



# New York

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ESSAY 04

## Tasting the apple

### *The city's signature dishes*

New York's ever-evolving restaurant scene of fusion foods and craft beers is exhilarating. But round-the-block queues mean many are instead looking towards the simple delis and dishes adored by the city's elders.

*by Julia Sherman,  
writer and photographer*

As a food writer and photographer obsessed with all things edible, I treat every meal as if it were my last. And in my food-obsessed city I am certainly not alone; planning dinner in New York is a contest of wills. Beleaguered by the pursuit of the most fashionable restaurants, some of us are now finding comfort in the traditional foods that we grew up taking for granted. Jewish food, once unique to the deli, has suddenly been thrown into relief. Entirely unconcerned with the dizzying

culinary landscape, these tried and true establishments of the Upper West and Lower East sides have done the impossible: maintained their bricks-and-mortar establishments with original decor since the turn of the 20th century. Their recipes have refused to react to trends and, as a result, those hearty postwar immigrant Jews have bequeathed to us, their far more fickle descendants, the schmaltz-laden cuisine of our ancestors.

When I was planning a lunch with a formidable culinary magazine editor, she generously gave me a choice of three restaurants: Dimes, the Lower East Side café; La Grenouille, the glamorous Midtown French institution for ladies who lunch for a living; and, last but not least, Barney Greengrass, the charmingly crusty, old-world Jewish deli on the Upper West Side. I was tickled to see the chichi La Grenouille in a line-up with Barney Greengrass, with its oversized laminated menu of whitefish salad, chopped chicken liver and

#### Sherman's top Jewish-inspired NY dishes

- 01 Gefilte fish**  
Light fish ball served with horseradish.
- 02 Chopped chicken liver**  
A Passover staple in my grandmother's house.
- 03 Whitefish salad**  
Smoked fish and mayo spread on a bagel.

*"The first generation of American Jews guarded traditions of their cuisine in a city always on the hunt for the next big thing"*

matzo balls. These homely but tasty dishes, always served with a "garnish" of iceberg lettuce, once belonged to the Sams, the Pearls, the Roses and the Mortimers of the city:

the first generation of American Jews who jealously guarded the traditions of their cuisine in a city always on the hunt for the next big thing.

My late grandpa Sam was himself like a bagel with lox and a schmear of cream cheese: something to be enjoyed in its purest, most reliably static form. No matter the occasion or the destination, "Jewish food" was the only food I remember him openly agreeing to and Barney Greengrass was his place of choice. He grew up in Borough Park, Brooklyn, with five sisters and a mother who spoke only Yiddish. He began his adult life as a factory assembly-line worker, only to become the owner of a mini property empire. He was not alone in this trajectory but part of a whole generation of immigrant Jews who, with little formal education and not a penny to their names, managed to scoot their way from the Lower East Side up to Park Avenue in no time.

Despite a drastic uptick in tax bracket and a far more desirable postcode, grandpa Sam's palate was unchanged. It was in the comfort of these old-world establishments that my far more fashionable grandmother would let him wear his old grey polyester trousers, oversized plastic glasses and knock-off gold Rolex, far too big for his wrist and dangling loose like a bracelet. (My father eventually gave him a real one but it never saw the light of day; he was happy with the fake he already had.)

New Yorkers two generations later romanticise the city of yesteryear in one breath and fawn over the newest hot spot in the next. Over contemporary Brooklyn nibbles and craft cocktails we compete for whose rose-coloured memories are most vivid, trying to prove that within us remains a bygone, authentic Big Apple.

So it should come as no surprise that Jewish delis serving a cuisine that has managed to buck all trends should be en vogue. Nor that Russ & Daughters would open a café and be the talk of the town; nor that wholesale Acme Smoked Fish in Brooklyn would have lines outside its warehouse door during its brief Friday retail hours. There are few things in New York that seem indestructible but if Barney Greengrass, "The Sturgeon King", was to close it would cause a riot.