

File: Bagel Shop History—“About Us” Essay for Website

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Headline: A Pocket History of Montreal’s Oldest Bagel Bakery

From Poland to Montreal

When he arrived in Canada in 1953, St-Viateur Bagel Shop founder Myer Lewkowicz didn’t know the first thing about baking anything, let alone bagels. He had grown up in a large, poor family in a Jewish village, or *shtetl*, near Krakow, Poland. Lewkowicz knew about not having enough to eat. In 1942, he was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. Years later, while speaking to a high school class, Lewkowicz said, “At Buchenwald, all I dreamt of was a piece of bread.”

Lewkowicz lived and worked in Germany after the war until 1952, when he was discovered by Jewish Immigration Aid Services of Canada. JIAS sent him to Montreal, where he got a job at Hyman Seligman’s Montreal Bagel Bakery. Working with Seligman and his partners, Yankel Drabkin and Isadore Shlafman, Lewkowicz learned the bagel business. It wasn’t too long before he became a partner himself. In 1957, he set up his own shop with Isadore’s son, Jack, but in 1959, Jack quit the bagel business and began working as a cab driver.

A Jewish Tradition Hits the Mainstream

St-Viateur Bagel is Montreal’s longest-running bagel bakery, with several business outlets and customers across North America. But for most of bagel history, the baking and eating of bagels were almost totally Jewish pastimes. Bagels were baked by Jewish bakers and bought by Jewish customers. Even successful, middle-class Jews who’d moved to the tree-lined suburbs far from The Main and Mile End knew to make the drive to St-Viateur to do their bagel shopping.

In the world of Jewish bread, bagels checked in somewhat low on the ladder (on special occasions, people bought *challah*, not bagels). That began to change in the 1970s, as people from all kinds of backgrounds discovered a taste for the humble bagel. By the 1990s, bagels had become thoroughly mainstream, as trade publications like *Bakers’ Journal* described the bagel as the fastest-growing market in baked goods. Bagel shops began opening up all over North America.

The bagel—the Montreal bagel, specifically—received some valuable cultural cred along the way. The first big boost was the publication in 1972 of Don Bell’s popular book, *Saturday Night at the Bagel Factory*, which went on to become a best-seller. More exposure came in 1974 with the release of the movie version of Mordecai Richler’s novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. The filmmakers, seeking to recreate post-war Jewish Montreal, shot much of their footage in the St-Viateur Bagel Shop, Wilensky’s Light Lunch, and other local Jewish landmarks.

New Ownership

Joe Morena was only fifteen when he started work at the Bagel Shop. He knew Myer Lewkowicz from delivering milk to his house on the weekend. Morena's cousin worked in Lewkowicz's shop and convinced him to apply. Lewkowicz said, "Hey Yosel!"—the Yiddish name for Joe—and hired him to start that night. Serving so many older Jewish customers, Morena even learned to speak Yiddish. In 1974, after taking a short hiatus, he returned to the bagel business and bought fifty percent of the business from Lewkowicz. The two worked as partners until Lewkowicz's death in 1994, after which Morena bought up the remainder of his share.

By 1998, Joe Morena estimated that he'd probably made some 25 million bagels. His shop has been visited by thousands of customers—from native Montrealers to international tourists. The list of repeat customers includes local celebrities like Leonard Cohen, Mordecai Richler, William Shatner and Céline Dion, as well as famous out-of-towners like Jack Lemmon and Richard Dreyfuss.

News of the world's greatest bagel travels far and wide. In 1996, Morena took a call from someone claiming that Prince Charles wished to order twenty dozen bagels. Morena informed the caller he had no time for practical jokes and hung up the phone. An hour later, a fleet of limousines pulled up in front of the shop. A uniformed officer pushed past the long lineup out the shop's front door and asked if the Prince's bagels were ready. After being politely informed that he would have to wait in line like everyone else, the officer went to the back of the queue without complaint and waited. A half-hour later he left, loaded down with bags of bagels. Presumably, the Prince awaited his bagels aboard a naval warship in the harbour.

