

TASTING A NEIGHBOURHOOD: A FOOD HISTORY OF MANHATTAN'S LOWER EAST SIDE

Peter Beck

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

The thing to understand about New York City's Lower East Side – the romantic, expensive, historic Lower East Side – is that people have been trying to escape from it for one hundred and fifty years. First the English and the Dutch, then the Germans, then the Eastern European Jews, then the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans – no one has wanted to stick around. Even today, almost half the people living in the centre of the Lower East Side were born in a foreign country.¹ Immigrants come to the south-eastern corner of Manhattan, try to make a living, and then try to move out. And yet, former residents and uptown visitors have been mythologizing the neighbourhood for more than a century.

Its glories – in particular its food glories – have long been praised by journalists, authors, poets, memoirists and scholars: the recorders of urban memory. They remember the knishes but not the crime, the sturgeon and not the squalor. Almost one hundred years after the tidal wave of Jewish immigration retreated from the shores of Manhattan, the neighbourhood is still remembered as the Jewish Lower East Side. Visitors still come every day for a taste of an authentic pastrami sandwich (Katz's), a traditional greasy knish (Yonah Shimmel's), or a slice of old-fashioned smoked salmon (Russ & Daughters). They walk away feeling like they have had an authentic New York food experience: the Jewish cuisine of the Lower East Side. They walk away without realizing that those three stores are all that remain of the once-Jewish Lower East Side.

Almost every other restaurant or grocery store caters to the Chinese or Hispanic population of the neighbourhood, or to the area's growing wealthy creative class. Mark Russ Federman, the third of four Russ generations to run Russ & Daughters, represents what might be the last Jewish family with a Lower East Side food legacy stretching back to the early twentieth century. All the more reason to take him seriously when, on a recent Tuesday afternoon, he looked around his store and said, 'This was a terrible neighbourhood. No one wanted a legacy on the Lower East Side.'

I had come to Russ & Daughters to talk to Federman about food. There are many ways a neighbourhood can be understood – from its population, to its architecture, to its history – but the Lower East Side has always been defined by its food. The archives of major New York newspapers contain almost annual articles about food on the Lower East Side: what to eat, what to avoid, what is truly 'authentic.' Urban histories have often relegated food studies to a minor role or a footnote in neighbourhood descriptions. In the case of the Lower East Side, that means much of its history has gone under-represented. To understand the neighbourhood, you have to understand its food.

The Lower East Side today stretches from Allen Street to the East River, and from Houston Street down to the Manhattan Bridge. But in the nineteenth century, and for much of the twentieth, it referred to the whole section of New York that now includes the East Village, Chinatown, and Little Italy. The district started at Broadway to the west

and Fulton to the south, stopping only at 14th in the north and the banks of the river on the east.² From the mid to late nineteenth century, it was known as Kleindeutschland: Little Germany.

Little Germany was the first ethnic neighbourhood in the United States. It contained half of New York's hundred-thousand Germans, and was the third-largest German-speaking community in the world, after Berlin and Vienna. It was created by the wave of mid-nineteenth century immigration that turned New York from an English-speaking, English-eating city of 313,000 into an immigration destination. In 1854 alone, 319,000 immigrants came to Manhattan, around a third of them German.³

The influx of foreign residents coincided with the birth of the restaurant as a New York institution. These pioneering restaurants served mostly the upper and lower classes: fancy fine-dining establishments for the rich, and cheap mess halls for the poor.⁴ On the Lower East Side, they were mostly German, catering to the sprawling denizens of Kleindeutschland. The Germans opened lager saloons, taverns, and beer halls: all variations on a theme that included copious amounts of alcohol and (often free) meals to accompany them. Some of the foods that would become New York classics made their American debut as Lower East Side delicacies: the frankfurter, the Hamburg steak.

Some of the saloons could fit thousands of patrons at a time. The Bowery was New York's original theatre row, and German establishments catered to the theatre crowds.⁵ For thirty-five cents, customers could get a complete meal, including pretzels, pickled oysters, Limburger cheese, and, according to an 1867 article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, 'pyramids of sausages of every known size and shape.'⁶ Basement dining-halls were packed with kegs of lager and roasts of all kinds. Food was the common ground for German immigrants in New York City, and the Lower East Side was their home.

