



# THE NEW YORKER

## *Jewish-Grandma Cooking for the Small-Plate Generation*

*A new restaurant and bar above the 2nd Ave Deli refines, with admirable panache, a cuisine that is fading away.*

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)



Photograph by Zachary Zavislak for The New Yorker

Jewish deli food and appetizing are not the world's sexiest culinary traditions (it's hard to sound cool asking for a "schmear"), but in the past few years a wave of restaurants with young proprietors—Mile End, Russ & Daughters Café, Frankel's—have remarketed pastrami sandwiches and bagels with smoked fish to appeal to a new generation. At 2nd Floor Bar & Essen (Yiddish for "food"), above the 2nd Ave Deli, on the Upper East Side, the millennial makeover goes a step further: the kinds of Old World dishes my great-grandmother made for her family of eight in their East 105th Street tenement kitchen are given the fussy small-plate treatment. A dish called Herring in a Fur Coat contains

“pumpernickel dust.” Sprats are “maple smoked” and served upon “toasted country bread.” Tongue is sandwiched between “challah medallions” with “dill aioli.”



*Hickory-smoked grapefruit is seasoned with pastrami spices.*  
Photograph by Zachary Zavislak for The New Yorker

It seems, at first, like the stuff of parody. The Chesterfield-style tufted-leather booths (a nod, presumably, to the early twentieth century, when my great-grandmother arrived at Ellis Island) are roomy and comfortable, but the pre-electricity-level lighting turns even twentysomethings on JSwipe dates into their boomer parents, straining to make out the all-Israeli wine list with iPhone flashlights. Much of the food, though, from the chef David Teyf—who also runs a catering company and is responsible for a restaurant called Lox, at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, in Battery Park City—is actually quite good. At the very least, it upholds with admirable panache a cuisine that is fading away as fast if not faster than Yiddish.



*Salmon is cured in vodka and dill and served with “lox bonbon.”*

Photograph by Zachary Zavislak for The New Yorker

Two recent meals began with an amuse-bouche: bite-size cubes of a warm, eggy, oniony casserole presented as “matzo babka,” a study in the Jewish art of making something delicious out of the world’s most tasteless cracker. Gefilte fish, that Passover punch line, an often sugared, gelatinous mash of ground carp, pike, and whitefish, becomes very nearly elegant in Teyf’s hands: he uses it as filling for crisp, salty bread-crumbed croquettes, which cut through the cloying sweetness of the fish and use the usual accompaniment of grated horseradish, dyed red and sweetened with beets and vinegar, as a subtle condiment instead of a masking device. Meat from the deli downstairs—pastrami, corned beef, hard salami—is carefully folded and arranged in neat rows on cutting boards, as Instagram-ready as a smoothie bowl. Even Manischewitz is convincingly dolled up, for a cocktail called the Man-O-Manischewitz (a reference to the company’s ad campaigns from the nineteen-fifties and sixties): it’s mulled with lemon and cinnamon, then chilled and served in a mini-carafe, to be added to taste to a tumbler of herby gin on the rocks. The Upper East Sider cleverly mixes celery soda, a deli staple, with ginger, lime, mint, and vodka or gin.



