

Forward



Tales & Musings from the Last Jewish Lox Slicer at Zabar's

Savory stories by Len Berk, our lox columnist

Culture

He may be our lox expert, but his heart belongs to clamming

By Len Berk

He had opened about two dozen top necks, separated the meat from the juice, and was ready to put up the water for the linguini. Another pot on the stove, above a low flame, was some simmering Greek olive oil, mixing it up with two cloves of chopped garlic. The aroma in the kitchen was ethereal. He reached out for the clam juice where he had left it, but it was gone. “Minna, Minna, [that was his wife’s name] what happened to the clam juice?”

“I don’t know” she said.

“It was right here on the counter!” he said.

“You mean that glass of dish water? I spilled that out.”

He couldn’t believe what she had done. He was on the verge of tears. What was to be done? He had a dinner to make. He took off his apron and the next thing I heard was a car pulling out of the driveway. 20 minutes later, he returned with three bottles of Doxsee Clam Juice and finished making the linguini and clam sauce. It wasn’t as good as if it was made with his clam juice, but it was good enough.

His name was Milton Abernethy, a southerner from Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He lived in an apartment building on Riverside Drive, on the upper west side of Manhattan. He also had a lovely summer home in the Shinnecock Hills of Hampton Bays, New York. My family was occasionally invited to spend the weekend with them there. They, Minna and AB [AB, short for Abernethy,] were aunt and uncle to my wife, Llewellyn. Ab was as far away from a “Milton” as you can get. Is Milton a Southern name? Nobody ever called him Milton. He was “Ab.”

Ab and I hit it off from the get-go. He was the owner of a bookstore called “The Intimate Bookshop” in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a successful stockbroker in New York City, but I will always think of him as a fisherman extraordinaire and a clammer. He would pick my brain

for the latest tax information so that he could prepare tax returns for some poor friends down south who couldn’t afford to pay for accountant.

Hampton Bays on Long Island, New York, is partially surrounded by water; The Great Peconic Bay to the north, Shinnecock Bay and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. It’s fish and shellfish country. There is a canal that forms the passageway between the two bays. From the middle of August to the end of September, the canal is not only the way pleasure boats get from one bay to the other but also for the baby blue fish [snappers, they are called] to make their trip. That was the place that Ab took me as an introduction to fishing. I quickly learned how exciting fishing for snappers was. A light rod was used to hook them and when they bit your bait, it was with a thrust that excited the guy (or gal) holding the rod.

They were fighters, these baby blues, and once you hooked them they rarely got away. But fishing for them was not the only reward. There was the fun of taking them home, filleting them, dredging them in flour, pan frying them and then the ultimate pleasure of eating them. I can taste them as I write this.

Snapper fishing was not the only thing Ab introduced me to. One day, during one of our visits, Ab sent me down to his basement to get a pail. It was the first time I was ever there and what I saw was a bit shocking. The place was in a state of disarray. I wondered if Ab was also in disarray. Confused about it, I let it go. While looking for the pail, I noticed many other pieces of equipment, but I was particularly drawn to some kind of a rake. The tines were very unusual for a rake, I thought; they were quite long. It didn’t look like a gardening rake. What was it for?

Ab told me that it was a clam rake. At that moment, I knew I wanted to go clamming with him.

One day the time came, the tide was low (as it should be for clamming) the sun was shining. Ab provided me with a rake and waders and we went to a spot in Shinnecock Bay. He explained to me how one goes about clamming. It was a first for me, and I loved it.

I started to research clams and clamming. I wanted to know more about them: more than that they were shellfish and delicious. I discovered some interesting things. Basically there are two types of clams; hard-shell and soft-shell. Soft-shell clams are male and female; hard shell clams are hermaphrodite. They have the equipment to self-reproduce. Hard clams (aka Quahogs) have the greatest longevity of any marine organism; they can live at least 200 years. They live beneath the surface of sand or mud, finding their own spot, out of harm's way. There they reside, moving ever so slightly on their own, but occasionally having their neighborhood changed by the water currents. They are usually harvested after the age of 20.

As a CPA, I was approached occasionally for financial advice. Once, my step-daughter and son-in-law had some funds available for investment and asked my advice. I suggested they buy half a house in Hampton Bays and Llewellyn and I would buy the other half. It happened just that way and for the past 40 years, from April through September, we spend most of our weekends there, just a clam's throw from a beautiful bay beach.

Soon after we started our weekends there, I bought myself an almost-professional clam rake and a wader and began my search for the most beautiful spot with the greatest clam yield. For years I clammed in many different places, in search of which I finally found.

It's a beautiful spot. You turn off Montauk Highway and drive about an eighth of a mile to a bend in the road when, suddenly, the blue of the sky in front of you meets the cool still waters of this beautiful, shimmering, quiet inlet of the Peconic, and you know that you have arrived at someplace wonderful.

I would estimate that I have retrieved over 4,000 clams from that body of water over the years. That provides for a lot of clams in black bean sauce, linguini in clam sauce and clam chowder.

Usually there is no one clamming in this water but me. I often wonder why, since this is a place of beauty and there are always clams here (sometimes even an occasional oyster). About two hours is usually enough for me. By then, I have between 75 and 100 clams in my Zabar's Styrofoam box which is attached to my waist with a clothesline.

I now use this floating Styrofoam box that previously held sides of salmon delivered to Zabar's to deposit my clams as I retrieve them from below. I make my way out of the water, put the clams in plastic bags and drive home. There I empty the clams into the sink, where I wash them to get rid of the sand on the shells and proceed with the count; always the count. Why I count them all the time remains a mystery to me. Then I sort them by size. Cherrystones in one group and Top and Littlenecks in another group. I put the sorted clams in wide containers, cover them with drenched towels and put them in the refrigerator, where they remain until called upon. Clams love the cool and the wet. It reminds them of home.

Quite often I would bring a few dozen to Zabar's, where I worked slicing lox at the fish counter, find a spot behind the counter that was not in use at the moment, open them, place them in wide plastic containers, squeeze lemon juice on them and share them with the special few that love clams as I do. Saul Zabar loves clams and I usually called him on the phone to let him know I had some. He always showed up.

Clams are very temperamental. They do not like being disturbed; therefore if you want to open them you must let them relax and stay cool before you attempt to do so or they will clam up and it will be impossible to open them.

Occasionally, I'm asked if clamming poses any risk or danger and I usually reply in the sphere of the affirmative. A few months ago, while clamming, I stepped into a very soft spot in the water. It threw me completely off balance and I fell. My wader filled up with water and I found it very difficult to move. Fortunately I was very near land and I was able to maneuver myself out of the water. I managed to get out of my water filled wader and I was OK. It could have been a different story had I been in deeper water and

so I decided not to go clamming wearing a wader unless someone was with me. This usually turned out to be my son Michael, who I introduced to the world of clamming many years ago; today he goes clamming every chance he gets.

So, there are basically two methods used in recreational clamming. One is to find a spot and just keep digging in that spot. If that produces clams, you're in business; if not you move on to another spot. The other is scratch clamming. Here, you put the tines of the rake down below the sand or mud water bottom and slowly walk backward until you feel the tines scratching the hard shell of a clam below them. This is a very special feeling. It starts when you become instantly aware of the scratch. The scratch seems to move up the shaft of the rake, through your arms and into your brain. Then you manipulate the rake so that the tines are under the clam and it falls into the pocket of the rake. With the clam now in the pocket you turn the rake with the tines up and you retrieve the clam. One of the disadvantages of scratch clamming is that you miss all of the clams below the tips of the rake tines. You never know what's beneath your tines

Sometimes you can retrieve up to four clams, or even more, at one time. Sometimes you can walk quite a while and no scratches. In that case you sing the clam song.

Isn't it rich, isn't it queer,

Losing my timing this late in my career,

And where are the clams,

Quick send in the clams,

Don't bother they're here.

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Len Berk worked behind the lox counter at Zabar's for 26 years. He is the Forward's lox columnist.

'Stretch one and paint it red' – Tales from the life of a Bronx soda jerk

By Len Berk



Image by Len Berk

It was a very unusual experience – sitting in a wire mesh cage surrounded by dead chickens that were waiting to have their feathers removed. Aside from babysitting, it was my job: “Chicken Plucker.” What was required was a quick jerky movement of the fingers and hand to sever the chicken feathers from the chicken. Before my time, this job had been performed by old Jewish ladies sitting outside a butcher shop. The introduction of the wire mesh cage took the plucking off the street. By the time I entered the profession, the cage room was the Cadillac in chicken plucking. It kept the floating and flying feathers within the confines of the cage, but unfortunately did not bode well for the pluckers, whose eyes, nose, ears and mouth were flooded with feathers and dust.

Bernie Weiner was the owner and only employee of this business except, of course for us kid Chicken Pluckers, also known as “Chicken Flickers.” He would stand behind the counter where the chickens were displayed after their feathers had been plucked.

Jewish housewives would enter the store, stand in front of the counter and feel the chickens, paying special attention to the breast in order to determine which chicken to buy. Very unscientific, I thought.

“Lady! Why are you feeling the breast so hard? It’s a chicken, not Mae West,” Bernie would always say. I thought those were the only words he knew.

I didn’t last too long at that job; too much sneezing.

There were other places to get a job in the neighborhood. My allowance was insufficient for my needs as a teenager, so I always had to work, so I decided to try my hand at soda jerking. Soda jerk! That’s a term from the 40s and 50s that describes a person who dispenses carbonated soft drinks at a soda fountain. The way I saw it, there were three choices for me; Winkleman’s Candy Store, located at the foot of the stairs of the Pelham Parkway & White Plains Road train station in the Bronx; Ruby’s Ice Cream Parlor, 15 stores south of Winkleman’s; and Smitty’s Luncheonette, around the corner from Ruby’s on Lydig Avenue. In the next few years, I worked as waiter, counterman and soda jerk at all of them.

Winkleman’s was my first choice. There I met people who were either going to or returning from work as they ascended or descended the stairs of the elevated train station. They would stop in for a Coke, some chewing gum, a pack of cigarettes or an egg cream. Cigarettes were hard to come by in those days. Most were sent to the armed forces even though World War II had been over since 1945. Packs and cartons of cigarettes were hidden under the counter and available only for regular customers and I was their guardian. Mrs. Winkleman was mean and always had a snarl on her face. Mr. Winkleman was much easier to work with. After a few months, the job got really boring, so I left and moved on to Smitty’s – a luncheonette and ice cream parlor. It was a lively place with a younger crowd than Winkleman’s.

