

# Something to chew on

Just a roll with a hole or something more? The battle for bagel authenticity, the holey war, continues.

**W**HEN is a bagel not a bagel? Before you say “Who cares?”, I know many people who care very much.

At least in Caulfield. Just as I know many, and I am one of them, who can bore you endlessly about such vital questions as whether gefilte fish is better with sugar or without; whether boilers or roasters make tastier chicken soup; whether sour cucumbers need dill or not; whether you add boiled eggs to chopped liver or don't; or whether you can have an authentic kiddush with only one kind of herring.

The answer to the last question, by the way, is in the category of “We hold these truths to be self-evident”. A minimum of two kinds of herring is essential. Maybe you can get away without providing egg kichlach. But don't even bother inviting me if you're only serving one kind of herring.

Herring issues aside, however, I accept that a commitment to a pluralistic Judaism means treading warily before claiming “authenticity” on any of these profound matters. Even insisting on “traditional” is fraught.

So I regret that *The Jewish Daily Forward* has not followed this cautious advice. An otherwise estimable online news service, it had thechutzpah to impugn, knowingly or unknowingly, the Melbourne Jewish community. And just days before Yom Kippur.

Under the headline “Fresh Bagels Down Under” (11/09) reporter Andrew Harris began: “The Melbourne troika of established bagel bakeries – Glicks, Haymishe and Aviv – each have a strong following, willing to defend their beliefs to the last poppy seed ...”

Very nice, you might think. But then comes the stinger. Wrote Harris: “Until recently, Melbourne's bagel-belt never had its authenticity questioned. That was until Zev Forman and his bakery 5 & Dime showed up.”

Authenticity, shmauthenticity. A bagel is a bagel. No? Well, not according to the *Forward*. It said that Forman, a New Jersey native who moved here with his Melbourne-born wife Naomi, encountered “a local culinary deficiency”. Melbourne's bagels weren't what he remembered as bagels.

“They didn't have the chew ... They didn't have the malty flavour ... They're basically bread rolls with a hole.”

Well, yes, that's true. But all bagels fall within that definition. Whether they're “real” bagels or not, however, is an argument I leave to others. But I do take slight umbrage at the *Forward's* claim that until recently nobody had questioned the authenticity of Melbourne's bagel-belt. I know people who have spent their lives doing just that.

In my own case, I once dared to

## Partisan



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write that Caulfield's bagels weren't real bagels because, wait for it, they were merely “rolls with a hole”. That was some 25 years ago in *The AJN*. So chastened was I by the readers' feedback, many times greater and more heated than on any columns about the Middle East or Judaism's great challenges, I decided to let sleeping doughs lie. (Note to editor not for publication: Yes, I know. A very weak pun. But then the bun is the lowest form of wheat.)

Over the past three decades and more, at least two ventures before 5 & Dime have tried to establish American-style bagel bakeries within Melbourne's Jewish precinct. They failed to catch on, although some within the Sydney community have been more successful. These efforts do not include quite a few other bagel businesses throughout Australia which have had mixed results.

### The disputations about the “authenticity” of Melbourne's bagel-belt are almost as old as the revered Mr Glick himself.

In short, bagels have been making news in Melbourne for quite a while. As a result the disputations about the “authenticity” of Melbourne's bagel-belt are almost as old as the revered Mr Glick himself – may he live to be 120. Mind you, those of us who see him still working energetically in Glick's original Carlisle Street shop after nearly 40 years, are convinced he'll romp it in.

Ultimately, sub specie aeternitatis – as Spinoza used to say in Yiddish – and in an age of globalisation, “a roll with a hole” is all any bagel can be, or aspire to be. Nevertheless, to be fair to Zev Forman, and to all who are devoted to “traditional” American-style Jewish bagels, descended and arisen from their Polish antecedents, I accept that their bagels have three basic points of difference: distinctive high-gluten flour, long slow rise, and effective boiling/steaming the dough.

As a result, the American style bagels are indeed chewier and more al dente than the Caulfield varieties. So on Yom Kippur eve, I enjoyed Forman's “everything” variety, and broke the fast with his “sesame”. They were very good bagels, and I wish Forman every success.

But “authenticity” is another question, and local loyalties die hard. So my long-standing affection for the bagels of the Melbourne troika – Glicks, Haymishe and Aviv – will continue. Would I dare say otherwise?

Chag Succot Sameach.

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