When Jacob Riis went to the neighbourhood to chronicle immigrant stories for *How the Other Half Lives*, the ghetto wasn't yet a Jewish neighbourhood. It was still Little Germany, apart from the small district within that neighbourhood he referred to as 'Jewtown.'⁷ On Hester Street, he saw 'frowsy-looking chickens and half-plucked geese, hung by the neck and protesting with wildly strutting feet'⁸ and meals of 'soup, meat stew, bread, pie, pickles, and a schooner of beer for thirteen cents.'⁹ By the time the Jewish community overtook Little Germany, these ratios would be reversed, but in the 1880s, Riis counted 111 places of worship, compared to 4,065 saloons.¹⁰

The Lower East Side, at the time, was known as a drinking and eating quarter. In two articles from the summer of 1895, the neighbourhood is casually assumed to be the best place to go looking for a drink when dry laws were being enforced citywide. Reporting on one Sunday in June, the *New York Times* began: 'The whole Lower East Side was as tightly closed as the Bowery. Many visitors from other parts of the city made expeditions to this quarter feeling sure that certain saloon doors would not be closed to them, but they returned as dry as they went.'¹¹ In the second article, the *Times* reporter elaborates on all the tricks patrons could use to get a drink in Little Germany. At one establishment, where you could order a drink with your meal, a man entered and asked for two eggs and a cocktail. After finishing the cocktail, he paid the bill and returned the plate saying, 'Here, I don't want your old eggs.'¹²

By 1907, the city, and the Lower East Side, had changed drastically. In Edmund James' *The Immigrant Jew in America*, the author announces: 'What saloons there are on the East Side do but an impoverished business.' The German lager bar was on its way out, replaced by the Jewish coffee house. The thousands of saloons gave way to hundreds of cafés and cake parlours.¹³

The transitional neighbourhood was the German-Jewish core of Kleindeutschland, around Grand, Stanton, Ludlow, and Pitt Streets. As Russian and other Eastern European Jews fled their homelands in the 1880s, they settled in and around the German Jews of Little Germany. In the 1870s, only forty thousand Eastern European Jews were coming into America. The number swelled to two hundred thousand in the 1880s, and three hundred thousand in the 1890s.¹⁴ The vast majority stayed in New York City, pushing the boundaries of the Jewish quarter of Little Germany. By 1900, the neighbourhood was the most populated area in the world, with around seven hundred people per acre.¹⁵ As the Jews settled in, they recreated parts of their European *shtetl* life. Pushcart vendors, street markets, cafés, and Russian or Rumanian restaurants sprang up on every street in the Lower East Side.

The halfway-point between lager bar and lox counter was the kosher delicatessen of the German Jew. The first delicatessens were all German-run, and were anything but kosher.¹⁶ One article from the *New York Tribune* in 1897 recommends the suckling pig, the roast pig's feet, and the blood pudding.¹⁷ At the time, Jewish delis were beginning to open on the Lower East Side, but they were still just a sub-category of delicatessen.

German-Jewish delis provided a quick in-and-out service whereas the Jewish cafés were a place to linger. According to M.E. Ravage's *My Plunge Into the Slums*, the coffee-houses were brought to the Lower East Side by Romanian Jews.¹⁸ They provided 'a place of congregation for the socially minded, and in which the drinking of fragrant, pasty Turkish coffee is merely incidental to a game of cards, or billiards, or dominoes.'¹⁹

As well as the political activists of the neighbourhood, these cafés were popular with the literary set. Writers visiting Second Avenue's Cafe Royal during the Depression declared it 'primarily a rendezvous, and secondarily a feeding place.'²⁰ It served a typical mix of Eastern European, Jewish, and American specialities: wiener schnitzel, Hungarian goulash, chopped liver, and grilled cheese sandwiches. In Bernard Gershon Richards' *Discourses of Keidansky*, from 1903, the author called the cafés 'those universities of the East Side,' where 'the great issues given up in despair by famous statesmen are met and decided upon.'²¹

As immigration to New York and the Lower East Side slowed down in the 1920s, the Jewish neighbourhood stopped growing and then began to shrink. For the most part, the only Jewish movement on the Lower East Side was outwards: east to Brooklyn, Queens, or the rest of Long Island; north to the Bronx, Westchester, or Rockland County; west to the suburbs of New Jersey. And yet, the Lower East Side retained its status as a Jewish neighbourhood, at least in terms of tourism, gastronomy, and business. Even as the neighbourhood began an irreversible demographic shift, the mythology stubbornly remained. From the 1920s until recently, the Lower East Side was a neighbourhood defined by Jewish nostalgia.