The owner was Jerry Smith. He was in his early twenties and pleasant to work for. Basically there were two positions there; the counterman prepared the food and ice cream dishes and the waiters served the people at the store’s ten tables. I liked doing both jobs but

preferred to work behind the counter.

To be successful at Smitty’s, you had to learn the luncheonette lingo. When you took a customer’s order you would either write it down or call it in, or both, depending on the circumstances. If two people were sitting in one of the booths and they ordered one “Bacon, lettuce and tomato on toast with mayonnaise,” one “Grilled American Cheese & Bacon,” “2 Coffees, one black, one with milk,” you would write down or yell the following: “One BLT down, Mayo, one GABC, draw 2, one with cow juice.” “Stretch one, paint it red” meant a Cherry Coke and “86” was code for “we’re out of it.”

“Wreck’em” meant an order of scrambled eggs; a “houseboat” was a banana split; a “dead eye” meant a poached egg; if you wanted something on the side, you got it “in the alley; if you wanted your steak rare, it was “on the hoof.” “On wheels” meant you were getting something to go; “Adams ale” was a glass of water and “lumber” was a toothpick.

I enjoyed working at Smitty’s, but after a while, I felt the urge to move on, so I applied for a job at Ruby’s.

Near the front of the store, there was a showcase displaying a vast array of racks of chocolate-covered candy and nuts, like you would find in a box of Barton’s or Barricini chocolates. The boxes said “Ruby’s Candies.” Then, there was the soda fountain. Behind the counter, there were malted milk machines, a sandwich board, Silex coffee pots filled with fresh coffee, the griddle for making sandwiches and pancakes, and the carbonated water levers; when you jerked them down, they dispensed soda or just plain seltzer. That’s where the name soda-jerk came from – the sudden jerk of the levers. “Jerk” was also a play on the word “clerk.”

The back third of Ruby’s was the seating area of the luncheonette. It had about 14 booths, each of which could accommodate four people.

Armed with my knowledge of the candy store and luncheonette business, I was first greeted by Herby Rubin, son of Pop Rubin, who owned Ruby’s. Everybody called him Pop and, although I got to know him well during my time there, I never did find out his first name; he was always Pop.

Herby was the store manager and ran the luncheonette and ice cream part of the business. He asked me if I knew anything about candy making.

“No, but I’m a fast learner,” I said.

He told me a little about the back room, where the candy was made; one of the job requirements, in addition to food preparation and service, was to assist Pop with making candy in the back room.

One of the functions I performed as a soda jerk was making whipped cream. We had a special machine that made the whipped cream without whipping. How could you make whipped cream without whipping the cream? The answer was a special machine that had two parts; a motor part on the bottom and a receptacle for the heavy cream on top. It seemed like a contradiction in terms, but as Ruby’s official taster – and I must say that I was very very efficient at tasting the whipped cream – the whipped cream turned out perfect.

The back room was the heart of the candy-making operation. To the left was a stove. On top of it was a large brass kettle used to make candy centers such as caramel, nougat, jelly and marzipan. Toward the middle of the room was a table with a marble top where the hot, viscous candy centers would be poured to cool and thicken, after which they would be cut and shaped, then later, covered with chocolate. Then, there was a room within the room in which a special stove heated a bath for the chocolate. Racks of candy centers, cut to appropriate sizes and shapes, would be placed in front of the heater where Helen sat. She would come in once a week to dip the centers.

Occasionally, when I was working in the back room while she was dipping, I would engage her in conversation and at the same time watch her dipping the candy centers in the melted chocolate and placing them on a marble table giving each piece the right curlicue swirl that would identify what lay inside the chocolate.

One day, Helen was called away for some emergency, and she had to leave. I was in the back room at the time. When I entered the chocolate dipping room, I noticed that the chocolate receptacle contained some warm and luscious-looking melted milk chocolate. There we were, the two of us – the vat of warm chocolate and me. What would any red-blooded chocolate lover do in this situation? It was obvious.

I took my index finger and immersed it in the vat of chocolate as far as it would go. After I removed it, I realized that what I had was a chocolate-covered index finger. Had I invented a new kind of candy? I put it in my mouth, pursed my lips and removed the finger, now free of most of the chocolate. I concentrated on the sensation of the chocolate in my mouth – that was a moment to remember.

During my several years at Ruby’s, Pop called on me often to help him with the candy making. It was a lot like chemistry class in high school and I loved working with Pop. Three operations remain in my mind to this day. One was making Christmas candy canes:

Heat sugar, corn syrup, water and cream of tartar in a saucepan to hard-ball stage. Add peppermint extract. When cool enough to handle, divide in two parts; 80% and 20%. Add red coloring to the smaller part. Form larger part into thumb shape and small part into four thin strips. Put red strips on top of the larger part and start pulling lengthwise. Pull and shape until you get the candy cane.

Then there was deep-frying whole cashew nuts, and the third was making the “Cordial Cherry.”

That had always intrigued me even before I worked at Ruby’s. A Cordial Cherry is a cherry encased in chocolate with a liquid center. How did the liquid get inside the chocolate? Was a hypodermic needle inserted into the chocolate? No! That is not how it’s done. I found the answer in two places. One was in chemistry class; the second was when Pop showed me how to do it:

Surround a dry Maraschino Cherry with a kneaded, thick, mixture of sugar, salt butter and corn syrup to form soft, pliable dough. Fully encase the cherry in the dough and let it stand to harden. Then dip in melted chocolate and let stand. In a few days, the acid from the cherry will react with the sugary dough to liquefy it; and that’s how the liquid center is encased in chocolate.

Pop called on me to prepare cashew nuts quite often and to this day I deep-fry them at home in my wok, at least once a month. My family is always happy when they come to visit and I bring out the cashews.

Things changed considerably after Pop died. The store closed for several days and when it reopened, Herby

reopened, Herby took over. The candy in the showcase was either sold or otherwise disposed of. Unfortunately, Herby did not have his father's skills and the candy-making part of the business came to a halt. Ruby's was never the same after Pop died, but I worked there until I moved on to my next world: college.

And who would have thought that the very hand that spread the mayo on the BLT, that had the index finger immersed in a vat of warm milk chocolate, that held the pencil that prepared a thousand balance sheets would hold the knife that sliced the Lox that made my world go round.

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Chinese food and me: The story of a lifelong love affair

By Len Berk



Image by Getty Images

CHAPTER 1: THE PLANTING

The year was 1937. I was seven years old. I was with my father and mother, at a Chinese restaurant on 13th Avenue and 47th Street in Boro Park, Brooklyn. I think that this was the first Chinese restaurant I ever dined at, perhaps the first restaurant in my life. I don't know if my father thought I wouldn't be able to finish an adult portion, or maybe money was tight at the time, but I was always given portions from the adults' order.

I'm not sure when it was, but the time did come when I was allowed to have my own order. That was when I had my first Won-Ton soup, egg roll and barbecued spare ribs. My father seemed to know the Chinese waiter, a young guy; his name was Jimmy. I remember being surprised that a Chinese man could have an American name.

Some months later, my father took me to a restaurant in Manhattan's Chinatown called The Rathskeller in the basement on Mott Street. This was my first time in Chinatown and I was very impressed by how different it was from Boro Park. We went there a few times. The

food was better than what we had in Brooklyn. I had my first Shrimp in Lobster Sauce= there.

I didn't know it then, but some time later, it became apparent to me that Chinese food would follow me through the days of my life.

In 1951, I had graduated CCNY with a degree in Accounting; the Korean War was in its second year and I was in the army. Because of my financial training, I was sent to work in the Hospital Treasurer's Office at Letterman Army Hospital on the Presidio in San Francisco. I was fortunate that I wasn't sent to Korea. A half dozen people worked here. There was Bill Fugita, Rosaline Lee (wife of Olympic diving champion, Sammy Lee), and Liz Jo who had an uncle who was a waiter at The Far East Café on Grant Avenue in the heart of San Francisco's Chinatown. Once a week, a group from the office would go there for lunch and Liz's uncle would take good care of us. My favorite dish was Tomato Beef Chow Mein with Pan Fried Noodles.

It wasn't until about 23 years later, in 1974, that I had my next serious relationship with the cuisines of China.

CHAPTER 2: THE BLOSSOMING

Until 1965, just about all Chinese restaurants in America served Cantonese-style dishes. Then, in 1965, the Shun Lee Dynasty restaurant opened in Manhattan. It was the first upscale Sichuan restaurant to appear in New York City and in the 15 years that followed, Sichuan restaurants opened up all over Manhattan. The competition for customers was intense and many restaurants offered incentives to gain patrons. One such restaurant was the Sichuan Royale, located on the ground floor of the Hotel Buxton in the upper 70's on the East side. We had friends that lived in the area, and we dined there every time we visited them. I loved the spiciness of the food and I had many favorite dishes. Among them were Cold Noodles in Sesame Sauce, Sautéed Shrimp in Hot Pepper Sauce and Chicken with Orange Flavor. On one of our visits there was a notice on all the tables announcing that the restaurant's chef was going to provide free cooking lessons every Sunday morning.

I was very excited by the prospect of attending these lessons Every Sunday morning, for about two months, I

would get up early and drive down to the restaurant. About seven to ten people would show up for the lessons, and for the food that would be served after the chef prepared each dish. By the time the lessons were over, I had about 16 of the restaurant's best recipes.

I did most of the dinner cooking at home on my Garland stove, which provided enough intense heat to prepare Sichuan and Hunan dishes. The next step was obvious – I had to buy a wok.. So, one day I went to a restaurant supply house in Manhattan's Chinatown and bought myself the best 14 inch carbon steel wok I could find. Now, I was off to the races.

CHAPTER 3: THE BIRD AND ME



Image courtesy of Len Berk

During the 1970's, I was a practicing CPA and my son was attending college in Chicago. A client by the name of Dr. George Pepper was dissatisfied with his accounting services at the time and approached me with an offer. George, who was also a gourmet, suggested that I fly to Chicago once every three months, provide for his accounting needs, stay at his apartment for a few days, visit with my son, and dine at some fine Chicago restaurants.

