

# Milchidika with Marty:

## *Just a schmear, please*

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If you walk into the deli and say, "I'll have an everything bagel with lox and a schmear" how thick is the schmear? Having done extensive research and field testing at "Barrington Bagel" in Great Barrington; "Too Jays" in Florida, and "Ben's" on Long Island, I conclude that there is no definitive measurement for a "schmear." It ranges from a light brushing to a layer a half-inch thick depending on the mood of the deli counter man.

The "schmear" of course is the cream cheese. And how did we get this combination of bagel, cream cheese and lox? The bagel seems to have originated in Poland and came to America with the early immigrants living on the east side of New York. The cream cheese seems to be an American invention and somehow seems to be connected to the city of Philadelphia.

Did the Jewish immigrant from the lower east side of Manhattan travel all the way to Philadelphia just to put cream cheese on their bagel?

Did our founding fathers, while creating and writing our Constitution, in Philadelphia in 1787 also make a little cream cheese on the side?

No, cream cheese was invented by a dairy farmer in upstate New York in 1870 who came up with a cheese made from milk and cream and he called it cream cheese. He peddled it in New York City and it sold reasonably well, until a marketing genius decided to name it after a region noted for its dairy farms and good food. The huckster packed it in silver foil, and he called it "Philadelphia Cream Cheese."

OK, you can spread cream cheese on white bread, but how did it gravitate to the bagel? And who added the lox? Who added the red onion, capers and tomato? Now as to a little history on the origin of the bagel. There are all sorts of legends and theories as to its beginning.

The legend that sounded reasonable was that in 1863 the king of Poland had just saved the Austrian people from an onslaught of Turkish invaders. The king was a great horseman, and a Viennese baker wanted to pay tribute to the king, so he fashioned some yeast dough into a circle to resemble a horse stirrup (or beugal in Austria). And, so it began. The bagel is traditionally shaped by hand into the form of a ring from yeasted wheat dough, then is boiled for a short time in water and then baked. The finished bagel is sometimes coated with poppy or sesame seeds, or has salt sprinkled on its surface. For a purist like me, blue berries, chocolate chips, cranberry orange, belong in muffins, not in bagels. Garlic is OK.

In the 1880's thousands of European Jews immigrated to the United States and brought with them a desire for bagels. A union for bagel bakers was soon formed in New York City with 300 bakers. Only the sons of bakers could be apprenticed to learn the secrets of bagel baking. It was easier for a Jew to get into medical school than to get into the bagel bakers' union.

Bagel baking required know how and was back breaking labor. Men were paid by the piece and usually worked in a team of four. Two made the bagels, one baked, and a "kettleman" oversaw the boiling of the bagels. The men earned nineteen cents a box and each box contained sixty-four bagels. It was not unusual for a team to make a hundred boxes a night.

The accountant in me, calculated that would be \$19 a night, split four ways or \$4.75 for each man. And, if they worked five nights that would be approximately \$24 per week, which was probably a pretty good wage for those days.

Now to the lox. To an unsophisticate like me, lox is lox. I didn't realize that you could become a lox connoisseur. Lox comes from the German word "lachs" or the Yiddish word "laks" both of which mean salmon. Before there was lox, there was herring. It was only when the Jews emigrated to the United States and salmon was relatively cheaper and easier to come by than herring that lox became a favorite.

What I have discovered, is that there are three categories of lox; namely, Nova, Gravlax and Belly lox, each of which is produced by a different process. There is a method called "Cold Smoking" where the raw salmon is first coated with salt brine and sugar and then placed in a smoker where the burning wood and smoke are somewhere else and blown over the salmon from afar over a long period of time. Nova is cold smoked salmon from where? You guessed it. Theoretically, Nova Scotia. Belly Lox is made only from the belly portion of the salmon. Typically, the belly of the fish is the richest, fattiest and most succulent portion. It is generally saltier than its non-belly counterpart. Lastly, Gravlax is cured, but not smoked salmon. It is cured with some salt, a ton of dill, lemon and alcohol (often Vodka, and sometimes Gin) and traditionally buried in the ground, "Grav" as in grave in the ground. Nowadays, it's common to just put a heavy weight on it instead of burying it.

Somewhere there must be a bagel and lox joke or thought to finish the story. And here it is:

According to Jimmy Fallon: Republicans are more likely to have a doughnut for breakfast, while Democrats prefer to eat bagels or croissants, while independents are that annoying friend who spends 15 minutes looking at the breakfast menu.