



John J. Reddin's Faces of the City

Bagel-Shopper Learns Tradition of Passover



JOE, left, and ITSEY BRENNER WITH BAGELS

"The hard unyielding roll with the hole in the middle..."

By JOHN J. REDDIN

This truly is a holy season, full of spiritual tradition for Christians and Jews alike. Today is Good Friday and also the beginning of the Passover.

Like many persons, probably, we were only vaguely aware that Passover commemorates the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, their flight from slavery under the Pharaohs. Like Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, it is regarded as one of the high holy days by people of the Jewish faith.

Strangely enough, it was while shopping for bagels that we learned much about the Passover, especially the Seder service which is held on the first two nights of Passover.



CHARLES BRENNER

Jewish families the world over gather at a table set with symbolic foods while the head of the family leads the group in a centuries-old recitation of the Hagadah and each family commemorates its ancestors' dramatic flight across the Red Sea.

For many years, ever since we acquired a taste for bagels (warmed in the oven and served with butter and strawberry preserves, along with our breakfast coffee), we have been fascinated by the matzo balls, borscht, gefilte fish and other kosher products with Hebrew printing on the labels at Brenner Brothers Bakery & Delicatessen, Empire Way and East Cherry Street.

FOR MORE THAN 62 years, we should explain, the Brenner bakery-delicatessen has been a Seattle landmark. Homeowners drive from all parts of the city for its hearth-baked sourdough or rye bread, especially transplanted Easterners in search of old-fashioned pumpernickel or "black" bread, bagel and lox and other Jewish delicatessen products that are commonplace in many cities but sometimes difficult for newcomers to find in Seattle.

It probably is the busiest and most informal bake shop in Seattle. Everybody is on a first-name basis—customers, clerks and owners alike. As far as we can determine, Charlie, Itsey and Joe Brenner own the place. Their sister, Yetta, waits on customers. So does a cousin, Esther Vinikow, who has worked at the bakery since she was 12.

Martha Steiner, who owned the Bohemian Bakery at 34th Avenue and East Union Street for 15 years, and Marie Holstad, who operated the Three Girls' Bakery in the Pike Place Market for many years, also are clerks in the store, and probably are as well known to customers as any of the Brenner family.

BUSINESS IS CARRIED on with a maximum of frenetic activity and owner-customer repartee. At one side of the store, away from the mainstream of customer traffic, are a coffee maker, styrofoam cups and several tables and chairs where customers (and usually one or more of the owners) can eat a slice of apple strudel or corned-beef sandwich on rye.

The other day, while fueling up on a pastrami (thinly sliced but piled high almost an inch thick) sandwich and coffee with Joe Brenner, we noticed that the store seemed even busier than usual.

"Passover begins Friday evening at sundown," Joe explained. "Jewish customers from all over the city are buying their matzo meal (for making the flourless dishes eaten during the eight days of Passover) and bitter herbs, the horseradish they grind from the roots floating in these barrels."

The Hebrew printing on many of the packages and cans, Joe explained, is "the kosher l'Pesach," meaning the product has been approved by a Rabbinical council, complies with dietary laws and can be eaten by Orthodox Jews during Passover.

"Like all observing Jews, we will close up shop entirely during the first two days of Passover, just like on Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah," Charlie Brenner said. "And for the other five days, we will just bake for the wholesale trade. No buying of bread is done during the eight days of Passover, but you should be here the night Passover ends. You can't get into the place!"

"**PEOPLE WANT** bagels, rye bread and all the other things they have gone without during the Holy Days," said Itsey, who insists his given name is Biblical, and not a nickname.

It was the Brenners' father, the late Abe Brenner, who baked the first bagel in Seattle (1925). The very first bagel, however, according to a scholarly text entitled, "The Bagel: Friend or Foe?," published in 1886 was invented accidentally by the Neanderthal cave man as a weapon of defense."

Of the bagel, the text says: "The cementlike object was hurled at the enemy. If it did not kill the enemy, it stunned him; and if it did not stun him, then its delicious aroma so intrigued the adversary that he sampled it on the spot, thereby making capture inevitable."

"Among Neanderthals, the bagel was called 'the pacifier,'" Essen und Fressen, a book published many years ago in Germany, says.

More recently, Dr. George Connors, professor of ancient history at Stanford University, called attention to Democritus' account of meteoric findings in ancient Greece in the fourth century B. C.

"Democritus tells us of small meteoric specimens examined by Brasidas of Mitylene, including a piece somewhat the shape of a doughnut," Dr. Connors reported.

"**BRASIDAS PRESENTED** this rock to his baker as a gentle means of chiding him for the hardness of his breads. The baker got back at Brasidas by producing an unsweetened doughnut that compared very favorably with the tiny meteorite in impenetrability. Brasidas liked the meteoric doughnut and ordered several dozen more."

Joe Brenner said: "In Greece, bagels are called 'bah-grat;' Russians say 'Bublichki,' and Polish people call them 'baronki.' Mostly, they are similar to the original, old-fashioned pretzel."

But, whether boon or bane, the "hard, unyielding roll with the hole in the middle" is here to stay—just like matzo balls, borscht, gefilte fish or hot pastrami sandwiches on rye...