For the next three years, I made quarterly trips to Chicago, did my accounting work, visited my son and dined very well. George knew many outstanding restaurants in the Chicago area. One was a Chinese restaurant called The Bird, which was owned and operated by Chef Benny Moy. George and Ben were longtime friends.

Benny Moy was a singular chef. The dishes he prepared were unique, and he had nothing written down; everything was in his mind. Just by changing, adding or subtracting an ingredient or two, he could come up with an entirely new dish. Sometimes, my wife, Llewellyn, would join me on my Chicago trips and a group of us would have dinner at The Bird. We would all show up at the restaurant around 6 pm, take our places at the table and for the next four hours, platters of Benny's artistry would be brought out to our table, one by one, until about 10:00 when Benny would show up, glass of wine in hand, and join us for some final chatter. George always picked up the bill.

After a year or two went by, I finally muscled up the courage to ask Benny if I could spend a week with him in his restaurant kitchen to learn. By his standards, I was a neophyte in the world of Chinese cooking but he saw my desire to learn, and so he agreed.

I was very nervous the first day I showed up. This was not like a cooking school with a curriculum; maybe he would be so busy he wouldn't even know I was there. Would I get in his way, be too close or too far away? What would he have me do?

I didn't have to wait long to find out how I would start. "Put on this jacket, go over to the stove and clean the two woks there," he said. I was thrilled. What a beginning; I was allowed to clean the masters' woks.

Then things just seemed to fall in place. Benny was very concentrated when he was doing prep work or cooking. I would just follow him around, trying very hard not to get in his way and I would talk into my hand-held recorder, documenting everything he did; so in effect I had all his recipes. He had a teaching style all his own. I just followed him around, watched and noted everything he did and at the end of the week, when my time in the kitchen was over, I came away feeling that I had had the most exciting, unusual, unique cooking experiences I had ever had. Plus, now I knew how to cook Ben's signature dish: Crispy Skin Chicken.

CHAPTER 4: EPICUREAN EDITIONS EAST

We were at about 20,000 feet on a Northwest Airlines jet somewhere above the middle of the Pacific Ocean

on our way to Hong Kong. Six months earlier, I had been half of the partnership of Berk and Roseman, a New York CPA firm. I had been in the business for over 40 years, and had discovered that I had enough of the financial world. I had prepared my share of tax returns and financial statements. I wanted out. So, I sold my 50 percent share of the firm to my partner and I was free. I could do anything I wanted. It was like a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders and I liked the feeling, a lot. It wasn't that I didn't want to work anymore. I had always regarded work as an important life activity, but I also thought it was important to work at something you loved.

A few years earlier, I was vacationing on a golf tour in Spain with seven other guys. One of them was Vic Ascrizzi, owner of Sea Gate Travel. We became friends, so one day I approached Vic and said "I think Sea Gate should sponsor a gourmet dining tour to Asia and I'm the guy that you should put in charge. "He said, "Okay, I'll give you a desk, phone and computer in the office. Let's see what you can do." I knew nothing about how to run a dining tour, especially to Asia where I had never been. I had to take a few steps back, collect myself, and seriously examine what I had gotten myself into.

I did some research and decided that Hong Kong – known for its Dim Sum and Cantonese cooking – should be the first destination. Vic thought it was a good idea, and so it began.

We called our operation "Epicurean Expeditions East," a division of Sea Gate Travel. Business cards were made, and I started to do extensive research of hotels and restaurants in Hong Kong. We tentatively decided that the tour would require about ten days, and would include a welcome cocktail party, six lunches, seven dinners and some excursions to markets, fishing villages and a jade factory. Perhaps there would even be a noodle-making demonstration. In January of 1991, I decided to visit Hong Kong for further research, and so I boarded a Northwest Airline 747 bound for Hong Kong.

Upon my arrival at Kai Tak Airport, I took a cab to the Merchants Hotel on Hong Kong Island and arrived there at about 11:00 pm. I was pretty tired from the trip but I was so excited about being in Hong Kong that I left

the hotel and explored the neighborhood. When I got back to my hotel, I noticed a cocktail lounge off the lobby and decided to drop in for a cocktail to celebrate my first night here.

It was late and there were few people in the lounge. The waitress brought me my drink and said a few words to me (either in Cantonese or Mandarin) that I didn't understand so I returned her words with a smile and she walked off. Ten minutes later, she reappeared at my table and said something. I again smiled and she walked off. Returning for a third time, she pointed to the front of the lounge. I noticed a microphone and what appeared to be some kind of screen apparatus and soon realized I was in a karaoke lounge and she wanted me to go to the front and sing. Apparently, my performance was included in the price of the drink. I went to the front, made my selection, sang "Besame Mucho," paid my bill and went to my room and my bed.

Over the next two weeks, I made calls, met with hotel managers, food and beverage people, restaurant managers and occasionally chefs, while staying at many of the hotels and dining at many of the selected restaurants. Somewhere along the way I was told that my Chinese name was Li Lup Duc. It was a spectacular adventure, two weeks of my life that I'll never forget.

When I returned home, I created an eight-day Hong Kong tour filled with the finest dining experiences imaginable accompanied by the unique sights and sounds of this great place. Our guests would stay at the Peninsula Hotel, which had a standard of personalized service that had largely disappeared.

I found Hong Kong to be one of the most unusual cities in the world. It provided a vibrant mix of East and West with high-tech architecture soaring in slick contrast to ancient temples and alleyway markets. The streets bristled and buzzed with life – the hubbub of junks, freighters and ferries in Victoria Harbor; sophisticated shopping centers and artisans in street stalls; Dai Pai Dongs (street restaurants) enveloped in the steamy haze rising from their sizzling woks; streams of people talking into cellular phones mixing with the brilliant yellows, greens and purples of fruit and vegetables in display stalls. The luster of neon and the pulse of entrepreneurial energy flourished alongside miles of

farmland and sparkling sea.

This is the Hong Kong I knew and wanted to share. In 1997, Hong Kong would become part of the Peoples' Republic of China. How would that change Hong Kong as we knew it?

My next challenge was making food lovers aware of our tour, so we contacted food writers of major newspapers and magazines and offered them the opportunity to take our first trip in the hope that they would return home and write glowing articles about their experiences. The press tour took place in February of 1992, and the articles that came out of it were so glowing that I thought the phones at Sea Gate would not stop ringing.

That, however, did not turn out to be the case. Although the travel agency community and the airlines were aware of our tour, the food-craze that exists today had not yet started. We received only a few calls and we were unable to put together large enough groups to provide a profit-making operation. It was quite disappointing. Perhaps my idea for a gourmet dining tour to Asia was just a bit before its time. I think of it as the most successful failure I have experienced in my lifetime, so far. I loved every minute of it.

CHAPTER 5: AN AMERICAN IN TAIPEI – DISPATCHES FROM THE 1993 TAIPEI FOOD FESTIVAL



Image courtesy of Len Berk

It was the spring of 1993. I was sitting at my desk when

my phone rang. A strange voice said, "I work for The Taipei Tourist Association. I'd like to speak to Leonard Berk."

"This is Leonard Berk; how can I help you?"

"Your name was given to us by The Hong Kong Tourist Association. We are working with the tourist bureau in the planning of the 1993 Taipei Food Festival and we would like to know if you would be interested in being the American judge at the cooking competition."

To say that I was overwhelmed by the call would be the understatement of the decade. I called her back the next day and told her I was available.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the first class lounge of China Airlines awaiting my flight to Taipei. With me in the lounge were three Chinese businessmen, dressed in suits, ties and sparkling polished shoes. No one spoke. Boarding time came and I found myself seated in first class. Shortly thereafter, we were airborne; the adventure had begun. The seats were great but somehow I got a backache even with lumbar support built into the seat. Sad to say the food was terrible. The only thing hot was the towel and the tastiest thing was the Diet Coke. The scallops tasted like sponges in white glue, the chicken was also in a gloppy sauce and it was all cold. This was first class?

My suite at The Ritz was more than I expected – king-size bed, two TV's, coffee table, couch, desk, love seat, two tables, large bathroom with tub and shower, dressing room with wall mirror and huge closet, fully-stocked bar and more. I had been there for perhaps an hour when I was invited to lunch by Stacey Chu, the publicity director, who told me that I would be taking a tour of the city and The Taroko Gorge area the next day. I was invited to a dinner at the hotel's Tien Hsiang Restaurant, which specialized in Hunanese and Hang Chow cuisine. The dishes started to appear, eight of them, properly spaced. They included:

A cold fish appetizer (almost couldn't tell it was fish)

Grilled shrimp with special tea leaves and a splash of vinegar

Deep-fried thin bean curd.

Sautéed squash in a white sauce

A soup with fish balls and some other unidentifiable stuff

A chunk of pork, tied with string, poached in Master Sauce

Sliced fruit

The food was acceptable, but far from Hong Kong caliber.

After lunch, I was picked up by a pre-arranged tour guide in a mini-bus. I didn't know why, but there was no one else on the tour – just the guide and me. We made friends rapidly, but the tour was not memorable, perhaps because of the intense heat. Taipei in August should be avoided at all costs; it's too hot outside and too cold inside.

I napped in the late afternoon and when evening approached I hit the streets. I had my dinner at various street stalls where I purchased squired squid, chicken Arsis, fried fish, chicken wing and foot and potato sausage, all put into bags. Total cost: about \$3.

Early the next morning, I flew to the Tarako Gorge in Haulien, with a Canadian M.D. from the University of Toronto, his wife and a Las Vegas computer engineer. The gorge was spectacular, but the traffic was awful and it was unbearably hot. The time spent at the gorge was not worth the time spent getting there.

Dinner that evening was held at a large round table that comfortably seated twelve. Among the guests was a Canadian Dean named Brian Cooper. I mention him by name because he was the only other person who spoke English, and that was bonding.

Stanley Yen, president of the Ritz Taipei Hotel made some opening remarks explaining that he wanted to upgrade the culinary areas of Taipei.

