

# Jewish cuisine punching above its paunch

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Originally intended for the Jewish community, bagels and smoked meat became a veritable symbol of Montreal in the 20th century. Professor Olivier Bauer, conducted a study on these two foods and recently presented the results of his research at the international conference Food Heritage, Hybridity & Locality at Brown University, Rhode Island. Credit: Taku, CC BY NC ND 2.0, <https://flic.kr/p/xVGXt>

"In the late 30s, you could get a smoked meat sandwich for five cents," said Olivier Bauer, a professor at the University of Montreal's Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. "Today, the sandwich is not cheap, but it has become a Montreal icon. The same is true for the bagel our city is famous for around the world." The researcher, who conducted a study on these two foods associated with Judaism, recently presented the results of his research at the international conference Food Heritage, Hybridity & Locality at Brown University, Rhode Island. His study is available on Papyrus. "Montreal's food heritage is influenced by Jewish cultural heritage," he said.

The first mention of the bagel, as traced by Bauer, is in a 1610 text in a sumptuary law from the city of Krakow. It was not until the late 19th century that the doughnut-shaped bread and smoked meat were introduced in Montreal by successive waves of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Most settled on St. Lawrence Boulevard, also known as the Main or Boulevard Saint Laurent. It was in fact the border between Montreal's Anglophone and Francophone communities - a strategic location that had a positive impact on a clientele from all backgrounds. "This neutral linguistic zone benefited business owners who were able to attract both Francophones from the east and Anglophones from the west," said Bauer.

"Smoked meat is to Montreal what pastrami is to New York and corned-beef is to Toronto," says the travel guide Le Routard, which invites tourists to taste smoked meat served on rye bread in several well-known Montreal restaurants, including Schwartz's and Lester's, two delicatessens founded between 1919 and 1957. Two other Jewish establishments in the heart of Mile-End, Fairmount Bagel and St-Viateur Bagel, also quickly made Montreal famous with their little round breads baked with naturally leavened dough. Open 24 hours a day and located two blocks from each other, Fairmount is more than 100 years old, while St-Viateur distributes its bagels on several continents.

So how did these delicacies find their way into our culinary heritage? "Bagels and smoked meat were originally intended for the Jewish immigrant community, but they soon became popular with workers who saw in them hearty and affordable food," said Professor Bauer.

The frequent mentioning of Jewish culinary specialties on the blog of the Vice-President of Tourisme Montréal and the remarks of authors Joe King and Pierre Anctil led Professor Bauer to focus on the bagel and smoked meat as objects of study. "It's as if the culinary heritage of Montreal corresponds almost exclusively to Jewish specialties, which seems disproportionate given that in 2001, Jews accounted for only 2.6% of the city's population," he said.

## **Montreal style**

Why do Jews eat bagels? "The addition of other ingredients besides flour and water makes them something other than bread," explained Bauer. "So Kashrut allows Jews to buy them and eat them right away without performing the ritual blessing over bread."

In his opinion, bagels, more than smoked meat, have an important symbolic dimension. "Smoked meat is certainly related to Jewish identity, but to my knowledge, it has no theological representation," noted Professor Bauer. "It is quite another story for the bagel, to which Judaism attaches a conception of the divine because of its form which symbolizes the infinite."

There is a whole science behind the Montreal style bagel - distinct from its New York cousin, which is bigger and softer. The bagels are handmade: the dough is first briefly immersed in boiling water to which honey has been added and then baked in a wood-fire oven. "Montreal Jews developed a special way to prepare the ingredients taking into account the context in which the food was prepared. The result - a bagel

with a firmer texture - is different from that found in Europe and the United States," said Bauer, who noted that an adaptation phenomenon also occurred with the cooking of smoked meat.

According to him, these Montreal specificities reflect a certain "culinary hybridity." "Bagels and smoked meat are a hybridization of Jewish, central European, and North American cuisines," he said. For the professor, the fact that most bagel bakeries in Montreal do not claim kosher certification is another sign of adaptation. "I'm not even sure that they're really kosher," he said. Have you ever seen an orthodox Jew buy bagels on St-Viateur? I haven't!"

According to Bauer, it is precisely because bagels and smoked meat are not associated with a particular community that these foods have become the symbol they are today. He reminds us that at the time, all Christian Montreal - Francophones and Anglophones - discriminated against Jews. He cited the fear expressed in the 1930s regarding the growing number of Jewish students at the University of Montreal and McGill University.

His conclusion: "Eating Jewish food does not necessarily make you more sympathetic to those who produce it. Besides, most people who buy bagels in a bagel shop or eat smoke meat in a deli probably don't know they're eating an artefact of Jewish culinary heritage."

**More information:** Le bagel, la smoked meat, les bageleries et les délis sont une part du patrimoine culinaire de Montréal,  
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