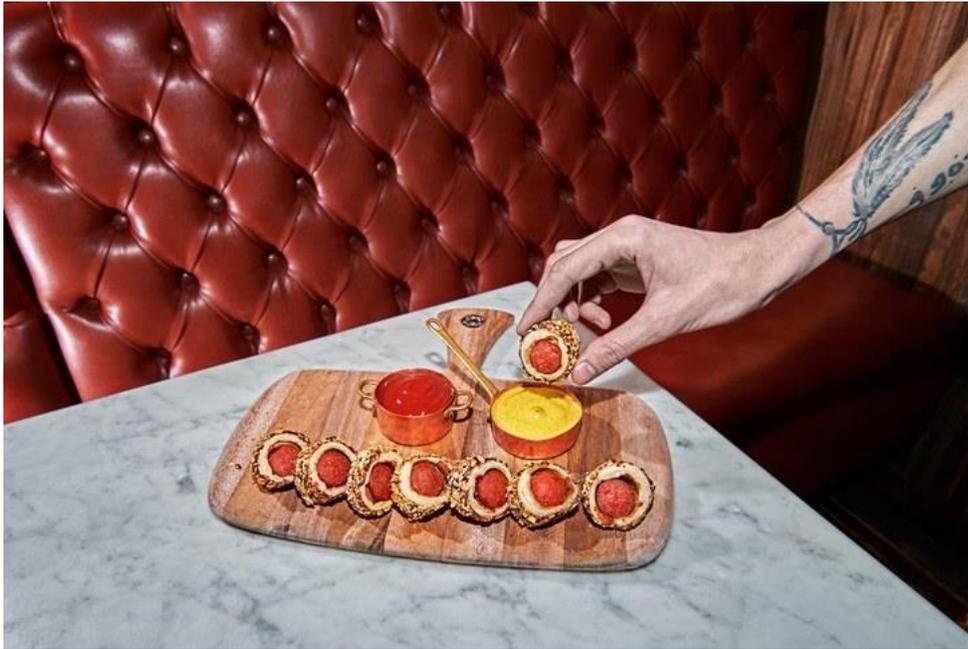
*An old poster for the McKinley Square Theatre, a Yiddish theatre in the Bronx.*

Photograph by Zachary Zavislak for The New Yorker

This is not to say that refining classics means toning them down. My father remembers eating fried kippers (whole smoked butterflied herring) for breakfast as a child, and then being teased at school, in Connecticut, for carrying the lingering stench on his clothes. To say that Teyf doesn't shy away from strong odors and flavors is an understatement; you might call his menu "garlic forward." (A glass apothecary cabinet in the bathroom contains Altoids, chewing gum, a bottle of Listerine with plastic shot glasses, and several vials of off-brand perfume.) I misread the parenthetical of a dish labelled "bone broth (P'tcha)" as commentary (as in, "Pshaw, all broth is bone broth!"), but p'tcha is actually a traditional Ashkenazi aspic, typically made from calves' feet. Teyf's version—soup-like rather than jellied, and rich with little shreds of fat—comes with a side of bracing chopped raw garlic to spoon in, plus parsley and a sprig of burnt rosemary, the latter intended not for consumption but as rustic aromatherapy. The carrots in the Pickled Trio pack an equally garlicky, peppery punch, and blintzes stuffed with duck confit and duck cracklings are so salty they'll make the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

Not every dish transcends its nostalgic value. Franks in a Blanket—with "sauerkraut baked-bean essence," whatever that means—are somehow less exciting than the ones

stocked in the frozen-food aisle at the supermarket, and the tongue on those challah medallions has been overdosed with liquid smoke. Herring in a Fur Coat looks, in the dark, like a tiny pink layer cake, making its mushy riot of ingredients (salmon roe, shredded beets, rémoulade) all the more jarring.



*Franks in a Blanket.*

Photograph by Zachary Zavislak for The New Yorker

Herring Three Ways, on the other hand, with delicate rhombuses of pickled fish draped, sushi-like, over halved fingerling potatoes, is excellent, and one of the lightest options on a menu that's relentlessly heavy, despite small portions and a lack of dairy and cheese (2nd Ave Deli is certified kosher). A Jewish proverb coined by the late food writer Josh Ozersky comes to mind: "The fat is the meat, and the meat is the vegetable." The stuffed helzel, perhaps the most outmoded dish on offer, is a sort of oversized dumpling made from two pieces of fatty chicken skin, stitched together with string, filled with a paste of flour and schmaltz, and fried until crisp. It's not the sort of thing you should eat every night, or even every month, but I'm glad that someone is still making it. I watched with only a twinge of envy as Teyf himself emerged from the kitchen, one recent evening, and sat down to a spread that included an exotic off-menu item: a lush green salad. (*Dishes \$12-\$36.*) ♦

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