher Dill Chunks and Large Quartered Spears Kosher Style.

Like bagels, kosher dill pickles began their life in America on the Lower East Side, in pickle stores owned by Eastern European immigrants. Consumers could choose among barrels of new pickles (only a day removed from cucumbers) to the beloved half-sours to three-quarter sours to fully soured pickles that had been brined for six months with plenty of garlic. (A few stores like Gus's Pickles and The Pickle Guys still thrive on the Lower East Side.) When Americans buy Heinz Kosher Dill Pickles today, though, they're hardly thinking of Jewish immigrant fare. America's Favorites, published in 1980, is a compendium of seventy-five icons of American food. Heinz Kosher Dill Pickles are among them, right up there with Wonder Bread and Pork and Beans. After all, what is a classic American hamburger without kosher dills? Or a deli sandwich, whether kosher or not, the pickles cut in vertical slices and wrapped in wax paper? Kosher dills have entered the pantheon of American greats.

Rather than marking a food as appropriate primarily for Jewish consumption, the kosher label promises the consumer a purer product, of ostensibly better quality and usually of better taste.<sup>17</sup> This promise of purity is not limited to Crisco or to kosher chickens (now available frozen nationwide through the Empire brand) or other meats. Even such American classics as M & Ms, Oreos, and, most recently, Campbell's Vegetarian Vegetable soup carry the kosher label. In the wake of the pioneering ads for Crisco, and similar to the

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<sup>17</sup> In blind taste tests the editors of Cook's Illustrated twice found Empire kosher chicken to have superior flavor. See "Kosher Bird Wins Chicken Tasting" (January 2002) and "Boneless Skinless Chicken Breasts" (June 2004).

earlier recognition that it's not necessary to be Jewish to enjoy Jewish rye, the public perception of kosher foods as healthier and better was shaped by another ad campaign, this time by Hebrew National, maker of kosher hot dogs.

Ever since Upton Sinclair's exposé of meat packing plants in The Jungle, hot dogs have been suspect in their purity—a kind of *treyf* for *goyim* (Gentiles). Hebrew National played on the public perception of hot dogs as a suspect food in a 1970s television commercial that showed Uncle Sam holding a hot dog as a voice-over lists all the ingredients allowed in hot dogs by U.S. law. The voice then states that Hebrew National doesn't use any beef byproducts or fillers, "Because we answer to a Higher Authority." Potentially contaminated or impure food was thus cleansed by association with the higher, purer standards of kosher Jews. Coinciding as it did with the nascent American health-food movement, this ad campaign, like the one for Levy's Rye Bread, was wildly successful, and it caused consumers to begin seeking out kosher foods as a way to promote healthy eating. Even for non-Jews the word "kosher" had acquired a certain cachet. The kosherization of America reveals how Americans have, little by little, made many originally Jewish foods their own.

Another Lower East Side favorite – rugelach— is still in the process of being domesticated. These pastries are appearing ever more frequently at bakeries and supermarkets throughout the country, a sure sign that they are no longer an oddity. But like mass-produced bagels, supermarket and most bakery rugelach are not as they ought to be—meltingly tender, rolled with raspberry jam and just a hint of cinnamon. Too often they are leaden, dry, and hard, and so overpoweringly flavored with cinnamon that the spice predominates. Rugelach have encountered an additional difficulty in the assimilation process: consumers

are not sure how to pronounce the word. “Bagel” is a breeze compared to the guttural ‘ch’ on the end of “rugelach.” Often the spelling has been changed to reflect the Anglicized pronunciation, “rugulah.”