This nostalgia for what was by all definitions a slum seems surprising. There were good reasons for the Jewish exodus out of the Lower East Side, so why did the weekend return trips carry on for decades? How could Ratner's Dairy Restaurant survive until this millennium? How could Katz's and Sammy's Roumanian still be around? The author and scholar Hasia Diner suggests that part of the answer comes from a mistaken assumption that immigrants would have compared their New York experience to that of their uptown peers. To Diner, the comparable experience for a recent immigrant is their home country, where people ate far worse, rather than their adopted country, where people ate far better.²² In this reading, the slum is not a degraded New York quarter, it is an elevated Russian *shtetl*. It has more of the pushcarts, cafés, and dairy restaurants of the

home country, with less of the hunger.

Perhaps the justification for nostalgia on the Lower East Side is even simpler. While the elevated-*shtetl* theory is appealing, it is hard to actually imagine an immigrant refusing to compare him or herself to the Upper East Siders slumming downtown every day. After some time, the appropriate comparison for new arrivals must have become fellow New Yorkers, not imagined Eastern Europeans. If not, why the relentless ambition to move up and out? The scholar Suzanne Wasserman quotes an author from the Federal Writers' Project during the Depression, whose essay 'Hold Up the Sun! A Kaleidoscope of Jewish Life in New York' succinctly captures what may be the best explanation for mythologizing the Jewish Lower East Side: 'Ah! and what a joy it is to relive the unhappy, distant past!'²³

In 1952, the Café Royal, once the literary and intellectual centre of the Lower East Side food scene, finally closed. Three years later, the storefront had become K&S Cleaners, offering three-hour laundry services and stories for old patrons of the Café, who came to visit – not knowing the Café was gone forever. To a visiting journalist, the patron of the cleaning store explained what he said to nostalgic actors and actresses returning to the scene of their late-night hangouts over tea: 'Well, the Café Royal isn't all gone. See the mirror there? That's your mirror from the café. You can still look in it and see yourself – just like the old days.'²⁴

By 1971, when Isaac Bashevis Singer published 'The Cabalist of East Broadway' in the *New Yorker*, the neighbourhood was no longer distinctly Jewish. His story begins:

As happens so often in New York, the neighborhood changed. The synagogues became churches, the *yeshivas* restaurants or garages... In the cafeteria on the corner, in former times one could meet Yiddish writers, journalists, teachers, fund raisers for Israel, and the like. *Blintzes*, *borscht*, *kreplach*, chopped liver, rice pudding, and egg cookies were the standard dishes. Now the place mainly catered to Negroes and Puerto Ricans. The voices were different, the smells were different.²⁵

Often, the neighbourhood wasn't even called the Lower East Side. The poet Bimbo Rivas coined the term 'Loisaida' in his poem of the same name in 1974. 'Lower East Side / I love you. /.../ Loisaida, I love you /.../ Te amo.' The new name was supposed to imitate the way the new Hispanic residents of the neighbourhood pronounce Lower East Side.²⁶ The Jewish immigration that ended in the 1920s had been replaced by an influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the post-World War II era.

In the same year as the Bashevis Singer story, the *New York Times* published a review of the Parkway Restaurant on Chrystie and Delancey that announced, 'The Parkway is a miraculously intact survivor of an all but vanished era on the Lower East Side.'²⁷ The article praised the traditional flavour and decor of the restaurant: seltzer, *shmaltz*, pickles – all the 'characteristic tone and flavor' that anyone could expect from a Jewish restaurant. And yet, the article notes, 'the native language of the Parkway's chef is Spanish,' and, 'the restaurant is not strictly kosher...'

