

Ode to the Knish

Mrs. Stahl died long before my time, but I knew her well. The Brighton Beach store, founded in 1935, where she made and sold her knishes, was a family destination of ours for over 30 years. In the 1970s and 80s, my parents insisted on stopping by whenever we found ourselves within a five-mile radius (not always an easy proposition, given weekend traffic in beachside Brooklyn). The diminutive Spanish-speaking woman who worked behind the counter regaled us with hunks of frozen dough stuffed with kasha, spinach and mushroom, potato and occasionally cherry and sweet cheese, which we heated and depleted through regular consumption at and between meals at break-neck speed.

In 1990, when my grandmother landed a choice apartment in senior housing in Brighton Beach, we became regulars. I was the delivery girl.

Gramma's standard order was a half-dozen kasha: one, hot, to be smeared with mustard on my arrival, and the remainder destined for the freezer.

After she died in 1997, my grief kept me away from the boardwalk. When I returned in 1999, Mrs. Stahl's Knish Headquarters was sharing space with a *shwarma* outfit. Although I was dismayed, I moved to revive my regular customer status. Mrs. Stahl's was a half hour by bike or subway from my Brooklyn apartment, and visiting the shop became a monthly pilgrimage for kasha and Old World-style affection.

Then, last fall, it was gone. In its place, there was a Subway sandwich franchise — “a *shanda*,” Gramma might have said. I had a lump in my throat the size of a cocktail knish. There had been no warning, no closing ceremony, no opportunity to say goodbye. No one picked up the phone at Mrs. Stahl's toll-free number and Googling

her produced little more than crumbs of other people's nostalgia. I wanted answers.

Pat Singer of the Brighton Beach Neighborhood Association was equally bereft, but happy to talk knishes. She nursed hopes of reintroducing the native species to her predominantly Russian neighborhood and referred me to Mrs. Stahl's last owner, Les Green.

Speaking from his home in Rockland County in upstate New York, some 60 miles north of Brooklyn, Green reflected on his days as Knish King. “I think it's very funny,” he said, recalling a big cocktail knish order for a Cape Cod wedding that he once handled. “It wasn't that long ago you didn't want Jews in Hyannisport,” he said. “Now you want knishes?”

All the same, acceptance and assimilation are part of the trend that sent knish noshers to the suburbs and ultimately drove Green, 59, to sell Mrs. Stahl's kosher recipe to a seasoned Italian pasta-maker in southern New Jersey. Mike Conte automated the dough-making process and now supplies some two dozen

New York City area bagel stores with Mrs. Stahl's knishes along with cards that proclaim their lineage.

“I still don't know if Mike really understands what he has,” says Green. Nonetheless, the father of three and grandfather of two admits

that it's not that easy to keep Jewish soul food in the family. “There's not a lot of young Jewish people looking to work at the counter of a knish store these days,” he says.

Green hasn't met 37-year-old Marc Elliot, chef-owner of Nosh, a newly opened delicatessen with dough in the oven and a “Knish Me, I'm Jewish” sign on the wall. Located on a halal-heavy stretch of Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue, Nosh just celebrated the arrival of its first potato-and-spinach offspring. Elliot flipped them upside down to prevent the bottoms from getting soggy. It made for a peculiar site, but the aroma... there was a sense of setting things right. Co-owner Matthew Flamm took a break from photographing the little ones to greet me. “Welcome home,” he said.

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