

BAGELS ON THE BRAIN

Twenty years ago, bagel shops were popping up on street corners and in suburban shopping centers from coast to coast. Like all trends, bagels enjoyed their 15 minutes of fame and went back to being a New York thing. Now, a new generation of bagel makers is putting their spin on this deli and bakery staple. Bagels are back in a big way!

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Over New Year's, Jessica and I visited friends in Connecticut. We hadn't seen Matt and Sarah Jordan since the onset of the pandemic, so a visit was long overdue. Originally from New York, they're serious foodies who know a good bagel when they see one. In fact, they're members of a bi-weekly bagel subscription from Popup Bagels in Redding, Connecticut. Fortunately, we happened to be there on the "right" Saturday.

If a bagel subscription sounds like a CSA for freshly baked carbs, it is, but nonetheless, I immediately loved the idea. Popup Bagels bakes more than 400 dozen bagels over the course of a weekend and on the morning of January 1, we ended up with five of them. Yes, you read that correctly – five dozen. A comedy of what some might mistakenly refer to as "errors" led to the order being filled with five dozen bagels. Fortunately, Sarah's parents arrived to help us and Matt and Sarah's three-year-old celebrate the New Year with bagels.

THE SELECTION was outstanding. Because of the quantity, individually we had boundless options, slicing bagels in half and then quartering each segment in order to explore fantastic options. The plain bagels allowed us to experiment with sweet or savory combinations. Some bagels had flaky Maldon salt on top and could be enjoyed in either direction. The happy accident also included an assortment of more than a dozen house schmears or flavored varieties of butter, cream cheese and lox (smoked salmon). The cinnamon-raisin cream cheese was as rich as cheesecake. Truffle butter, dill butter, honey butter ... everything was divine.

For the more adventurous, trout roe and capers were side accouterments that infused bursts of tangy, umami flavor. Dill butter on a plain bagel with trout roe, lox and capers was out of this world, as robust, savory flavors balanced one another to perfection.

When our visit ended on Sunday, Sarah sent us home with eight bagels to freeze. They lasted about as long as our trip.

During the long drive home, I reminisced about some of the best bagels I'd ever had throughout my travels. Two destinations stood out, which I'll mention briefly. To my taste, bagels are worthy of a road trip, so if you are looking for an adventure, check these out.

Myer's Bagel Bakery Burlington, Vermont

The most unique bagel I've had thus far comes from this bakery in Vermont, where the bagels are honey-boiled and baked in a wood-fired oven on wood planks. Walking into the warm bakery on a cold, winter's morning



Top to bottom:

Myer's Bagel Bakery in Burlington, Vermont, boils their hand-rolled bagels in honey water before baking them in a wood-fired oven.

A bacon, egg and Cabot cheddar breakfast sandwich on a rosemary sea-salt bagel from the wood-fired oven at Myer's Bagel Bakery.

A custom-ordered "egg-everything" bagel sandwich with bacon, cheese and hash browns from Surf Bagel.





Clockwise from above:
Michelle Drobnak bakes, boils and tops yeast-risen bagels at Grand Central Bagel Café in Lancaster. The hole in the middle of each bagel harkens from practical, centuries-old use: bagels were stacked on wooden dowels for swift transportation and display. Grand Central Bagel Café's Long Island Lox bagel sandwich, with cream cheese, tomato and red onion. Mike Casertano and Evan Yoder of Water Street Mission collect leftover bagels donated by Grand Central Bagel Café. These bagels will help nourish 200 people staying at the WSM shelter plus another 50 to 80 in the community through meals served three times a week.



will warm your soul in more ways than one. The Jordans sent us to Myer's, which is located next to a glass-blowing workshop in a building that qualifies as a Vermont gem. In a state with unbelievable cheeses, Myer's bagels stand tall amidst epicurean delights. The aromas coming from the oven and the resulting flavors of the bagels are complex, tasty and divine.

The bakery's origin story is equally as memorable. Myer's was founded in 1996 by Lloyd Squires, who learned to make bagels as a homeless 15-year-old boy after a chance encounter with Myer Lefkowitz. A Holocaust survivor of the Buchenwald Nazi concentration camp, Lefkowitz later founded the famous St-Viateur Bagel in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Myersbagels.com.

Surf Bagel Lewes and Rehoboth, Delaware

Another divine indulgence is the egg-everything bagel made by Surf Bagel, with locations in Lewes and Rehoboth in Delaware. Founded by brothers Dave and Tom Vitella, their egg-everything bagels are further perfected as sandwiches filled with bacon, eggs, cheese, home fries and hot sauce. Surf Bagel carries an assortment of cream cheeses to "Wax up your Surf Bagel." I typically go the savory route, so strawberry and blueberry cream cheeses are favorites for a sweet departure. There's usually a long line of hungry folks in need of breakfast and coffee, especially on summer weekends when vacation rentals turn over. Waiting in line is well worth the rewards! Surfbagel.com.

