

TALK WITH YOUR MOUTH FULL

APPETIZING CONVERSATION

Brooklyn's mishpokhe circle to discuss the stuff you eat with bagels.

BY RACHEL WHARTON

"You are here not to eat for fun," Mark Federman warned the group assembled in his classic Park Slope brownstone. "Everybody's got a story about appetizing, and you're here to tell it. This," he added with an ominous wave of a finger, "is not a party."

Those who've met Federman—and many have, across the counter at Russ & Daughters in Manhattan's Lower East Side—will know he was kidding. At least a little: as the third generation to run the famous food shop (his daughter Nikki now the fourth) he takes food very seriously.

Now some of you—even those who love the Sunday bagel with a scallion schmear and lox—might not be exactly sure what appetizing even means. For starters, baffled goyim, we're talking about the noun, not the adjective: appetizing is that Sunday bagel, not the delicious way it looks. So for those readers who grew up, say, Episcopalian in Alabama or Catholic in Boston or even Jewish in Atlanta, think of appetizing as the opposite of the heavy, meaty, sit-down meal of a Jewish delicatessen. In fact, the physical separation of these two stores was originally created for Kosher dietary laws requiring fish and dairy to be sold apart from all those briskets, corned beefs and pastramis.

The bagel-friendly spread Federman had assembled in his spectacular, sunlit dining room was meant as a lure, as brain food at this working brunch for Brooklyn's best and brightest Jewish palates.

Like those briskets, appetizing foods—chewy, fist-sized bagels, the cream cheese spreads, the pickles and dried fruits and caviars, the smoked fish and wet-cured salmon called lox, the whitefish salads, the herrings either in cream sauce, pickled, or pure—were brought to Brooklyn by Eastern European Jews in the early 19th century. They were traditionally eaten for breakfast or lunch, today more often as a special treat on weekends. Federman calls appetizing "that combination of smoke, salt, pickle and sweet," but most folks just call it the stuff you eat with bagels.

And the bagel-friendly spread Federman had assembled that morning in his spectacular, sunlit dining room—all from Russ

& Daughters, of course—was meant as a lure, as brain food at this working brunch for Brooklyn's best and brightest Jewish palates: the food writers and cookbook authors Arthur Schwartz and Melissa Clark; Rainbow Room restaurateur Michael Whiteman and his wife and cookbook author, Rozanne Gold; Brooklyn College professor and food sociologist Annie Hauck-Lawson; publisher and biographer Larry Freundlich; restaurant consultant Eddie Schoenfeld; cookbook editor Pamela Krauss; and a handful of husbands, wives and significant others pleased to position themselves in the background over the trays of pickled herring and cinnamon babka.

What these native Brooklynites were hoping to uncover was memories, both old and new, of appetizing—specifically in a changing borough where scores of appetizing shops have dwindled to just a handful, those left mainly in isolated Orthodox neighborhoods.

So if you know any Brooklyn Jews, you'll know the toughest part of the morning was getting them to stop talking: about the best type of pickle ("small crispy sours," said Melissa Clark), the social meaning of that extra quarter pound of smoked fish, which, says Arthur Schwartz, is all about letting other families know you can afford it. And about long-gone smoked fish and sweets emporiums at the now Caribbean corners of Caton and Clarkson Avenues, the ones along Kings Highway, or Flaum on Havemeyer Street. That's where, said Ed Schoenfeld, "I always had my hand in the jelly rings."

They talked about the confusion over smoked salmon, which is actually smoked salmon, and lox, which is salmon that has been cured in a salty brine. Then, of course, there's pickled lox, which is lox that's doused with pickling spices.

Ed Schoenfeld: "There was only lox."

Michael Whiteman: "We didn't know from that, we only got lox."

Arthur Schwartz: "Even when you wanted smoked salmon, you got salty lox."

Mark Federman: "Of course if you ask the Russ family, we invented pickled lox."

They uncovered a father's battle for supremacy over the lox slicer, even though he likely had never sliced his own lox in his lifetime.





Previous and left: Loxapalooza. Top: Annie Hauck-Lawson reminisces with Ed Schoenfeld. Above: The Federmans hosted the meeting of the mouths.

Ed Schoenfeld: “It’s like the man’s role as the barbecue chef.”

Arthur Schwartz: “This guy’s been cutting fish for 40 years, you had to tell him ‘thinner.’ You had to show off your managerial skills.”

They hit on homemade pickled herring, and its, er, wonderfully pungent smell.

Michael Whiteman: “Does anybody remember a grandmother with a crock?”

Mark Federman: “My grandmother had a barrel.”

Michael Whiteman: “If you think appetizing smells bad!”

Annie Hauck-Lawson: “I learned from my mom who’s 84 how to fillet a schmaltz herring and how to make a cream sauce.”

Mark Federman: “Ooh, we don’t even do that anymore.”

Michael Whiteman: “I could never understand why you would get pickled herring and prunes in the same place.”