This obituary-style food review of Jewish restaurants on the Lower East Side became a genre in New York newspapers. In 1964, one article introduced the 'once almost entirely Jewish-owned' stores and pushcarts, now perfumed by the combination of 'fried enchiladas, baked matzos and pizzas and rotting garbage.'²⁸ It describes the Chinese laundry, Jewish wine merchant, and Spanish grocery right next to each other, and the Jewish peddlers who call out in Spanish to attract the new customer base. From an article in 1983: 'the formerly Jewish Lower East Side.'²⁹ From an article in 1991: 'The Lower

East Side, once virtually a Jewish enclave...³⁰ The death rattle was interminable: half a century of 'the once-Jewish Lower East Side.' How did one ethnic group get such a hold over the gastronomic imagination of a neighbourhood? Partly through the constant return of Jewish visitors and tourists – the survival of Jewish restaurants long after the neighbourhood had changed, attests to this fact. But also because the mythology was adopted by the neighbourhood's new residents. That chef at the Parkway didn't open a Spanish restaurant, he took over a Jewish one. And perhaps most importantly, journalists, authors, and film-makers continued to explore the 'Jewish Lower East Side' and perpetuate its mythology long after the justification for that title had gone.

Some food journalists picked up on the exodus before others. In 1979, for instance, Mimi Sheraton recommended three restaurants in New York for the best pastrami, and only one was on the Lower East Side. Five more delis are rated average to excellent, and none of them is on the Lower East Side.³¹ That became typical: an obligatory Lower East Side recommendation or two, and then on to more interesting neighbourhoods. Even restaurant categories that once belonged to the Lower East Side (delis, cafeterias, dairies) began to be stocked with recommendations from further afield. By the 1980s and 1990s, very few restaurants on the Lower East Side were even mentioned at all. The neighbourhood mostly made the news for its crime and violence. Rather than the *Times* dining section, it began to come up only in real estate: a cheap neighbourhood, but just too rough.³²

It is surprising that the Jewish Lower East Side lasted so long. In 1892, seventy-five per cent of New York's Jewish population lived on the Lower East Side. By 1916, that number was down to twenty-three per cent, and by 1994, only one quarter of one per cent.³³ Today, the core of the neighbourhood is split almost evenly among white, Hispanic, and Chinese residents. The population of the neighbourhood under eighteen years old, however, is about half Hispanic, a third Asian, and less than a tenth white. Half of the residents of the historic Lower East Side are on income support.³⁴

There is a tension between this low-income population of the neighbourhood and the incoming, gentrifying class. Rents began to go up by half, then double, then triple in the last ten years.³⁵ In real estate articles, the recently gritty Lower East Side was now offered up as a too-expensive version of Greenpoint. The median per-square-foot price for condos in the Lower East Side was \$1,020 as of January 2012.³⁶ The increase in retail value of the neighbourhood has fuelled (and is fuelled in turn by) a renaissance in the Lower East Side food scene.

Around the turn of the millennium, Ratner's Dairy Restaurant closed and 71 Clinton Fresh Food opened. The former represented the old-world Lower East Side, the latter the new. Ratner's could no longer sustain enough regular customers to remain open ('People come here every two years, it doesn't do it,' said the owner as the restaurant closed.)³⁷ 71 Clinton, meanwhile, was attracting uptown visitors into the still-seedy Lower East Side every night.

Restaurant owners – like artists and students – are part of a frontiers-men class of neighbourhood development. They are on the lookout for the next neighbourhood, the cheapest rents near the most people. In the late nineties and the first years of the 'noughts', the Lower East Side was that neighbourhood. According to the *New York Times*, there was drug traffic and crime all over Clinton Street as late as 1999, 'but it wasn't until 71 Clinton Fresh Food made its debut in October 1999 that the changes on the street became visible...'³⁸

Nowadays, the restaurants recommended by guides and reviewers are very rarely

Jewish. In 2006, the *Times* began an article about restaurants on the Lower East Side by obligatorily recounting its Jewish history, but then recommending an Italian restaurant, a French café, an upscale/seasonal comfort food restaurant, a fusion restaurant, and one called 'Zucco Le French Diner,' which is reminiscent of Calvin Trillin's hypothetical Maison de la Casa House.³⁹ Food on the Lower East Side is back on the map, but in a whole new way. A new community has finally revived the neighbourhood's status as a food destination, but it is a community defined by wealth more than ethnicity or religion. It is defined by the kind of tourist who can afford the Thompson LES hotel on Allen Street (rooms start at \$375 a night) or the \$3 fresh candies at the recently opened Christian Vautier Le Concept.⁴⁰

NINE BLOCKS

Histories of the Lower East Side have tended to be too broad or too narrow: either a full demographic overview, or an anecdotal history of the few individuals who kept detailed records or memoirs. Within the study of food, there may not be a single analytical, data-based history of this neighbourhood. It is easy to understand why. Pushcarts and basement restaurants don't tend to come up in business records. Journalistic accounts of the neighbourhood have always been attracted to the iconic – not the everyday – food establishments.