All glasses were filled with a Chinese wine, which tasted like warm sake, but with a little more flavor. Then the ritual toasting began; one to one, eye to eye, nod to nod. Everyone at the table toasted everyone else during the course of the meal; sometimes more than once. Talk was mostly in Mandarin with apologies from Mr. Yen, for it being so. I got into the toasting (and drinking) but stopped in time. I ate my dinner, played

game for a while and went to bed.

I won't go into the lackluster dinner for which Mr. Yen apologized with lackluster reasons; he assured us that great food would be coming. He had planned out almost every dinner.

Next morning, having eaten breakfast at the hotel buffet the previous two days, I decided to have breakfast on the streets where I found a variety of breakfast sandwiches and steamed buns. I found a stall staffed by some young girls and decided to get my breakfast there. I stepped up to the grill and tried to communicate that I wanted my eggs over easy, but I wasn't able to get the idea across, so I picked up an egg and cracked it on the side of the grill. She smiled, knowing I was going to show her. When I grabbed her hand as she was about to stab my yolk, she understood. What resulted was a perfectly-made egg served in a walled Styrofoam container with a pair of chopsticks. I don't recall how I dealt with chopsticks and the egg yolk. I asked for coffee and got delicious whitened iced coffee. Cost: \$1.50.

After breakfast, I walked the streets, which was an ordeal because of the heat and humidity. I carried my camera and a small towel, wore a short-sleeve shirt, shorts and sneakers. After ten minutes, I was wet from the waist up. It was a challenge to be out there, but I wanted to see the sights. There were broken sidewalks, construction all over, unbelievable traffic; if the cars didn't get you, the motor scooters would. There were pet shops, pachinko and Nintendo parlors, many 7-11's, barbers, salad bars. Most things were beat up. Some young adults were well-dressed in spite of the heat and there were occasional wafts of cool air coming from open doors. There were cute babies, butcher shops with no refrigeration, dog groomers, meter maids with beautiful umbrellas, Baskin-Robbins, smog, smog and more smog.

I visited a Taoist temple where people prayed with incense sticks, and were blessed by uniformed old ladies. I had dinner that night with Daniel Pelligrenelle, an old friend from Hong Kong who I met on the street. He had given up his job at the Conrad Hotel and now worked as a chef. We reminisced about times past, and talked about Taipei and the food festival. He said that

Taipei was a second-class city with second-class food and that the food festival was second-rate; no major international chef would be competing. This was disheartening .

At the dinner that marked the beginning of the festival, I walked into the banquet hall of The Ritz, said many hellos and took a place at a table alongside Dean Cooper. There were about 120 guests in all, 24 of whom were judges. Those of us who were judges received uniforms, and shortly thereafter the speeches began, most of them in Mandarin. Then, into the dining room. There were about ten tables, a large bright red napkin at each setting. The room looked like a sea of redness. The dinner that followed was almost a repeat of the welcome dinner that had been held a few days earlier. I had not had one great dinner since arriving in Taipei. What a disappointment.

CONTEST DAY 1:

The first day of the cooking competition of The Taipei Food Festival of 1993. At 8:30 am, we were driven to the Exposition Hall of the Taipei airport. The Taiwanese too, turned out for the event – 75,000 strong. The parking lot outside the main hall was huge. Car spaces were marked; each space had room for one car or four motor scooters. When the lot was full, it looked like a sea of huge bugs, awaiting orders to strike.

Upon entering the exposition hall, we were ushered to the VIP Judges' lounges which were located behind four make-shift kitchens where teams of chefs were already cooking the dishes that we were to be judging. I was called upon to judge eight teams of chefs, each chef cooking four hot dishes. That's 32 dishes, which meant I had 32 forms to fill out while everything was happening around me. This situation required a great deal of calm on my part. As the dishes were finished and displayed, many did not have the identifying names and numbers required so that we didn't always know which dish we were judging; also the forms which did have identifying numbers and detailed descriptions of the dishes were written in Mandarin. In short order, it became an impossible situation.

For some reason, we were not allowed to taste certain dishes and then we were called upon to rate them. By

the time many of the hot dishes were ready for tasting, they were cold. Arguments broke out between the Chinese officials, their interpreters and the English-speaking judges as to how we could rate a dish we never tasted. In the midst of all this the air conditioning broke down. So much for the morning.

The afternoon session was a bit less hectic. I had only 12 dishes to judge. I was given more forms to fill out for morning dishes that were not ready until now. Everything about the day was chaotic and confusing; bedlam reigned. Some of “The “Yellow Shirts Brigade” group [more about them later] appeared and presented me with forms in Chinese that they said required my signature. By this time of the day, I was tired and not thinking clearly and I just signed whatever they gave me. Anything to stop the torture. It was a day to remember.

Many demonstrations apart from the cooking competition were featured, such as Singapore Tea Pouring, Spring Roll Skin Making, Noodle and Malt Candy Making and Chinese Medicine Dish Preparation, as well as over 70 display and presentation booths representing hotels and establishments all over Taiwan and the other participating countries. There were also over 30 traditional snack stands staffed by restaurant and hotel exhibitors, selling wonderful things to eat that one would expect at a Chinese food event; noodles, pork, scallion pancakes, soups, spring rolls and more. Four wine companies participated in wine-tasting events.

Unfortunately, one of Stanley Yen’s promised dinners was scheduled for that night. He had told us that before we went home we would have sampled everything that there was to be eaten in Taiwan. On this night, we dined at three restaurants, and were served a total of 21 courses. All we could do was taste each dish and move on. For the first time the food was outstanding. When the orgy ended, the diners’ faces showed signs of pain. I had never eaten so much in my life, but the company was pleasant; we were getting to know each other.

DAY 2:

I went up to the Fitness Center to work out instead of having breakfast.

At 8:30 am, my car arrived and brought me to the Exposition Hall. This day went a little better than the previous one had if only because I was used to the chaos. However, I must also give credit to the staff of the Heineken’s Exhibit for making life more bearable in a poorly air-conditioned facility. If not for them, I don’t think I would have made it through the competition. When things got too hot, we would hop over to the Heineken’s Exhibit, where my judge’s coat and badge entitled me to a tall one in a glass instead of a small one in a plastic cup. I was a VIP. When the crab dish came out and it was a duck, when the score sheets were pulled away while I was filling them out, when I was given the fish score card to fill out instead of the chicken card, when the forms got lost and the squab turned into a scallop, when some official told me to taste a dish and another told me not to; these were all times for a Heineken.

And yet, these were serious situations. Chefs were very concerned about their scores. With the stroke of my pen, I could possibly change somebody’s life. A 75 instead of 95 could possibly make the difference in a chef’s future. After work, I took the opportunity to walk around and visit some of the exhibits. I noticed people at me, some bowing and nodding. I was the American judge, and I enjoyed the celebrity of it. The kid’s faces were warm, bright and friendly. My uniform allowed me entry to all exhibits without waiting on line. I watched many exhibits including Ice Carving, Noodle Pulling, Vegetable and Fruit Carving, and Napkin Folding.

DAY 3:

Today was relatively easy. Judging was almost like second nature to me now, and I was able to mix it up with the people I had nicknamed “The Yellow Shirt Brigade.”

Every food festival needs its workers: runners, guards, data entry people, messengers. Enter Mr. Hui-Wen Hsia, principal of the Taipei Kaii-Ping Vocational School, and his students, ages 17 to 19. Mr. Hsai and the festival committee agreed that, in exchange for his students’ services, his school would receive all of the kitchen equipment used at the competition. So they came, hundreds of students, enthusiastic and bright eyed, there to help and learn. They all wore yellow shirts,

and moved through the exhibition hall like little yellow butterflies. I developed a relationship with a group of them working in my area. The grins and smiles that passed between us were special; they seemed to think I was lots of fun because I kidded them a lot. One day, I took a sheet of 8 ½ X 11 paper and filled up the page with the following words: “THE YELLOW SHIRT BRIGADE.”

They were so eager to see what I was writing that they peered over my shoulder and milled about. I presented it to a group of them and they understood I was giving them a nickname, and the idea seemed to appeal to them. They summoned the best English speakers in the group hoping to understand the meaning of “brigade.” No luck until I found a competent interpreter and explained that brigade was like an army. They appreciated that, and the name stuck.

DAY 4:

It was the last day of competition and that was okay with me. I needed a rest from judging. Along about 11:00, the morning competition concluded. I wandered to one of the judges' meeting rooms where I met my counterparts and discussed some of the morning's activities. “How did you enjoy the Kung Pao Chicken first thing in the morning?” I asked. Several people grimaced.

I had only 16 dishes to judge this day. Even so, by afternoon, things were getting a little hazy: I couldn't tell mutton from mango, but I went on tasting and judging, writing and questioning, and then, suddenly, like out of an old J. Arthur Rank film, the gong sounded and vibrations tickled my eardrums” It's over. I fought my way past all the exhibits, exchanging smiles with the masses on my way back to the VIP lounge. Some “Yellow Shirts” offered me smiles and tea while I waited for my limo back to The Ritz. Oh, for a Coke.

The farewell banquet would be our last sit-down dinner together. By this time, our group of hosts and judges had become quite friendly; a familial-type relationship had begun to grow.

The Chinese enjoyed their liquor. Many bottles of Shou Shing wine were consumed, followed by toasts of “Ganbei” [cheers]. Halfway through the dinner, most

could feel no pain but the toasting continued. We never ran out of things to toast I made a toast to the recent marriage of my stepdaughter and her new Chinese husband. When legitimate toasts ran out, we toasted cities and countries. “To our friends from North America, to Shanghai, to good food.” You name it; we drank to it. I tried to be careful – I didn't want to get drunk. Towards the end, I faked drinking. And don't you think I wasn't caught. Oh yes, the dinner:

Prawns with four sauces! Frogs Legs Szechuan Style! Bamboo Shoots and Spinach! Shark's Fin! Roast Chicken! Chicken Soup with Bean Curd and Watercress! Beef Sandwich! Steamed Fish with Ginger and Scallions! Fruit Soup and Fruit Platter!

THE FINAL DAY:

The awards presentation banquet was actually a buffet at the Ambassador Hotel. Everyone who had anything to do with the festival was there, even the “Yellow Shirts,” who wore their best suits and dresses. It was a happy gathering. Introductory speeches (in Mandarin, of course) were short and sweet. There was a band comprising music students from a local school. Awards were given out with dispatch. Cameras flashed throughout the proceedings and finally all the proud winners, in their sparkling whites with their trophies and medals, lit up the place with proud smiles.