And on the unspoken customs of ordering and eating smoked fish, which are deep-seated, wide-ranging and far more important than you’d think.

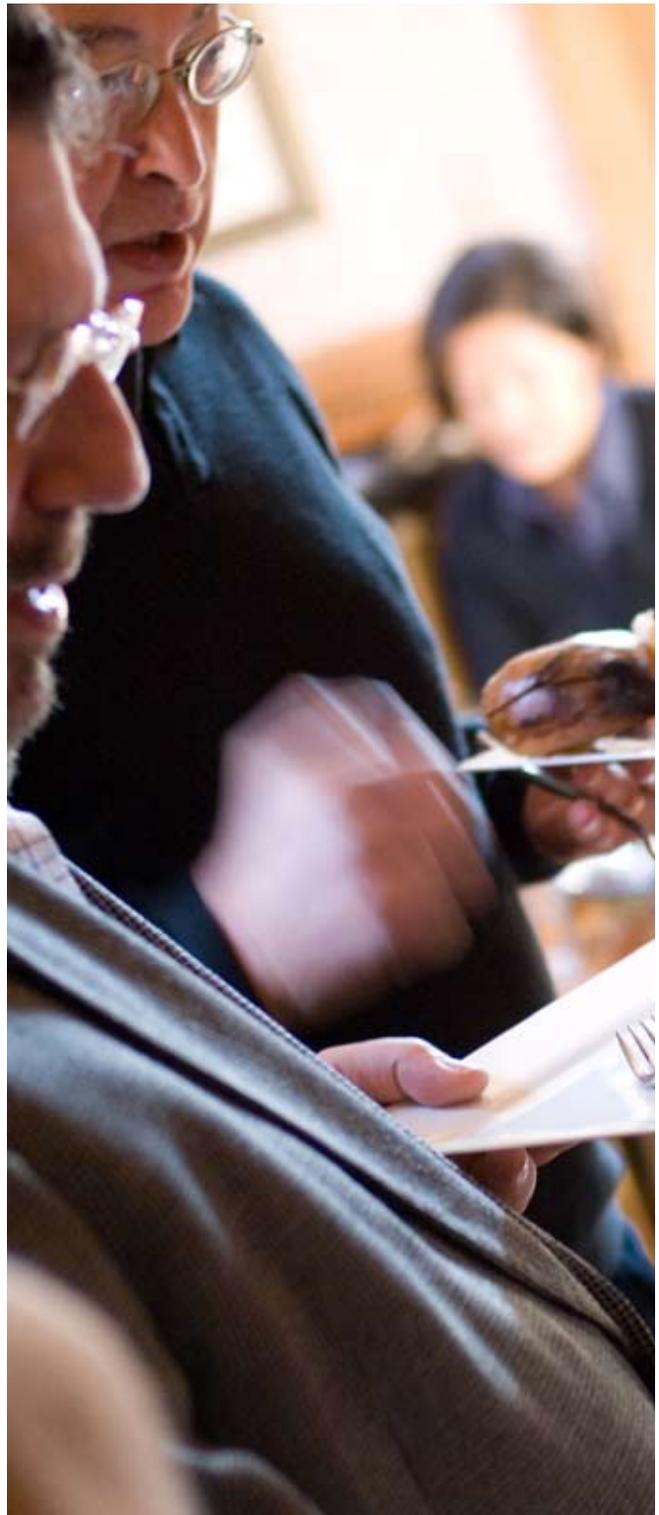
Arthur Schwartz: “I think appetizing is a social thing. If you had half a pound of Nova you’re better than the guy behind you who only bought one-quarter pound of lox.”

Melissa Clark: “My father always bought three-eighths of a pound.”

Larry Freundlich: “My mother came in about 1923 from Austria, and my father had originally come from Hamburg. They spoke to each other only in one tone of voice, which was anger. There was only one occasion that would get these people together as Jews, and that was over smoked fish.”

And not surprisingly with this crowd, there were complaints, too—starting with the death of good bagels (they’re now too big and soft), the dearth of bialys, and, mourned Larry Freundlich, the fact that, like so many other foods before it, appetizing has moved from the everyday food of the working class immigrant to something fancy for those special, once-or-twice-a-year occasions—the foods bought by wealthy Brooklynites from Blue Apron, Fairway or Lassen & Hennings.

And as the group—at last, well appetized and deep in reverie—moved from herring to chocolate rugelach and slivers of cinnamon babka, they realized that even the negative memories of



appetizing are worth their weight in, well, Russ & Daughter's famous lox. Take the sometimes snarky give and take, said Freundlich, between the appetizing shopkeep and the customer.

"I wanted it to be contentious. I wanted somebody to be mean to me," he remembered, "I know that changes the taste of the food."