But that is no reason to ignore what data is available. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, *Trow's Business Directory of Greater New York* listed businesses of all types by their address. In the twentieth century, reverse phone directories did the same. Though many of the food establishments on the Lower East Side were the kind of itinerant fly-by-night operations that wouldn't subscribe to *Trow's* (or own a phone until late in the twentieth century) there is still much that can be learned from what businesses are listed.

The nine-block area from Allen Street on the west to Essex Street on the east, from Delancey on the south to Houston on the north, offers a good representative sample of the Lower East Side. From the time of Kleindeutschland to today, it has been within the accepted boundaries of the neighbourhood. In fact, today, it is most of the neighbourhood – or at least the historic zone. Early street maps of New York from the turn of the twentieth century show that the house numbers haven't changed in that area, so addresses listed in old directories are still valid today.

In 1898, there were twenty-two restaurants and nine deli-cateassens listed in *Trow's* directory in those nine blocks. Almost all of the owners' names are German, some German-Jewish: Beitz, Brandstaedter, Costink, Kutner, Steiner, Wolf, and Gruenspan, for example. One notable exception is an oyster saloon owned by John Dew – harking back to an even earlier era when oysters were a popular and inexpensive New York treat.

By 1912, John Dew's oyster saloon was gone, and there were thirty-three restaurants and twelve delicatessens in the nine-block area. The names Iceland and Katz show up for the first time, at 207 Houston Street – they were the original owners of the still-present Katz's. Abraham Schwebel's dairy restaurant is on the map, at 191 Houston, as is Isaac Berger's smoked-fish shop at 187 Orchard. The names are more diverse, representing all the Eastern European immigrants that have settled in the neighbourhood: Karneol, Zimmerman, Smul, Edelstein, Weiss, Racow, Blachman, and Schor.

The *Manhattan Address Directory* from the summer of 1929 is even more comprehensive. The neighbourhood hadn't changed much since 1912 – Jewish immigration had only just begun to decline, and the Puerto Rican and Chinese

immigration hadn't yet begun. There are seven food establishments on Allen between Rivington and Stanton, including Sam Barlia's luncheonette, the Allen Boulevard Cafe, and the Old Roumanian Restaurant. On Delancey, between Allen and Orchard, there are two restaurants and Abraham Unger's dry foods store. On the same street, between Ludlow and Essex, there is the French Roumanian Restaurant, the Melrose Cafeteria, and the Pageant Tea Garden, as well as a candy store owned by Pincus and Sachin.

Essex Street has seven food establishments (including a smoked fish store at 131 Essex), while Ludlow has seventeen (including three butchers and a deli). Stanton has eight (mostly butchers and grocers), and Rivington has thirteen – a remarkable number given how short the street is, and how few stores are there today. Houston Street is just as short in this neighbourhood, but has eighteen food establishments, eleven between Allen and Orchard alone. They include J. Feldstein's smoked-fish store, Joel Russ's imported mushrooms (the founder of the still-present Russ & Daughters), H. Tananbaum's bakery, and the Spitz brothers' dairy restaurant. Down the road, Katz's deli and Schwebel's dairy restaurant were still at the same locations. You could do all your grocery-shopping and restaurant-going on this tiny street.