Then the eating began. Nowhere else have I ever seen such incontrovertible evidence that the Chinese are happiest when they are eating. And eat they did. In a short time, mountains of beautifully-displayed food disappeared. Platters of shrimp, lobster, fruit, roast pig and pork, beef, salads, dumplings, soups and noodles; GONE!

My appetite was not ready for this orgy. I was “fooled out.” I found myself in a room where I had the opportunity to eat my way through a magnificent Chinese buffet banquet while my body messengers told me I didn't want any. It was truly over for me; this trip anyway. But I knew I'd make a comeback.

EPILOGUE: MY CHINESE CHINESE BANQUETS

My love for the cuisines of China expresses itself

in how often I eat them, how often I cook them, and with whom I share them. Mostly, I have shared them with my wife Llewellyn and our children, although many close friends are part of the select group that partakes of my Chinese dinners.

An annual Chinese banquet has been traditional in my family since 1979; usually during the first three months of the year. For weeks before the event, my kids call to find out what's on the menu besides "Shrimp in Lobster Sauce," a family favorite. Of course I tell them I don't know because it depends on what looks good in the market. The dinners usually start with hors d'oeuvres followed by a seven-course dinner. A menu is displayed on the dining room table for all to see. Dishes are brought to the table one by one.

These banquets are usually held on Saturday evening, and I begin preparing early in the week. I check out the pork, chicken, fish and beef to see what appeals to me. Each dinner usually contains one seafood dish, one pork dish, one chicken dish and usually soup and dessert. The other two courses depend on my mood and attitude.

In order to turn out a worthy dinner, you need to have the following equipment; an adequate stove, hooded fan above, two 14-inch woks, a bamboo, four-tiered steamer, large and medium stainless steel spiders, deep-fry thermometer, stirrers and turners, chopsticks and probably more that I can't think of right now .

A well-stocked American kitchen has all the spices and condiments an American chef needs. A Chinese chef needs the equivalent in Chinese spices and condiments.

There are many different cooking methods in the Chinese repertoire. Most of the dishes, but certainly not all, that I prepare, are done in the following manner. The star of the dish [the pork, the lobster, etc.] is usually cut up into bite-size pieces, marinated [sometimes over night] in corn flour, egg or egg white, salt, sugar and a bit of oil. The other ingredients are cut to size when necessary and assembled. A sauce is prepared. When this has been accomplished, all the ingredients await placement and the cooking can begin. All the ingredients are placed on the counter next to the wok in the order that they are to be used. The main

ingredient is deep-fried to about 85% of doneness and reserved. It is then stir-fried, usually in certain spices, the sauce is added, more stir frying and "Voila!" the dish is done, ready for plating and serving. And so it goes, dish after dish until it's over.

Along about 2017, I discovered that these banquets required more time and effort than I was willing to provide. I was 87 years old. It was time to stop; the banquets, that is.

Still, I'm cooking away, every day: well, almost every day.



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The 16 customers you'll meet at the Zabar's lox counter

By Len Berk

Outside, the sun peeks out over the high condo buildings and blazes across 80th Street into the windows of Zabar's. New Yorkers are scurrying up and down Broadway. Mommies stroll by with adorable babies on their backs or in their strollers. When I'm at the window, I wave at the passing kids. Some wave back; others seem to question my motives.

Kiosk booksellers stand at their regular sidewalk posts in front of the store awaiting their next customers. Walking out of the store is the actor Peter Boyle. I always figured he was short and chubby; turns out he's lean and over six feet tall.

Two golden retrievers are tied to a tree waiting for their master to return from shopping. They watch as two kids in a carriage scream for a frozen yogurt cone.

Purveyors are delivering huge boxes of food; cops write tickets for illegally-parked cars. An ambulance screeches by and almost crashes into the Shelly's Prime Meat Truck that is stopped at a traffic light.

The outside of the store is a very busy place. Inside is also very busy. But it's a different kind of busy. There are the clerks, the managers, the owners and the customers. By far the customers are the most interesting of the lot. Here are some I've met over the course of my 26 years at the store:

1) THE OLD JEWISH WIDOW:

Sometimes she comes in alone, other times with her Jamaican health care worker. She never smiles; she's all business. She tells me at great length what she doesn't want, and watches my every move as though she expects me to do or say something not to her liking. She wants to know why one salmon is darker than another. The painful expression on her face as I respond to her inquiry could be heartbreaking to the uninitiated, but to the trained smoke fish professional, she's a pussycat.

I explain that salmon are somewhat like people – some darker, some lighter, some smaller, some larger. She looks at me. "What are you talking about?" she says. "Salmon are like people?? Don't talk, just slice, slice. I don't want salty. No dark and don't give me near the skin."

2) THE CRASHER:

Having realized that there is a long wait for her turn, she works in cahoots with an accomplice who is currently being waited on. The two begin a conversation. There's an unspoken agreement that the accomplice will make a purchase for the Crasher. Since I'm a professional, I also know what's going on. When the accomplice finishes her order, she tells me that she is also buying for her sick daughter and proceeds to order the items on the list that the Crasher has asked her to buy. I don't want to argue or make a scene, so I usually go along for the ride. But sometimes this plot is uncovered by another customer I call "THE SPOTTER" (see below).

3) THE SPOTTER:

She's watched the whole scam being perpetrated by the Crasher and her accomplice. She intervenes loudly, calling out the situation and forces the Crasher to wait for her turn. The Spotter knows exactly what she wants to buy, has the next number and is not about to lose her turn to a Crasher.

4) THE PERPLEXED ONE:

She's in her late 30's and is planning to make her first important Sunday brunch for six. She wants only the best; she's savvy enough to know where to get it but is overwhelmed by the number of fish in the showcase. She is momentarily disarmed by a huge whitefish that seems to be starring at her. At that moment, she considers the possibility of taking everyone to The Plaza instead.

wants to assume full responsibility for the success of her brunch. I tell her exactly what and how much to buy, how to plate each item, the order in which the selected items should be served, the kind of plates to use, the beverages she should buy. Soon she feels so safe and confident that she asks me to come to the brunch. She settles for asking me my name and telling me how wonderful I am.

A few days later she returns to tell me how glad she was that I made her buy the eel; it was the hit of the brunch. Of course she becomes one of my regulars.

5) VICTOR BORGE:

He was literally hanging over the counter to get the closest possible look at Jerry, one of my co-workers, slicing his salmon. Jerry, one of the three Chinese lox slicers Zabar's employed at the time, had no idea who Victor Borge was.

Borge was my first celebrity sighting on the job and I was thrilled. I'd always loved his work and couldn't resist the impulse to intrude. "You know, Mr. Borge," I told him. "I've seen so much of your work and enjoyed it immensely, but there's one question that I've always wanted to ask you."

He had been fixated on the salmon with the concentration of a great pianist, but then he looked up at me with a half smile. "Yes?"

"I've always wondered if you will ever be able to play a classical piece properly, you know, with no wrong notes?" I said.

He broke out into a smile. "Well, I don't know," he said. "Not if I keep falling off the chair."

6) THE MOGUL:

In his pinstriped suit, he looks immaculate, but his display of sartorial elegance is totally out of place at the fish counter. He requests 14 ounces of Beluga Caviar, and doesn't need an insulated bag or an ice pack because he is only minutes away from the helicopter that will take him directly to his Lear jet at JFK, which is, of course, equipped with a refrigerator that is temperature-programmed to keep to keep his caviar ready to eat at any time. Happy landings sir!

7) THE PLAYER:

She takes a number from the red dispenser at the front of the fish counter to make sure she gets a good place in line. She then proceeds to the cheese counter, the meat counter, the bread counter and the coffee counter, acquiring numbers at each location. She has a lot of numbers when she returns to the fish counter to check on her position number-wise.

This situation can play out in one of many ways. Here's a typical one. I call her number and we engage. She has one eye on me as I slice her salmon, the other eye on the meat counter to her right. She is also tuned in to the cheese frequency and she strains her neck to observe the status of the bread line. She is totally strung out waiting for the inevitable, which is that the cheese number and the meat number will be called simultaneously as I am in the middle of slicing her whitefish. At this point, an experienced "Player" can almost manage to deal with three different clerks in three different departments in three different parts of the store simultaneously. Less experienced Players will fall by the wayside. I always feel for the "Players," for theirs is not an easy calling.

8) MR. FRIENDLY:

I've never seen this guy before but he wants to know my name, how I am this afternoon, if I saw the game, whether it's been a hard day for me so far and what I think of the weather. Is he just trying to be friendly or is he as phony as a Waldbaum's Scotch Salmon?

9) YOU'RE HIM, RIGHT?

His name was on the tip of my tongue, but I just couldn't spit it out. These kinds of moments can be very frustrating, but they are what they are. We were looking at each other. He had a smile on his face like he knew something that I didn't, and he was right. Desperate to say something, I looked him right in the eye and said "Are you him?" He looked back at me with a smile and said, "Yeah."

I finished slicing his lox, wrapped it up nicely and said, "Would you like something else, sir?" He said, "No thank you" and I handed him his package. He smiled, turned and disappeared into the crowd. About ten minutes

passed; I was waiting on another customer and then it came to me. I knew who he was. He was either an ex-senator from Minnesota or an ex “SNL” comedian or both. Need I say more?

10) MR. LUCKY:

He was standing directly behind a Super Spotter who wanted everything just so – Nova from the tail only, the length and width of each slice the same. I explained that the shape of the fish means that there’s no way all slices can be identical. She wasn’t buying my explanations. I told her that I’d do the best I could. I was well into 3/4 of a pound when she said that several of the slices were too small – some were too thick, some too wide and some too narrow.

I reviewed each and every slice with her, removing the ones she rejected and placing them on another piece of parchment paper. They were all beautiful, but it was a struggle to satisfy her. With a forced smile, I assured her that I would remove the undesirables and replace each with acceptable cuts.

Mr. Lucky watches, in awe of my care and concern. He shakes his head with a disapproving grin aimed at The Super-Spotter who is totally unaware that she is being observed and mocked. I call my next number and Mr. Lucky has it. He wants six ounces of Nova, the exact amount the Super-Spotter had rejected, which is now sitting on parchment in the showcase, looking beautiful and waiting to be sold.

