

# The Cradle of Global Bagel Baking? (It's Not New York)

A self-taught baker in New Jersey is helping entrepreneurs all over the world, many with not even a schmear of experience, to open bagel shops.

By Alan Neuhauser

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FAIR LAWN, N.J. — Beth George was sitting in her kitchen when her cellphone chimed with an email.

“I have visited New York a couple of times, and every time I return I end up dearly missing the bagels there,” the message said. “The taste is extraordinary. I would really like to open a shop in the Netherlands.”

There was just one problem, the writer continued: “I really don’t know where to start. I am not a professional cook.” In fact, he said, “I work in the I.T. business.”

It was Ms. George’s second such email that day, and the fifth she would receive in August. There were queries from two men hoping to open a bagel shop in Pittsburgh, a five-person team outside Dallas, a woman in Sweden and another in India.

“This business started off as a hobby,” Ms. George said as she tapped a reply. “Now it’s nonstop.”

Ms. George, officially, is a lawyer. But since 2013 she has worked day and night as one of the world’s few, and most sought-after, bagel consultants.

From the Bahamas to Saudi Arabia, from India to the Horn of Africa, dozens of aspiring bagel bakers — novices and professionals — have hired her to provide and adapt recipes, guide their business plans, help lay out their kitchens and be their on-call troubleshooter for issues from kneading and rolling to boiling (or steaming) and baking.

“It’s only five ingredients: water, flour, sugar, salt, yeast. But the thing people don’t know about bagels is, it’s a process — and people have to realize that they’re buying into that process,” said Ms. George, 57. “What surprises me is how many people want to do this. Every day. It’s just crazy.”



Ms. George at work in New Jersey. The BYOB on her shirt stands for both Be Your

Working from a commercial kitchen here in Fair Lawn, under the name BYOB Bagels — for both Be Your Own Boss and Build Your Own Business — Ms. George has helped open about 50 bagel shops on every continent except South America and Antarctica. She has improved what she calls “the bagel game” at another 20. (About 38 miles west of her, in Hamburg, N.J., is another consulting firm, How to Open a Bagel Store, run by Rob Goldberg, whose family owns about two dozen Goldberg’s Famous Bagels shops across the New York metropolitan area. Mr. Goldberg says he has consulted for about 20 independent shops.)

This wellspring of bagel know-how, recipes and innovation isn’t, as New Yorkers might imagine, some wizened man working in a basement kitchen in Brooklyn. It’s a largely self-taught Lebanese-American woman across the George Washington Bridge in North Jersey.

“I have just this natural understanding of math. I can look at something and start building math formulas — rudimentary formulas, but formulas,” Ms. George said. “I wrote my first bagel recipe in the back of a Lebanese cookbook.”

Many of her clients are first-timers: architects, engineers, accountants, teachers, graphic designers and business people, all nursing a shared dream of everything-seasoned entrepreneurship, one fueled by the bagel’s simplicity and adaptability.

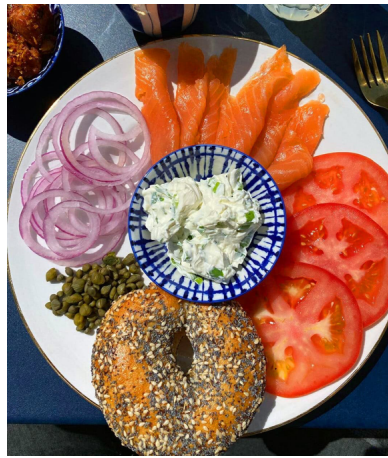
That approachability, though, can lead them to the mistaken assumption that bagels are easy to make.



Elizabeth Rubin, an expatriate from Manhattan, opened Jimmy & Joan's New York two years ago in Sweden. “It was so much harder than I thought,” she said. Magnus Egger



A sampling of the options at Jimmy & Joan's New York. Sara Bagenholm



Just like New York — only in Gothenburg, Sweden. Food and Coffee Gbg

“I just thought, ‘How hard can it be?’ It’s bread and it’s schmears, cream cheese,” said Elizabeth Rubin, 55, an expatriate from Manhattan who opened Jimmy & Joan’s New York, a chic chandelier-lit shop, two years ago in Gothenburg, Sweden. “It was so much harder than I thought.”

There’s the baking itself: days or weeks of trial and error, with different flours and enzymes, to replicate a New York bagel’s distinctive chewiness and crust; adapting the recipe to the local humidity and temperature; and adjusting the amount of time bagels need to “nap,” or proof.

But there’s also the marketing — how to shape expectations and build interest in a New York staple that, overseas, may be entirely unfamiliar.

“People didn’t understand why they had to pay the same price for bagels as compared to their sandwiches, because of the hole in the middle,” said Jonathan Jablonski, the founder and chief executive of Factory & Co., a Paris-based chain of 33 bagel (and now burger and salad) shops, with another 10 set to open in the months ahead. “We had to explain the whole idea.”