Orchard Street, however, was the real destination for food on the Lower East Side. Two blocks on that street, from Rivington north to Houston, contained an astounding forty-four places to buy or eat food. It's worth going into detail, to show what a food-oriented neighbourhood the Lower East Side was at the time. It's clear evidence that the zone was more than just a residential slum – this amount of food had to be for visitors, too; this was a food destination. Starting at Rivington and walking north on Orchard, a hungry traveller could begin at house number 143, at B. Gartenberg's delicatessen. It was in the same building as the Imperial Fish Packing Company, and next door to two butchers and a grocer. The Zuckers sold poultry at 145 Orchard, where the Rosenzweigs sold fish. S. Zuckman down the road at 149 also sold fish, and Morris Fenster's grocery was in between the two. If the first two stores didn't have the fish you wanted, J. Honig's store was next door, and S. Schwartz sold poultry from 151 Orchard. Dora Dorfman had a grocery, and Jacob Greenberg had a butcher shop (Gutwetter & Greenberg). A poultry shop, four butchers, and a smoked fish shop were all between 162 and 170 Orchard. There was a dairy restaurant right before you got to Stanton Street. Across the street, the poultry shops started up again, a couple of houses down from the Orchard Roumanian Pickle Works. Oskar Koffler had a grocery next to H. Katz's butcher shop, which was just down the block from A. Rubin's chicken market and J. Greenbaum's butcher shop. Jaffe Fish Market and Max Hellman's poultry store were at 182 and 185 Orchard, respectively. There was a butcher shop and delicatessen in 187 Orchard, and a caterer (Mrs Hilda Bauer) next door. You could get more poultry at the Pitt St. Live Poultry Company, and eggs at I. Zuckerman & Son. Another butcher shop, three more poultry shops, two more fish-markets, and P. Feinenbaum's fruit store round out the street. And those are just the stores that had telephones in 1929. S. Shulman's sign-painting operation on the corner of Orchard and Houston must have been very busy.

Thirty years later, the street had cleared out. In the winter of 1959, there were only ten food businesses on those same two blocks of Orchard. Most of the businesses were still owned by Eastern European Jews, but the residential part of the neighbourhood was very different. For instance, in both 1929 and 1959, Allen Street was the place to go for quilts and neckwear. In the earlier years, the shops were owned by the Biedermans, the Spitzers, the Gersteins and the Nadlers. In the later years, they were owned by the Schillers, Schachters, Levines and Bergs. But the non-commercial listings showed a

changing neighbourhood: in 1929, the residents that lived between 123 and 127 Allen were: David Lilian, Vincent Vitale, J. Biederman, and Benjamin Nadler. In 1959: Hsien Kung Sung, Ging Song Chow, Ning Ying Ah, Kud Chung Chai, Ming Fa Just, C. Liang Cheng, C. Long Foo, and more.

It's the same for the rest of the neighbourhood, which fits in with anecdotal and demographic analyses. The period of Jewish settlement was over, and the diaspora from the Lower East Side was already well underway. But somehow, the retail and food businesses remained in Jewish hands, and kept the myth of the Jewish Lower East Side alive. The cafeterias and delis of the twenties were still there – and would remain for another forty years; but the families were gone.

Today, their businesses are gone, too. Houston Street puts on a good face: Yonah Shimmel's knishery, Russ & Daughters appetizing store, Katz's Delicatessen. Behind that facade, however, the neighbourhood food establishments are far more likely to be upscale bistros and cheap bodegas than Jewish cafés or delis.

There are thirteen restaurants on Allen Street today. They include a hip Swedish café, a vegan restaurant, a café/political activist centre, a sports bar, a new Blue Ribbon sushi, and a 'New American' restaurant, under construction. Much of the street, however, is empty. There are empty lots and retail-less residential buildings for most of Allen between Rivington and Delancey. There is, of course, a Starbucks.

Apart from the Starbucks, the only other 'restaurants' on Delancey are a McDonald's and a Popeye's with Chinese signs. The once food-centred Orchard Street is now almost entirely devoted to cheap luggage and leather. There is a self-described beer garden (harking back to the days of Kleindeutschland) between 189 and 193 Orchard, but it's really just another sports bar.

Ludlow Street reveals the trendy/residential divide in the neighbourhood: there is the fashionable Spitzer's restaurant, but also the restaurant El Sombrero. There are creperies and organic cafés, but also bodegas and cheap pubs. Essex Street is the same: there are \$1 pizza slice joints and \$4 pint bars, but also a very hip restaurant called Sons of Essex, and a bar that serves \$9 cocktails in Mason jars.