Despite their growing ubiquity, it is unlikely that “rugelach” -- or even “rugulah” -- will become a household word anytime soon. That honor goes to what is arguably the most iconic Jewish food of all: Chicken Soup, *goldene yoikh*. Chicken soup is the single most defining dish of the Ashkenazic kitchen, one that encapsulates the wellbeing of the household (a Yiddish proverb says that “when a poor man eats a chicken, either the man or the chicken is sick”). Chicken soup is part of the Jewish consciousness, a fixture from Sabbath dinner to the Passover seder (ritual meal), a panacea when someone is not feeling well. Chicken soup isn’t restricted to Jewish culinary culture, of course; Mimi Sheraton, the former restaurant critic of the New York Times, penned The Whole World Loves Chicken Soup, an entire book on chicken soup variations from dozens of different cuisines (though Sheraton’s maiden name of Solomon and the book’s subtitle of “Recipes and Lore to Comfort Body and Soul” reveal an unstated Jewish premise). So what is it about Jewish chicken soup, in particular, that caught the fancy of America’s marketing geniuses? The probable answer is chicken’s soup’s reputation as “Jewish Penicillin” because of its marvelous restorative powers.

The co-opting of Jewish chicken soup for motivational purposes, to build self-esteem, should perhaps not come as a surprise. Jack Canfield’s original book titled Chicken Soup for the Soul came out in 1993; there are now over seventy titles in the series, with more than eighty-five million of the books in print. A quick glance at Amazon.com shows some of the most popular volumes: Chicken

Soup for the Preteen Soul (followed by Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul); Chicken Soup for the Horse Lover's Soul (or the Puppy Lover's); Chicken Soup for the Prisoner's Soul; Chicken Soup for the Golfer's Soul; or – two of the titles that best show assimilation at work -- Chicken Soup for the Christian Family Soul and Chicken Soup for the Soul: A Christmas Treasury.

Jewish-style chicken soup, while not in the culinary mainstream of America, is certainly a notable part of its societal consciousness. Indeed, chicken soup represents an appealing symbol for Jewish domestic culture, a metonymy for the Jewish mother herself, the over-nurturing parent whose guilt-inducing selflessness and cooking are exaggerated to a comic extent.

American advertising, that barometer and creator of popular opinion, has mainstreamed Jewish food (and thereby Jewishness) by deepening the mythology of kosher Jewish foods as healthier, purer, even more godly, and magically related to maternal love. Something more than just certain iconic Jewish foods has entered into the American mainstream: Jewish culture itself has been integrated into American life. Beyond bagels and kosher dills and rugelach and chicken soup, Jews have also given America a piece of our larger culture, an affectionate sense of the particular celebrations that surround our foods, and a particularly wonderful brand of Jewish humor. A poem by Rodger Kamenetz, inspired by the Levy's Rye Bread campaign, captures the spirit of Jewish life in America. The epigraph to "You Don't Have to Be Jewish" ((Kamenetz 2000) reads: *"You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's rye..."*

You could be black, Italian, a Cherokee  
with very large teeth, grinning over a  
corned beef sandwich-- you don't have

to be Jewish to love, certainly or  
uncertainly, you don't have to be Jewish  
to love Levy's rye. Or to love anything:  
a single caraway seed, or the rough black seed  
of the four o'clock enclosed in pastel petals  
late afternoon-- you know it's there and  
you don't have to be Jewish. You don't  
have to be Jewish to walk a mile  
with the sun going down rosy in the park  
or to love Rosy in the park or at home  
(and Rosy loves you back.) You don't have  
to be Jewish to chew slowly, tasting the rye  
breaking down into sugar, you just have to be  
willing to slow time down to a poster, a still  
photograph of you in your ethnic garb  
in the days when ethnicity was okay not yet  
terrifying or indistinct: Kiss Me I'm Irish  
and kiss me again, I'm gay Italian Chinese  
and No Parking This Space Reserved for Polish.  
You don't have to be anything, really to love.  
You don't have to be Jewish you could be anything  
amazing or distinct, you could have just once  
for maybe an hour, a day, forgotten you were  
different, you don't have to be Jewish, you  
don't have to be, to love, to love bread, you  
don't have to be wry to love Jewish--but it helps.

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