



TAMPA EDITION

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Orthodox maven joins effort to make Tampa more kosher

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Rachel Lisbon

Keeping strictly kosher was easy for Rachel Lisbon for most of her life. Then she moved to Tampa and discovered what a headache it is to find kosher food.

Now, largely through social media postings, she is trying to help others, including a recent influx of Orthodox Jews who have moved to the Tampa area, to have an easier time finding kosher.

Lisbon, an Orthodox Jew, was born and raised in Brooklyn where, she said, “You can find two or three kosher spots to eat in every block.”

When she married Dennis Lisbon, they moved to his hometown of Silver Spring, MD, then in 2006 moved to Israel and later to Sunrise in South Florida.

Kosher products ranged from abundant to acceptable until 2014 when Dennis found a new job in Tampa. It was nothing less than culture shock for her, Lisbon said.

The Bay area has the second largest Jewish population in Florida, but it is nothing like South Florida, where there are not only many more Jews, but there are also cities like Sunrise, Boca Raton and Wellington where Jewish populations are heavily concentrated and merchants cater to them.

Save for Jo-El's Market and Delicatessen in St. Petersburg, there were no kosher restaurants or markets here when Lisbon arrived. Jo-El's is kosher certified by a Conservative rabbi and while not all products there qualify as kosher for Orthodox Jews, many do. Lisbon said walking into the place “made me feel like I was back in Brooklyn.”

But Lisbon said finding acceptable kosher products was so difficult that when friends planned to visit, she warned them to bring kosher food with them.

Throughout it all, Lisbon has continued to keep strictly kosher and offered advice and sympathy when she encountered Orthodox newcomers moving to the area.

The influx of Orthodox Jews to the Tampa Bay area has increased in the last few years. Strict covid regulations and high prices in New York, coupled with relatively cheap housing and plenty of jobs, prompted more Orthodox Jews to move here, she said. That is when it hit her that she could help both newcomers and those who have been here awhile find kosher products – sometimes hiding in plain sight.

Last summer Lisbon began turning that idea into reality when she formed Tampa Kosher Foodies, LLC, a company operating largely on social media sites to spread the news about what kosher is and where to find kosher food. She has a website, www.tampakosherfoodies.com, (which she acknowledges needs some updating) and more current postings about kosher in the Bay area by searching Tampa Kosher Foodies to find her Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok and WhatsApp sites.

Meanwhile, the kosher situation has improved in recent years, with much credit due to the Bais David Chabad center in South Tampa, led by Rabbi Lazer Rivkin. First was the opening of Pilpel Glatt Kosher Grill two years ago at 615 S. Melville Ave. on the Bais David campus. More recently Aroma Kosher Pizza at 2001 W Swann Ave., also on the Bais David campus, has opened.

Adding to the list of kosher restaurants is a new eatery opened by two Israelis – Grill Express Tampa at 514 Franklin St., Suite 104, in downtown Tampa.

Avihay Mamon, one of two owners of Grill Express, said Lisbon did a lot to help them, teaching them how to pronounce some English words and assisting them with wording for their menu.

She has also visited stores and found items that the owners did not know were kosher, then offered to help get the products identified to shoppers as kosher, or referred the owners to Rabbi Rivkin to see if the store can get kosher certification.

Lisbon says she wants to become the go-to source when it comes to letting folks know where to find kosher products in the area, so she is quick to tell people about Tampa's kosher restaurants or at grocery stores, or when a kosher food truck may be coming to the area. "Everywhere I go, I am always looking, and I am trying to do this for everyone in the Bay area. If I am in St. Petersburg, I will stop in stores over there and look for kosher items," she said.

Rabbi Rivkin said he knows of Lisbon's work in the community, adding, "I help her to identify kosher items and give her direction in how to verify what is a kosher product."

Her website lists a variety of symbols used on packaging for products which meet kashruth standards of the Chicago Rabbinical Council (CRC). She says the CRC is the "gold-standard" for kosher for Orthodox Jews and she has a contact there for when questions come up about what is kosher or not. Folks can check for those symbols on foods or, as has been her mission for a while, she visits many grocery stores in the area and goes aisle by aisle searching for those symbols and posting her findings on her social media sites.

In addition to her work identifying and listing kosher foods, Libson said as she builds trust and a reputation in the area, she hopes to expand her consulting service and also has plans to sell t-shirts and other Tampa Kosher Foodie merchandise.

As for expanding the choices locally, Rabbi Rivkin worked to get extensive kosher offerings added to a Winn Dixie store at 2100 W. Swann Ave, in South Tampa in 2016 and since then a Winn Dixie on Dale Mabry Highway at Bearss Avenue now has similar kosher offerings. He is working to get a third one in the Wimauma area. A Jewish resident there says 18-20 Orthodox families have moved in over the last few years.

In Pinellas County, Clearwater Kosher offers glatt kosher meats, chicken, deli, dairy and groceries and is located at Chabad of Clearwater, 2280 Belleair Road in Clearwater. The store is open by appointment, (727) 265-2770 or visit www.clearwaterkosher.com.

Additionally, Rabbi Pinchas Adler and wife Mushky of Chabad of Pinellas County in Palm Harbor do something similar to what Lisbon does. The couple have a Facebook page called "Kosher Food in Pinellas." As an introduction, the Adlers note, "Finding Kosher in Pinellas can sometimes be like a scavenger hunt." The site includes postings on kosher foods that the Facebook page members find.

Rabbi Adler a pointed out that the deli at BJs Wholesale Club, 26996 US Hwy 19 N, Clearwater, is kosher. Among items stocked are kosher challah and rye bread and they even have hamantaschen year round.

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