"Whenever I think perhaps that I am not Jewish," he added, just before the last cups of coffee were poured and the leftovers packed for lucky guests to carry home, "all I have to do is walk into an appetizing store, and I realize I am." 🍷

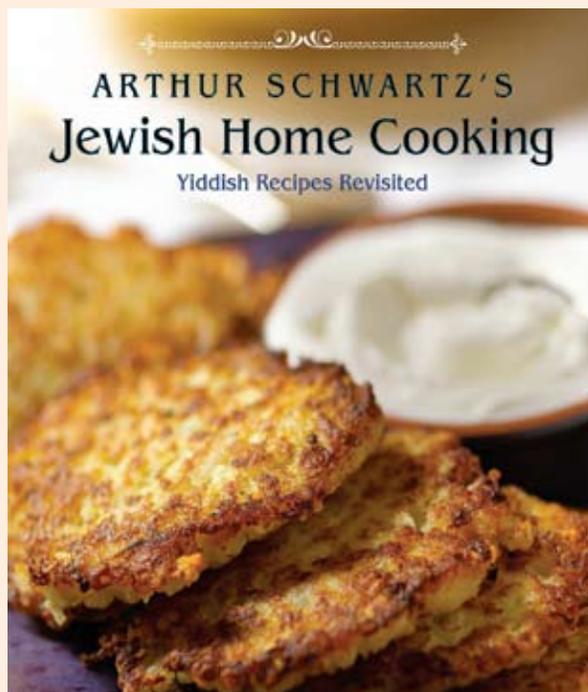


THE KEYS TO LOX

"Listen," writes food maven Arthur Schwartz, "you can still get a great pastrami sandwich in New York City. And, if you look hard, you can get an excellent and restorative bowl of chicken soup with matzo balls. But by and large the foods that everyone thinks of as Jewish—the foods that connect us to our past—have almost disappeared from public eating places."

So in his new book, *Jewish Home Cooking: Yiddish Recipes Revisited* (Ten Speed Press), he sets out to save them for generations of Brooklynites to savor.

He's collected recipes from his own family memories, as well a cheat sheet of the city's greatest Jewish restaurant and supermarket trips—many right here in Brooklyn. Luckily he's laid out the classics you know (chopped liver, borscht, chicken soup) and the ones fewer and fewer of us have even tasted, like sweet-and-sour flanken, also known as short ribs, and shlishkas, something like a Yiddish version of gnocchi, anointed with a luscious coating of onion-and-breadcrumb-kicked schmaltz. —RW





LOX, EGGS AND ONIONS

From Arthur Schwartz's *Jewish Home Cooking*

Smart-aleck New Yorkers who enjoyed speaking lingo that tourists couldn't understand used to call lox, eggs, and onions "a Leo." By me, it is still lox, eggs, and onions, and one of the most sublime creations of the Yiddish kitchen. Well, maybe you had to grow up eating it, and to have an emotional attachment to it.

Lox, eggs and onions was the only thing my father, Larry, could cook, other than Broadcast corned beef hash and Campbell's tomato soup, both out of cans. He was precise and meticulous about it, too, as he was about everything. After soaking the lox in milk for 30 minutes to leach out some of the salt, he'd cut the lox into perfect squares, fluff the eggs with an egg beater (as he and I learned from his mother), and, with lots of bubbling butter in the pan, very slowly drag the eggs around the pan to form large curds. I still make scrambled eggs this way, although with less butter. And I still soak salty lox in milk to leach out some of its salt. "Why not use smoked salmon?" I have been asked. Because it's not at all the same taste. I like it, but it's not the same.

For some unfathomable reason, some people like this as a flat pancake-style omelet, essentially a frittata. Cook it that way if you must. Or, to serve it as an appetizer with drinks, make it as an omelet and then cut it into small squares. To me, this is breakfast-brunch food, to enjoy with a buttered bagel, bialy, or seeded roll, or maybe supper. On the other hand, I would find it a treat at dinnertime, too. The large range of the number of eggs to be used reflects this—use fewer for breakfast, more perhaps for other meals.

1/4 lb.	sliced lox
1 or 2 T	milk
3 or 4 T	butter
2	medium onions, cut into ¼-inch dice (about 2 c.)
8 to 12	eggs
	Freshly ground black pepper

Cut the lox slices into ¼- to ½-inch squares. Place the pieces in a small, shallow bowl, and cover with milk. Set aside to soak for 30 minutes.

In a 10" nonstick skillet, heat 3 tablespoons of the butter to bubbling over medium-high heat. Add the diced onions and fry, stirring frequently, until they are wilted, about 5 minutes. Meanwhile, break the

eggs into a mixing bowl. When the onions are cooked, scrape them into the eggs. Drain the lox, discarding the milk, and add the lox to the egg mixture. Stir to mix well.

Add the remaining 1 tablespoon butter, if desired, to the same nonstick pan used to cook the onions. Pour the egg mixture into the skillet and place over medium heat. Let the eggs set a few seconds. As the eggs cook, push them around the pan with a wooden spoon so as not to scratch the nonstick surface. First push them from the edge to the center, so you end up with large curds of scrambled eggs. I then shut off the heat and turn the curds over for a second. Cook to taste, either dry or slightly moist.

Serve immediately.

Serves 4.