Montreal's Friendly Bagel War

With the bagel becoming a mainstream sensation, Isadore Shlafman's son Jack gave up driving his cab to get back into the bagel business. The family bought back an old store of theirs at 74 Fairmount Avenue, fired up the old oven and got back into the bagel business.

Competition with Fairmount has been steady but friendly. There have been many contests and taste tests over the years, but in the end, everybody has their own opinion on who makes the best Montreal bagel. And everybody loves talking about it!

Montreal Bagels Are Best!

To anyone who's tried them, it's obvious that Montreal's bagels are the best. Bagel makers elsewhere make them by machine and bake them in electric ovens. By comparison, traditional Montreal bagels are made with malt and boiled in a honey-water mixture, which gives them their distinctive golden-brown color. Finally, they are baked in wood-fired ovens. New York bagels, in contrast, are thicker, chewier and less sweet. And Toronto bagels... Must we even go there?

The secret to Montreal bagels, Lewkowicz told the *Vancouver Sun* back in 1987, “It’s the flame in the wood-burning oven.” The bagel shop had to be rebuilt in 1985 following a fire that destroyed everything, except the oven, which survived the blaze. The bagels customers buy today are still baked in Lewkowicz’s original oven, which he built in 1957.

Joe Morena believes the secret is in the experience of his loyal employees, many of whom have been hand-rolling bagels for over twenty years and are an important part of the bagel-making family.

Despite Montreal’s unique bagel tradition and taste, challengers keep on tossing their hats into the ring. Over the years, there have been many contests to decide whose bagel is the best: Montreal vs. New York City, Montreal vs. Toronto and, believe it or not, even Montreal vs. Hamilton. But Montreal wins every time—and, nine times out of ten, even the other cities’ judges agree.

The Montreal Bagel’s Mysterious Origins

Everyone knows why traditional Montreal bagels taste so great. Less well known is where that remarkable taste came from. The story of who brought the special recipe to Montreal is where history passes into the shadowy realm of family myth. According to one story, Hyman Seligman brought it here from his hometown, Dvinsk, in Czarist Russia (now Daugavpils, Latvia), and started making them in his Montreal Bagel Bakery. In another tale, the recipe was brought from Kiev, where Isidore Schlafman’s father had run a bakery. But without further research, the truth of the Montreal bagel’s origins will remain obscure, lost in the mists of the past.

But while the bagel of the past may be something of a mystery, the bagel of the present is more accessible than ever. In 1996, Joe Morena, with sons Vincenzo, Nicolo and Roberto, began to expand their operations, opening up a new St-Viateur Bagel bakery-café on Mont-Royal Street. Another followed in 2001 on Monkland Avenue. The Morenas also operate several more bakeries that serve not only Montreal, but all of North America.

As keepers of such a time-honoured tradition, the Morenas and their famous product have been widely recognized and celebrated, with newspaper and television coverage in media outlets across North America. St-Viateur bagels have also been featured on many Travel Channel, Food Network and other TV programs, including Bob Blumer’s *Glutton for Punishment*, *The Today Show* with Kathie Lee Gifford and Hoda, and Anthony Bourdain’s shows *No Reservations* and *The Layover*.

Despite this continent-wide recognition, St-Viateur Bagel remains firmly rooted in its local community. Joe Morena and his family are committed to giving back to the neighbourhood and city that have supported them for so long. St-Viateur Bagel hosts an annual charity breakfast in support of the Generations Foundation to help fight child poverty in Montreal. The bagel shop has also held numerous fundraisers for the Montreal Children’s Foundation, the most successful of which—held in 2007 as part of St-Viateur Bagel’s 50th anniversary celebrations—broke previous records, raising more than \$50,000.

Like their father Joe, the Morena boys have been in the bagel business since their early teens and proudly uphold the traditions passed on to them. They remain dedicated to this historic landmark and to the customers it serves, as well as to preserving Montreal's cherished bagel tradition into the years to come.

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