Grand Central Bagel Café Lancaster

Upon returning home, I needed more bagels. Craving an egg-everything breakfast bagel sandwich, the closest thing I've found locally is from Grand Central Bagel Café on Centerville Road in Lancaster, where the bagel case is filled seven days a week. The menu offers an "egg" or an "everything" bagel, and their pancake bagel is a pure gem. Curious, I wanted to discover if an egg-everything bagel can be ordered. Not only that, but I also wanted to see how they're made, which is where baker and pastry chef Michelle Drobnak comes in.



Jordan Bush is a commercial photographer. His work has allowed him to discover and document cultures and food across five continents. A graduate of Garden Spot High School and Millersville University, Jordan and his fiancée, Jessica, reside and cook together in Ephrata.

Bagels served with cream cheese, capers, dill and lox (smoked salmon), served with Twining's English Breakfast tea. There are a plethora of opinions regarding the merits of toasting a bagel. If a bagel is fresh, toasting it could alter the texture and flavor. If it's not fresh, toasting a bagel could improve its taste and deliver a crunchy crust and soft interior. The SMEG toaster is from Zest! in Lititz.



For the past five years, Michelle has been one of Grand Central's hard-working bagel bakers. On this Monday morning, she had to navigate her Jeep through the snow as she made her way to work at 4:30 a.m. in order to prepare the day's bagels. Today she will boil and bake almost 60 trays of bagels, which equates to approximately 1,200 bagels. Remarkably, by the end of the week, daily production will double in order to meet demand.

BAGELS ARE TYPICALLY made of yeast, flour, salt, water and sugar or barley malt. Temperature and humidity affect how active yeast becomes in the dough, impacting the rise, size and texture. Being a cold, dry day, an extra step must be added: steaming the dough so that it will rise. "On a 100-degree day, we love it," says Michelle. "In the winter, we have to steam bagels. It takes a lot more effort." If yeast rises too quickly, bagels become too large and the texture will change, eventually becoming too dense.

In Grand Central's bakery, the temperature change throughout the room is astounding. Aside from the walk-in cooler that helps slow-rising yeast, a massive oven heated to 550 degrees warms the air in the room around it. The nearby steam kettle is rolling with boiling water. Constantly being filled via a faucet, the kettle produces heat and humidity, much of which is removed through an exhaust fan. Cooler air can be felt moving through the

kitchen and bakery because of customers entering through the front door. To find a consistent rise, Michelle rolls a cart over to the kettle to steam the bagels before putting them next to the warm oven. While those proof, risen bagels are flash boiled for 30 seconds to lock in a chewy crust with a glossy surface without setting the dough inside.

WHILE THE FIRST board of bagels boil, Michelle prepares wooden boards covered in burlap, which creates the signature texture on the bottom of the bagels. Toppings such as poppy and sesame seeds are sprinkled on the board for the bottoms before the flash-boiled bagels come out of the kettle. Toppings are added to the top side of the bagels before they're offloaded into the oven and placed on one of four rotating shelves wrapped in a burlap cloth, baking for 13 minutes.

As the oven rotates, bagels proof, while others boil. The work is dizzying, and Michelle is a one-woman army. She sets each subsequent batch of bagels in order within the oven, as each shelf starts baking at a separate time. This is another instance where humidity and room temperature can affect the bake and final product, leaving experience as the best guide. There is only one oven with four trays – "Your eyes are everywhere, constantly looking around at the oven, the kettle," says Michelle.

AS BAGELS ARE removed from the oven on a flat wooden peel, they go into wire baskets to cool. The baskets make for easy transport right into the display case. Chewy on the outside, soft on the inside, they're ready for schmears or to use as a sandwich. At the end of the day, Grand Central uses leftover bagels to make croutons and bagel chips. Leftovers are also donated to Water Street Mission.

To my extreme delight, I learned custom orders can be placed 24-48 hours in advance – and that includes ordering my coveted egg-everything bagel. There is no minimum order size and payment is taken at the time the order is placed.

If you buy a dozen (or five) and have a few leftovers, they can be cling wrapped and frozen in freezer bags. Reheating a bagel whole will help keep the texture chewy; toasting it changes the experience entirely. For day-old bagels, wet the bagel first with water or place it in a wet paper bag before reheating.

Sisters Emily and Eryn McCoy took ownership of Grand Central Bagel Café last year. Grand Central is celebrating its 27th anniversary this month and will be offering specials throughout March. They'll also be celebrating with green bagels – while supplies last – on St. Patrick's Day, March 17.