Mr. Lucky is a nice guy. He’s in his forties and has mother issues. I put the previously sliced salmon on the scale and I can see what he’s thinking: “My mother once told me never to buy smoked salmon that wasn’t sliced specifically for me.” This could be the major breakthrough he and his therapist have been awaiting. It seems that we have something far more important than a Nova purchase going on here. On the one hand, he knows that the slices sitting on the scale are fine, but he remembers his mother’s caveat and now he’s in the throes of Nova dilemma.

I have to do something to get this situation back on track, something that will allow him to take the previous sliced Nova, and still feel that he has heeded his mother’s warning. I suggest that we examine each

slice. If he finds any to be unsuitable, I will replace them and also give him a free slice.

“Momma,” he’s thinking, “You should see me now; I’m about to make a Nova killing.” After all, his mother told him that if he could ever get something for nothing, he should go for it.

He winds up rejecting three of the slices; he just didn’t have the “chutzpah” to go further. So he gets his six ounces plus three free slices. For a moment, he’s happy. But then, he becomes fearful. Did his mother tell him to take it if it’s free or did she say you never get anything for nothing?

I weigh the lox, price it, wrap it up, hand it to him with a smile and say, “Today’s your lucky day.”

He looks back at me, accepts his package and says, “I’m going to take the salmon, but I want you to know that I know that you put one over on me.” He turns and leaves the store. I see him stop at a payphone outside the store and I wonder: Is he calling his mother or his therapist?

11) THE KID:

I hear someone say, “a quarter pound of Nova, please,” but no one is there. I look down and through the glass counter, over the sable and through the trout, and spy a six-year-old lad, who has been entrusted with the sacred duty of making “The Purchase.”

“Yes, sir,” I say to the lad.

I slice and he stares. I don’t want to say any more to him because he seems petrified and fragile. I want him to complete a successful transaction and my gut tells me that silence is the key. Perhaps next time when he’s a bit more experienced, I’ll talk to him. I stretch over to the other side of the counter, hand him the package and thank him. He takes it and dashes towards Mommy.

12) THE TV TALK SHOW HOST:

He stood before me at the lox counter and asked where the whitefish salad was. I knew who he was since I had watched him host “The Tonight Show.” I told him the whitefish salad was on the extreme left hand side of the refrigerated case he was facing. He proceeded to walk over to the right side instead of the left.

I walked out from behind the counter. Not wanting to embarrass him, I said, “Mr. Paar, I think I may have told you the wrong spot; it’s actually on the left side, not the right.”

He looked at me, smiled and said, “You did say the left but unfortunately I’m not taking directions very well these days. I returned his smile, went back to the counter and he walked over to the left side to get his whitefish salad.

13) NS:

NS died about five years ago. He was one of my favorites, perhaps because he was a retired tax attorney teaching Tax Law at NYU, and I was a retired CPA slicing Lox at Zabar’s. I did find out that his first name was Norman, but he will always be NS to me. Why, you may ask? Because when he appeared almost every Friday to purchase caviar, he always felt it necessary to tell me the initials to put on the silver bag containing his caviar.

He always purchased the best and most expensive caviar. He was one of the very few allowed to taste the caviar because we knew he was a serious buyer, not just a taster. Not only did he taste the caviar but also the Nova, Sable and Baked Salmon. He was such a prolific taster that we all called him “president of the Tasters’ Club.” Every time I saw him, I would announce “The president is in the store.” Occasionally his wife accompanied him and she earned the title of “First Lady.”

She continued purchasing caviar after he died. She is, or was, I’m not sure, a lovely woman – an attorney and a caviar lover. I haven’t seen her recently. Sometimes I wonder with whom she is enjoying caviar these days.

14) THE REJECTERS AND MRS. PIVNIK:

Many types of Rejecters frequent the fish department. Some reject whole fish, [too big, too small; too fat, too skinny]. Others reject a chunk of fish [the color looks a little off, the skin isn’t shiny enough]. Then you have your Slice Rejecters. [The slice is too narrow, too wide, too thick, too thin.]

One day, I was slicing a pound of Nova for a “Slice Rejecter.” I was well over the half-pound mark when

she said, “Those last three slices; they look a little off-color.”

“No problem; I’ll remove them,” I said.

I neatly placed the three rejected slices on a separate piece of parchment and continued slicing her Nova. I had about three more slices to make the pound when she pointed at the rejected slices and said, “What are you going to do with those three slices?”

“Oh, I’m going to save them for Mrs. Pivnik,” I said.

“Who’s Mrs. Pivnik?” she asked.

“She’s that rich lady who lives on 86th Street, near the French restaurant,” I said. “You probably have seen her here; she comes very often. She usually stands two or three feet behind the customer I’m waiting on and watches me slice. She’s waiting until I get to the part of the salmon she likes and sure enough, then, she’s my next customer. Those are her kind of slices. She’ll be glad I saved them for her.”

“On second thought, I’ll take those three slices,” the Rejecter said.

“Sure,” I said and placed them in her package.

15) THE FOREIGNERS:

The foodies of the world all show up at Zabar’s sooner or later. They come from as far as New Zealand, as close as Canada and from all the countries in between. They look different, they speak differently, they are different but the one thing they have in common is that they appreciate good food. Some ask if they can take a picture of me, some have even asked for my autograph on their bag of Lox.

The Japanese arrive by the busload. I take a slice of lox and hold it up to show them. They smile. I put the slice on a piece of parchment and hold it over the counter as an offering. “Dozo,” I say. “Please have some.” Someone usually steps up to accept the offer with a slight bow and always with a “thank you” in Japanese.

Once, a Japanese woman looked at me and said, “I remember you. You were the American Judge at the cooking competition at The Taipei Food Festival of 1992; you’re famous, right?”

I was speechless. All I could do was smile. [Yes! I was the only American Judge at that event].

16) THE OTHERS:

Thanks to the guy who comes in almost every Friday and buys six ounces of smoked tuna, only. Wait, I think he bought baked salmon once.

To the tasters who never buy and the buyers who never taste.

To those who walk by and look down at the fish in wonderment.

To those who pass the fish counter and never see it.

To my many friends and relatives who have visited me at work over the years, and to those who couldn't make it.

And to the following celebrities who lightened and brightened my workload over the years by their presence and smiles: Lauren Bacall, Ann Meara, Jerry Seinfeld, Jerry Stiller, Charles Durning, Eli Wallach, Ann Jackson, Fyvush Finkle, Zohra Lampert, Barbara Walters, Glenn Close, Peter Boyle and to those whose faces I see and whose names I can't recall.

There are so many many fish stories out there. These are just some that come to mind.

The oldest customer at Zabar's lox counter – the tale of the 105-year-old man

By Len Berk

Zabar's is a slice of life. People scurry from room to room, section to section, walking, looking, seeing, listening, deciding, talking, thinking, tasting. Big people, little people, fat, skinny, tall, short, young and old. They're all here. I'm watching them. Some of them are watching me. There are as many stories here as there are faces. Here is just one of them:

He stands there in the distance, his black suit and black hat prominent amid the scantily-clothed summertime women who are in the store shopping and escaping the intense heat outside. He stands there, quietly, starring at me, waiting for me to notice him.

I didn't know he was there until I heard it: "HUH" – the short, baritone second long bellow which always announces his presence. Then, a second "HUH" louder than the first. I look up. He walks toward the counter. He smiles. He is ready.

It never varies – the same repartee almost every Friday. It's like a one-act play, two characters engaging in fish talk over an appetizing counter.

He starts. "I'm already waiting for you an hour; show me," he says loudly.

Customers turn and look at him. I reach into the showcase and pick out a belly piece of baked salmon.

"Show me, show me," he says again.

I remove the baked salmon from its cryovac wrapping and hold it over the top of the counter so he can get a good look. I hold it quite close to him because, at 105 years of age, his eyes are not what they used to be; nor is anything else, for that matter. I think actually seeing the salmon in all its unadorned glory is wishful

thinking on his part but we go through the motions anyway.

Was he really 105 years old? At one of his first visits, when he announced his age, I was skeptical.

“You don’t look a day over 102,” I said.

“I’m 105,” he said.

“Are you really?” I asked. “Let’s see your driver’s license”

“I don’t have a driver’s license,” he said. “I stopped driving when I reached 99. Now I have a chauffeur. He takes me everywhere – to work, to restaurants, anywhere I want to go. Look outside. You can see him in the car waiting for me.”

It was true. He did have a chauffeur. I wondered what type of restaurants a 105-year-old frequented, so I asked him.

He told me that he went to only the best restaurants in New York. He had many favorite spots; French, Italian, Chinese, Greek. He was a gourmet. So was I. Over the years, we had many conversations about food. He said that he would like to take me to his favorite steakhouse. I accepted and that was the start of something wonderful. For years, we went to restaurants that he loved and that I loved. He was always known, and referred to respectfully as Mr. Rosenberg. He never let me pay.

“Put the knife down” he says, meaning that I should place the blade of the knife on that part of the salmon where I intend to cut it so that he can see the size of the slice. Now, I know the size he wants but I put the knife on the salmon at a place that, if cut there, will provide a slice much larger than I know he wants. That way he can say, “less, less.”

I slide the knife until I reach a point where the slice will be about one-inch wide. “Less, less,” he says.

I keep moving the knife until I arrive at the point where the slice will be about a half-inch wide.

Why didn’t I start the whole transaction with the half-inch slice since I already knew how much he wanted?

Well, that’s the way we play the game.

“Four slices like that,” he says, “That’s enough for breakfast”

“How about some gravlax today?” I ask. (He buys gravlax every time he comes in.)

“Yes” he says. “Do you know how much I pay for ‘Graved-lox’ at Petrossian?” He accentuates the word “Graved-lox” to make sure I know he is familiar with the history of the product, that ages ago it was cured while being buried in the earth. “\$76 a pound,” he says.

“So why do you buy it there?” I ask. “Ours is better and costs half the price.”

“Thin, very very thin the ‘Graved-lox,’” he says.

“Don’t worry Mr. Rosenberg; I’m going to cut it so thin that it will have only one side.”