The divide is even more pronounced at the retail and food stands in the Essex Street market. It abuts the nine-block area, and houses the vendors who once upon a time would have pushed carts down the streets. The market was created by Mayor LaGuardia after he got rid of the pushcarts, thinking that merchants would create a better image for NYC.⁴¹ Today, it serves a mixed demographic, like the neighbourhood around it. There are restaurants, grocery stores, butcher shops and cheese stores in the market – as well as a barber shop and a tailor. At the grocery, you can get yellow *yautia*, *yampi*, *malanga*, white *yautia*, *yucca*, or *bacalao*. It's located right next to Anne Saxelby Cheesemongers, 'Purveyors of Fine American Farmstead Cheese.' The same kind of customer divide is visible in the two butcher shops, and the customers who patronize them. One is called the Heritage Meat Shop, and offers *culatello*, prosciutto, date and fig salami, truffle sausage, and \$14/lb. brand-name bacon. Fifteen feet away, Luis Meat Market has bilingual signs: 'Centre cut pork chops/*Chuleta del centro*', '*Masa de Cerdo*/Fresh butt'. They have tripe, giant cow's feet, gizzards, necks, and blood sausage for \$4.69/lb. Both butcher shops have pigs' feet. At Luis Meat Market, they are for sale; at Heritage Meat Shop, they are just for decoration (one has a little placard attached: 'Try the rest of my body!').

It's a neighbourhood divided: the old Jewish establishments, the predominantly Chinese and Hispanic residents, and the incoming forces of uptown gentrification.

Houston Street today is one of the best examples of this. A Ray's Pizza, a bodega, a Turkish kebab joint, and an Army/Navy surplus store cater to the lower-income residents that make up the neighbourhood. The trendy Sugar Café and innovative Laboratorio del Gelato get away with juices and tiny cups of ice cream for \$4. Il Laboratorio is located next to the Ludlow luxury apartments (one of the three tallest buildings in the neighbourhood; the other two are both luxury hotels). Customers can choose from flavours such as sweet potato, tarragon pink pepper, honey lavender, or black mission fig. There is a Blue Bottle Coffee stand within the store, with a detailed menu describing what the baristas will and will not do: 'We always pull a double ristretto espresso,' 'We don't serve an iced macchiato,' 'Customers often ask for it without milk, but it isn't advised'..., etc. The last old-world establishments on the block are Katz's deli and the fourth-generation family-owned Russ & Daughters. ONE STORE

Mark Federman doesn't run his grandfather's store any longer. Now it belongs to his daughter and his nephew. Still, he can't help playing the manager whenever he visits, which is as often as he can. He stands in the centre of the store and holds court, chatting with passing customers, nagging current employees, and giving brief histories of his store and the neighbourhood it represents.

Russ & Daughters began as a pushcart. Joel Russ started selling food on the street in 1907, using fish from his sister's herring business. He expanded to dried mushrooms from a horse-drawn cart, and then a candy shop in Brooklyn. In 1914, he came back to the Lower East Side to open Russ's Cut-Rate Appetizers, after buying out Isaac Berger's smoked fish store at 187 Orchard. He ran the business for decades, eventually moving the store to its current location on East Houston, and enlisting his three daughters (after whom he renamed the business). Joel wasn't an easy man to work with, and one of his daughters eventually moved away from him and the store. Mark remembers his own mother, who stuck around, having to sneak away to Abraham Schwebel's business down the road for bananas and sour cream. (Her father insisted that the family ran a food store, and that they should only eat there.)

Joel had started the business because he had to. Opening a pushcart, then a storefront, then a bigger store, was how you made a living on the Lower East Side. If you were lucky, it was also how you eventually were able to escape. He hadn't made it out by the time his daughters took over, so they were forced to keep up the family business as well. By the time Mark was raised, though, the family was doing well. He went to graduate school, and joined an uptown law firm.

At this point, the Russes had followed the established pattern of Jewish immigration in New York: move into the Lower East Side, open a store or restaurant, get out by the second or third generation. In 1978, Mark broke the pattern, and left his firm to take over the family business. There was something romantic about the store to him, though he wasn't misty-eyed about the surroundings. From the time he took over until the late nineties, Mark hated what was happening to the Lower East Side. Even when he remembers that time period today, he can't help explicitly describing the neighbourhood: 'It was shitty,' he'll say or, 'It was awful. The shittiest.'

Long-time Russ & Daughters customers had been asking Mark for years why he didn't follow them uptown. He'd always responded glibly: 'Uptown will come back downtown.' Over the last fifteen years, he's been proven right. Now there are developers approaching Mark from luxury boutiques and expensive hotels. The Thompson Hotel purchased air rights from around the neighbourhood to build higher, though Mark

refused to sell. He says they offered him hundreds of thousands of dollars, but that he couldn't stand to see them take over the neighbourhood. 'So now they've got only twenty-three floors instead of twenty-six or something,' he says, half-proud, half-weary.