His face is expressionless. Where is he, I wonder? I pack it all up and give it to him. “See you next week,” I say. He looks at me, says, “I hope so” and disappears into the crowd, perhaps into another world.

I learned a lot about Mr. Rosenberg over the many hours we spent dining together.

He came to this country from Europe in 1950 when he was 50 with his wife and baby in search of the American dream. He started at the bottom, working as a clerk in a delicatessen. One of his regular customers owned a zipper factory. The owner knew that Sol was a hard worker and offered him a job selling zippers on the side for a commission so he could earn extra money to support his family. He was so good at selling zippers that he gave up his deli job to sell zippers full time. He made contacts in the industry and by the end of his first year in America, opened his own small shop in lower Manhattan, making and assembling zippers. By early 1960 he had a booming business that employed over 100 people. He became known in the trade as “The Zipper King.” The business continued to grow through the end of the decade, and he was optimistic that the 70’s would bring greater growth.

Unfortunately, the 70’s brought cheap imported products to the U.S. By the middle of the decade he

was forced to downsize and found himself getting deeper and deeper in debt until he was forced to close the business.

In 1990, at age 90 he started up a new zipper business, with only one or two employees, buying and selling to customers both new and old from his little loft space in New York's garment district. He was still working every day as he approached his 108th birthday in March of 2008, when, on Valentine's Day he died.

On the Friday, after his passing, someone showed up at Zabar's, asked for me and told me Sol had passed away and that I was on the list of people to be personally informed of his death.

I miss him, especially when I go to one of the restaurants he liked.

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The sturgeon will see you now – an expert's guide to smoked fish

By Len Berk



Image courtesy Judith Girard-Marczak on Unsplash

Smoked salmon or lox? That is the question.

On Sunday mornings in the 1940's and 50's, Jewish people lined the streets of New York to get their lox fix from the appetizing stores around at the time. It was a ritual; there had to be lox on the Sunday breakfast table.

Why did it happen? Why is it important? Tevye answered both questions with two words. TRADITION! Tradition.

Before Jews immigrated to America, when many of them were still in the old country, they ate herring. It was cheap and plentiful. When times were bad and anti-Semitism flourished, ways had to be found to make the fish last. Refrigeration was not readily available, so salt curing became the solution.

It was only natural that when the Jewish immigrants arrived in America, they would make the jump from herring to salmon, which was abundant here and far more luscious, with its silky texture and delicate flesh. At first, the salt curing process produced a salmon that was very salty. This new product was called

“Lox,” the newly-spelled name for Lachs, the German [And Yiddish] word for salmon. When sugar and smoke were added to the mix, voila, smoked salmon was born. At the time, much of the salmon came from Nova Scotia, and so the name “Nova” was born and remains to this day.

As more and more people become aware of the availability of this delectable fish, demand for Nova flourished, even if there remained a staunch group of [salty] lox lovers who have never given up their lox. As General Douglas McArthur declared, “Old lox lovers never die, they just fade away.”

A FEW WORDS ABOUT WILD VS. FARMED

Salmon in the wild roam the waters freely and where they are caught in their journey can affect the texture and flavor from fish to fish. Generally, they are lean and less fatty. Since fat is a significant component of flavor, wild-caught salmon tend to be less flavorful.

Farmed salmon live a less active life than those in the wild and therefore have a smoother and more buttery flavor. In addition, in the better farms they are given proper amounts of protein, oils and fats so that texture and flavor remains consistent from fish to fish.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT HOT-SMOKED VS. COLD-SMOKED

Hot smoking [usually between 165 and 185 degrees Fahrenheit] cooks the meat while flavoring it with smoke. Cold smoking [usually between 69 to 87 degrees Fahrenheit for up to 30 days] preserves and flavors the meat. The texture is usually smooth, silky and has a slippery feel as it glides across the tongue.

Here are the mainstays of the smoked/cured fish world. Writing about them gives me pleasure and delight.

SABLEFISH

Sable is the commonly-used name but in fact, when you ask for sable, what you get is black cod, which is one of the fish in the sable family. Why is this fish referred to as sable, when in fact it is black cod? Probably because sable sounds more elegant and this fish is truly elegant.

The fish is filleted, skin on, the meat side coated with a light sprinkling of paprika and cold smoke. Its flavor is sweet, buttery and a bit salty with a silky and somewhat slippery texture.

STURGEON

Sturgeon is considered the king of smoked fish. It is hot smoked, traditionally with maple wood to enhance its natural flavor, which is on the mild, somewhat sweet side. It is also low in sodium. Its texture is dense and meaty; not smooth at all, but its delicate flavor is unique and delicious. You’ve got to taste it to understand it.

It’s not surprising that it is so delicious; after all it comes from the family of fish that produces the world’s best caviar.

WHITEFISH

A smoked whitefish is a thing of beauty; especially when it weighs between four and six pounds. Arriving from the smokehouse it is displayed in all its glory, intact, the whole fish, head, tail, skin, bones and beautiful golden scales. It holds a special place in the showcase, easily seen by the costumers.

Over my 26 years behind the fish counter at Zabar’s, I have been known, on occasion to pick up one of these fish, point it straight out, head first, over the top of the counter, and keep it in my hand about two feet away from the face of a 5-year-old standing with his mother, waiting at the counter.

“How would you like to kiss a whitefish?” I usually ask the kid.

This is a very unsettling experience for a 5-year-old and usually causes the boy to look directly at his mother, as if to say, “What I do, Ma?” When I pull the fish back, return it to its place in the counter, and say to the mom “May I help you?” both mom and child breathe a sigh of relief.

These whitefish were recently swimming in the icy waters of the Great Lakes of North America. They run anywhere from two to 23 pounds. In the hot-smoking process, they are hung on a rack with hooks through

the head; a line of 20 to 30 fish in a vertical, heads-up position on a rack is wheeled into the smoke room and smoked.

They are considered one of the best-eating freshwater fish; high in fat content, mild flavor, medium firm, sweet, delicate and smoky meat with large juicy flakes that peel right off the bone. Whitefish are sold by the chunk, half or whole, bone in or filleted. . And then there are smoked chubs, thought of by many as baby whitefish and in most cases they are. Sweet, rich tasting, delicate and smoky; oily in texture, they please the most refined palate. They too come from the Great Lakes, and are sold whole only. Unfortunately, however, invaders have entered these waters and have almost eliminated the chub community entirely. And so you rarely see chubs in appetizing stores these days.

GRAVLAX

The origin of this legendary cured salmon dates back to the 14th century. The word gravlax comes from the Scandinavian word grava/grave [“to dig] and lax/laks [“salmon”]. At that time, salt was expensive and alternative methods had to be found to preserve the fish. A technique was developed whereby the salmon and its cure were buried in the earth. The resulting product would not have been edible by today’s standards but as time passed new techniques for making gravlax evolved including the use of salt, brown sugar and dill which provided a gentler product, suitable to today’s tastes.

The basic recipe starts with a small fillet of raw salmon, about four pounds, skin on, cut in half. The cure is rubbed on the skin side of each half. Most of the cure will not stick to the skin side and is packed on to the meat side of each half fillet, Then the two halves are placed together, one on top of the other, meat sides facing each other. They are wrapped in plastic, a weight is placed on top of them and then they are refrigerated. After about 72 hours of curing, the prize emerges. Its flavor is both sweet and a bit salty, its texture similar to lox, however denser since some water is lost during the curing process.

Zabar’s makes its own version of gravlax in house under the watchful eye of Saul Zabar who is a stickler

for getting it just right. Many a side of gravlax has been discarded if it did not meet the boss’s standards.

BAKED (KIPPERED) SALMON

I am often asked to explain the difference between baked and kippered Salmon. The difference is slight and not significant enough to mention. Essentially they are the same.

To make baked salmon you start with a full side of raw salmon, pin bones removed, skin on. Then you cut off enough of the tail part of the fish so that the remaining part is of similar thickness. You cut the salmon from head toward the tail down the center, thus separating the back side from the belly side. Then you cut the belly side into 6-inch pieces and do the same with the back side. Alternatively you can bake the whole side and cut the sections later. Coating the meat side with lemon, pepper, butter, salt, and paprika and garlic powder is optional.

Depending on the size of the salmon you will have six chunks, give or take. You hot smoke the pieces at about 140 degrees Fahrenheit for about 12 to 15 minutes and you’ve got baked or kippered salmon. The belly sections are fatty, succulent and sweet with only a hint of salt; in spots, they’re a bit creamy. The back sections are drier with large firm flakes, moderately sweet with a hint of salt.

SMOKED TUNA

The best tuna for smoking is a whole fresh premium grade loin, ahi tuna being the best, followed by yellowfin. Salted slightly and hardwood smoked, the tuna has a delicate, mildly sweet flavor and a dark reddish purple color. It doesn’t sound beautiful but when you see it, it is.

SMOKED BROOK TROUT

Brook trout generally live in the cold fresh water lakes and streams of the Great Lakes region. They inhabit shallow lakes in the north and deep lakes further south.

To get the smoking process underway the trout are first submerged in a brine solution, refrigerated covered for from two hours to overnight. They are dried by breeze or paper towels and refrigerated for another five hours.

Then they are hot smoked, and hang on racks for about two hours at which time they are ready to eat. Their flavor is smoky and a bit salty. The meat slides off the bone with the help of a knife. The texture is on the dense chewy side. These fish are sold whole only; that means head, tail and bones.

EPILOGUE

One final thought: Every so often during my slicing day a playful costumer would see me take a taste of a particular fish. He (it's mostly men) would say "I caught you. Eating up the profits eh?" I would smile, look him right in the eye and say "Not at all, sir. Actually it's part of my job. When customers ask me if the whitefish is good today, is the sable salty, is the baked salmon fatty? I consider it my responsibility to have the right answers, and the only way for me to really know about the fish is to taste them.

And that's how I know so much about smoked fish.

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'Should he sit or should he go' – a uniquely Zabbar's dilemma

By Len Berk

It's located just behind the manager's desk in between the two time clocks that are used for signing in and out at break time, lunchtime and arrival or departure time. Customers use it when they discuss problems, order merchandise and inquire as to the location of various store items. Without question it's in a very busy area in the store.