The incoming youth and money has shifted his customer base. He used to get old Jewish women who would come in and order a half of a quarter of a fish and then tell him he was ripping them off. He's collected together many of his memories in the recently published *The House That Herring Built*. He says that one old woman came up to him while the store was packed and pointed right at him: 'You! Get behind the counter and make me a herring!' When he tells the story, he lays on a thick Yiddish accent: 'I vant you should make me a herring!' Russ & Daughters adheres to a strict system of ticketing to get served: you get a number, you wait your turn. It was clear to Mark that this woman had never, and would never, take a number at Russ & Daughters.

Today, though, he gets young, wealthy customers who are thrilled to take part in a piece of New York, Jewish culinary history. He says he gets people who are honoured just to be served at Russ & Daughters. They buy up whole platters of prepared foods for their brunches. They see the equally priced smoked sable and smoked whitefish, and have no idea that sable is supposed to be a cheap substitute for whitefish. They love the wasabi-infused roe. One of these customers was standing next to Mark as he tasted a new product they had just gotten in: wild Baltic salmon. He highly recommended it – it's some of the best salmon they get, and they don't get it in often – but she was sceptical. It was far paler than the bright orange salmon surrounding it, though Mark explained that that was because most salmon eat krill, while the Baltic fish got fat off of herring. 'You'd be pale too if all you ate was herring.'

Even though the employees no longer work for him, they still look up to Mark – and he still bosses them around. One had just become a father, and pulled out his phone to show Mark photos of his newborn. Mark has been looking at employees' baby photos for decades now. 'You're in for a rough twenty years!' he said, then added, 'Maybe he'll grow up to slice fish.' 'I hope not,' said the employee, and Mark looked genuinely hurt. There was a pause, then the employee added that it was only because he needed his kid to pay for his retirement. Mark laughed and lit up again, 'Your 401(k)!'

He turned to another employee to ask for coffee. Though the man behind the counter spoke perfect English, Mark attempted Spanish: 'Por favor, dos cafés. Una media taza. Negra. Una media, para me, con leche, sin grasso.' He sighed, 'Did I say any of that right?' Over coffee, he kept it up. He couldn't stop staring at a misaligned photo stuck to the fridge. He wanted to fix it – or, more accurately, he wanted it fixed. He finally got someone to straighten it on the fridge, then remove it from the fridge when it wasn't straight enough, then take the glue off the fridge where the photo had left a mark. When the employee tried to rub it off, he watched: 'No scratching!' he yelled. 'Don't scratch it off!' She groaned, 'Mark, I've got work to do.'

I told him that I would love to run a store like this one day, where customers come in and chat with the proprietor. He immediately got defensive: 'This took one hundred years to make!' I wanted to get that chronology straight, so I asked him when his daughter took over from him. He took a deep breath and told me that that was a long story. I wanted to assure him that it didn't have to be; I was just looking for a date. But he began a tale that stretched back to a farm in Poland in the nineteenth century and lingered in Brooklyn during the Depression. When we finally got to his daughter, he told me that she had wanted to work for a non-profit after college. He thought this was crazy. His family motto is: 'From where do we take our living?' When bankers told his

grandfather that they were going to repossess his home or his business, he gave them the home. 'From where do we take our living? A non-profit? We take our living from profit!' He told her. By the time we changed topics, I realized that he had never told me when his daughter inherited the store.

I was busy ordering a sesame bagel with Scotch salmon and scallion cream cheese, and he was busy correcting a patron's pronunciation. They were saying the Jewish pastry, *rugelach*, like the Italian salad green, arugula. '*Ruggeluh!*' Mark yelled. 'It's *ruggeluh!*' Mark loves his job. The whole difference, as he sees it, is that his mom and his grandfather had to run the business, while he chose to. The store is very successful now: he can afford to be nostalgic, to be an icon, to participate in the on-going mythologizing of the neighbourhood and its food. He thinks that for Americans, the Lower East Side is the Jewish homeland more than Israel is. His store, he said (and then he apologized for his word choice) is its Mecca. When I told him that I would be spending the next four months on a cow and chicken farm in Virginia, he got worried. 'What are you doing? You don't belong there! You ought to work in an appetizing store.' I told him no luck; I was committed. He leaned in close to whisper: 'I'll send you herring.'

NOTES

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