Taped to the seat of the chair is a sign that says "FOR CUSTOMERS ONLY." Nevertheless, the managers sometimes allow you to place items on it; a vendor's delivery, an order awaiting pick up. On occasion, you can spot an employee leaning on or sitting on the chair.

You may wonder why I am telling you all this. Rightly so. Allow me to explain.

Sometimes after I've been standing behind the counter, doing my job; trimming the salmon side, slicing smoked salmon (very thin), chopping off the heads of whitefish, filleting the fish, making Nova sandwiches and many other tasks, the manager tells me that it's time for one of my two daily ten-minute breaks. During these breaks, you can do almost anything you like as long as you do not break any store rules.

On one of these breaks, my feet were aching, so I needed to sit down.

True, I could have gone to the break room, which is also the lunchroom; it's located in the basement. For me, however, this is not a good solution since getting there requires descending a narrow staircase of about 20 steps, which takes me about three minutes. The return trip takes another three minutes, which leaves only about four minutes of resting time. Instead, I

opted to sit for ten minutes on “the chair.”

Saul Zabar, the boss, gave me a look.

“Didn’t you see the sign on the chair – FOR CUSTOMERS ONLY?” he said.

He is older than I am, and I thought that his feet must hurt sometimes too. Still, I made as if to jump up.

“It’s ok,” he said. “It’s ok, Sit, sit, sit.”

Relieved, I reversed my jump and rested on the chair once again.

Rested? Well, there are things you should know about the chair. I think it’s fair to say that it was not made to provide a very comfortable sitting place. The seat is hard and small; maybe 13 by 13 inches. and there are actually two signs on it, both of which say “FOR CUSTOMERS ONLY.” Two signs and they both say the same thing. Sounds pretty serious. The signs sit on about 2/3 of the seat area and are covered with see-through tape. The back, with its empty frame and straight-edged corners, provides little to lean against. Either the legs are of different lengths or the floor beneath the chair is uneven; if you breathe too hard, the chair will wobble. Even so, the chair provides the best solution for sitting when my feet hurt.

The following week, when I once again sat on the chair during my break, guess who appeared? Right, the boss. I immediately started to exit the chair and he said:

“Stay there, Len. It’s ok for you to sit there.”

What a relief. He must have known I needed a place to rest during my break. Of course he did since we are almost the same age.

I thought I had it all figured out – chair-wise, that is – until a week later. This time, he admonished me again: “The chair is for customers, Len!”

I was confused.

“But Saul’ I said, “You said it was ok for me to sit in the chair. You gave me permission.”

He looked at me. I looked at him. We were both silent.

I got off the chair and walked away.

So, I ask you, what should I have done next week, chair-wise, that is?

EPILOGUE

A week had passed since I finished writing about the chair.

I carried a copy of my essay in my side pocket. Would I give it to my boss to read? I wasn’t sure.

I was taking care of fish business when he appeared. I asked how he was feeling.

His face and voice were neutral.

I asked him if his sense of humor was in good shape.

He said he thought so.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the two folded 8 1/2 by 11 inch sheets and gave them to him.

“Oh, you wrote something” he said, “I love your stuff.”

He leaned against the refrigerator and started to read. Minutes passed. He read with a stern expression, then suddenly looked up at me.

“I think we should remove one of the sighs,” he said.

I was speechless, but it didn’t matter because he disappeared as abruptly as he had appeared.

An hour later, he came back.

“I think the sign should say, ‘CUSTOMERS PREFERRED,’” he said.

He stood there a few moments, then abruptly walked away.

An hour later, I passed the chair and noticed the sign had been corrected.

Another week passed and I was back at my station behind the fish counter. My ten-minute break was announced and I opted to sit in the chair.

“Will anything happen today?” I asked myself. “I’ll sit and see.”

Directly adjacent to the chair, there’s a series of shelves where the boss sometimes puts his packages or other

items. As I was sitting on the chair, the boss approached the shelves to get some stuff from them. It was too late for me to get up from the seat, which would have been a good thing to do, but the way we were positioned made it impossible to do.

He reached up, and suddenly, I felt an object crash against the side of my head.

“Ow,” I said.

I had no idea what had hit the side of my head but it was a solid object and it hurt; suddenly, a second blow to my cranium with substantial force. Whatever hit me was hard, very hard and I screamed out in pain again. One blow on top of the other. It all happened so fast. I sat there not knowing what had hit me twice.

By now the boss had retrieved his packages and was standing beside me

“You know that really hurt,” I told him.

“I didn’t really mean to hit you so hard but that’s the exchange,” he said. “If you sit there, then I can hit you”

I went back to work behind the counter. Did he mean that if I sat on the chair he had the right to hit me? No, it must have been an accident, but what could have caused the blows? Was it the walkie-talkie that he carried on the side of his pants? It had to be accidental. I knew he would never have intentionally hit me.

I guess what he meant was that if I sat on the chair, and got hit inadvertently, that was ok; that was the fair exchange.

So now, upon reviewing the events, I must decide my relationship with the chair. At no time was permission to sit revoked. So the question at hand seems to be, do I accept his terms? Do I withdraw in ignominious retreat? Or do I sit tall in the chair when I feel the need?

What should I do?

Of arms and the sushi man, I sing – a poem from the Zabar’s lox counter

By Len Berk



Image courtesy Judith Girard-Marczak on Unsplash

What the devil is that guy doing in my spot? I walk into the store at 7:30 am. It’s my early day; the day I watch the store wake up. I like seeing the store at that time, but I wonder – *what’s that guy doing in my spot?* As I get closer and closer, it becomes clear. This guy is making sushi on my board. Looks like they decided to discontinue bringing in the sushi from outside, and instead, have it prepared, with all its ritual, in the store where people can see it being made and know it’s fresh. Good idea – even though my board was usurped.

I start to work one board over which is really not a problem – a board’s a board. And I get a chance to watch sushi being made from scratch. We introduce ourselves, the sushi man and me, and a new relationship is formed. Which is how I came to write this poem.

THE SUSHI MAN & HIS BLAZING BLADES

There is a pleasant Sushi Man
His name is Danny Fnu
From where does Fnu originate?
I have not a clue

Does not sound Japanese to me
But I don't think it has to be
What has to be is plain to see
Fingers, hands, dexterity

His day starts early, at daybreak
He arises and he's wide awake
He grabs his gear, for it is clear
Today it's sushi he'll create

Sushi Man is slicing
Sushi Man is dicing
Make a roll, break a roll
Hit them with some spicing

Shred the cukes, squeeze some gloss
Spread the rice, spread the moss
Add a shrimp then some eel
Avocado in this deal

Flash the knives with bravado
Add some more avocados

Pickled ginger, bright and pink
Then some soy sauce, looks like ink

Dancing fingers fold and squeeze
Rainbow rolls if you please
Next, wasabi, seaweed salad
The Skill is worthy of a ballad

Box 'em up, box 'em down

Box 'em sideways, add a crown

Sushi Man is finished
Sushi Man goes home
I've studied all his doings
So I could write this poem

'May I help you, Mr. Perlman?' – a lesson from the maestro at the Zabbar's lox counter

By Len Berk

So, I was slicing away. I looked up and sitting before me was Itzhak Perlman. Mr. Perlman is a regular at Zabbar's – you know, like Woody Allen's mother. He's been shopping here for years. He is held in such high esteem that the store manager assigns one of the sub-managers to walk around the store with Perlman to help with any difficulties he might encounter while shopping because he now uses a wheelchair.

I was about to say, "May I help you, Mr. Perlman?" when my memory flooded with images from years back when my co-worker David, the only other Jewish lox slicer, waited on the great violinist. I couldn't get over the fact that David would call him by his first name, and not only that, he would call him by his Yiddish name, Yitzhak.

I think David had been waiting on him long before I started to work at Zabbar's. David died some years ago and since then I was always looking for the opportunity to wait on Mr. Perlman, but it was difficult, because we have the number system at Zabbar's. The person with the next number gets waited on next and Perlman had escaped being the next number for me until that day. It was as though the stars were properly aligned and I was going to slice for Mr. Perlman. It was like my debut and he was my audience. I knew he would be watching me.

"How may I help you, Mr. Perlman?" I said, thinking that he would be impressed that I recognized him. None of the younger lox slicers on the line knew who he was. They were into a different kind of music, but I have been a lover of classical ever since I won the

“music appreciation” award for recognizing pieces by name back in the fifth grade.

“I’ll have a pound of Nova,” he said.

“Which part of the salmon do you like best?” I asked. “The belly or the back, lean or fatty?”

I was obviously trying to make an impression, like he knew his business but I knew mine. I wanted to make the kind of impression so that he would always want me to wait on him whenever he wanted lox. I don’t remember his answer but I do remember trying to make beautiful slices for him. That was all he wanted. I wrapped it up nicely and walked out from behind the counter and handed him his Nova.

He asked if we had such-and-such cookies.

“Yes, we do, Mr. Perlman, we do, I’ll get them for you from that department. I’ll be right back.”

I proceeded to the cookie department and sought out the one he wanted. I took it off the shelf and noticed that not only was there the cookie he wanted, but that the company made variations. So I took another box off the shelf – same brand, slightly different – these had chocolate sprinkles on them. With both boxes of cookies in hand, I started walking back to the fish counter where Mr. Perlman was waiting.

On my way I was thinking of the fun I’ve had kibbitzing

with selected customers. Not all the customers are kibbitzing ready, but when you find the right one it could lead to a sweet interlude. I wondered if Mr. Perlman liked to spar. Wouldn’t it be fun if I slipped one in on the maestro?

I handed him the box of cookies and told him that the company made the same one with sprinkles, and asked if he’d like to try those as well. He looked up at me and said, “No thank you, I’ll stick with the original. When you’ve got something good, you stick with it.”

I saw my opportunity.

I thought for a moment and then said to him, “Mr. Perlman, if a young boy or girl came up to you and said ‘I have been playing the violin for years and I recently completed writing my first concerto – would you be willing to play it for me?’ Would you say to that boy or girl that you would not play it because you found Beethoven’s Violin Concerto and when you find something so good you stick with it?”

I thought I had him.

He looked up at me, smiled, and said “That’s an entirely different matter.”

I guess he was trying to tell me that cookies and concertos don’t belong on the same plate.

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