While most of Ms. George’s clients seek to conjure what she calls “the authentic New York experience,” many aim to — or need to — incorporate local influences: a labneh yogurt spread instead of cream cheese in the Middle East, bagels with Emmental cheese in France. In Paris and Brisbane, Australia, where crowds lean more toward lunch than breakfast, bagel sandwiches feature pastrami or grilled halloumi.





Spurthy Akshar, a lawyer from Bangalore, India, fell in love with bagels during a trip to New York City. Jyothy Karat for The New York Times



Ms. Akshar is making bagels at home until she can open a shop. Jyothy Karat for The New York Times

“I can’t open a very neat, bland place here — people would throw it in my face,” said Spurthy Akshar, 25, a corporate contracts lawyer in Bangalore, India. “Even McDonald’s here is so spicy, because that’s what we eat here. It needs to be a burst of flavor. Give me that, and people will eat it every day.”

Ms. Akshar, enchanted by an everything bagel with cream cheese during a visit to New York City last fall, hopes to open a shop later this year, offering spreads made from paneer and local vegetables. Since the start of the pandemic she has been practicing in her home kitchen, sending photos of her progress to Ms. George via WhatsApp.

“My manager would kill me if he knew how much time I was spending baking bagels,” Ms. Akshar said. “I can whip up Indian food in a few minutes. But working with an oven, I had no experience; it was so scary. Beth calmed me down. She’s like, ‘Take it one step at a time.’”

Ms. George knows what it’s like to teach yourself how to bake. She stumbled into bagel consulting through her business partner, Frank Mauro, 81, a cheerfully truculent New Yorker who is a veteran salesman — and perhaps the industry’s best-known elder statesman — of bagel-making equipment. He made his first bagel-equipment sale to a city shop during the Koch administration.

Their work together started with a challenge: In 2007, Ms. George, while working full time as a child-advocacy attorney in Maine, started experimenting with spelt-based breads after discovering that her son was sensitive to gluten. What began as an at-home baking project swiftly gained a following among friends and family, and soon elbowed its way onto store shelves from Hannaford to Whole Foods Market. Ms. George called the business Spelt Right.

She contacted Mr. Mauro, the head of sales at Excalibur Bagel & Bakery Equipment, then in Paramus, N.J., because she needed a device to help keep up with demand: the “bagel machine,” a whirring, Rube Goldberg-ish contraption with a rotating metal cog and a gliding conveyor belt whose design hasn’t much changed since the 1980s.





Ms. George with her business partner, Frank Mauro, a salesman of bagel-making equipment who helped get her started. Michael George for The New York Times

Mr. Mauro was skeptical. Over years of helping thousands of bagel shops, he had fielded dozens of calls from aspiring bakers with various flour mixes and doughs. Many hoped to make something gluten-free. But even if their doughs could be formed into rounds by hand, they inevitably proved too gooey or too dry for mechanization, gumming up the metal cog or simply breaking up.

“I said: ‘Lady, trust me, it’s not going to work,’” Mr. Mauro recalled. “‘But if you come down here with your recipe, and if it works, I’ll help you with whatever you want.’” Ms. George drove home that evening with an Excalibur Bagel Divider & Former in her pickup truck.

Spelt Right largely fell apart in 2016, hit by a sudden spike in the price of spelt grain. But Ms. George and Mr. Mauro stayed connected, and as he sold more bagel machines and dual-arm mixers and V-shaped muffin depositors around the world, he began connecting customers to the woman who could teach them how to use them.

Among the first were a retired police officer and a social worker in Marathon, Fla., who were mystified as to why their bagels kept puffing into blimps. (Answer: Too much yeast in the air from the bakery that had previously occupied their space.) Soon after that, she flew to Factory & Co. in Paris — a city skilled at producing delicate croissants and light-as-air brioche, but flummoxed by the bagel.

“People tried to do bagels with French style — it’s disgusting, it doesn’t work, it’s not the same,” said Mr. Jablonski, 40, the owner. “We needed her knowledge to improve on the bagel.”

Other clients had similar problems: Bagels would emerge plush, like a loaf of Wonder Bread, or deflate into hockey pucks or crumble into pieces like packing peanuts. Sometimes the flavor was off.

Ed Thill, who immersed himself in bagel-baking in 2016 after a four-month stint in drug rehab, said his at-home bagels kept coming out “too breadly.”

“Beth takes a scientific approach, and she’s a realist,” Mr. Thill said. “She straight-up told me: ‘This is what people want, I recommend using this formula, and here’s how we’re going to do it.’”

His shop, Goldilox Bagels, opened last fall in Medford, Mass., to glowing reviews.

Before the pandemic, most clients spent four to five days training with Ms. George, flying in for the week and staying at a nearby hotel, or, in the case of one vegan baker from Los Angeles, crashing on Ms. George’s couch.

They worked eight-hour days in her white-walled commercial kitchen, learning how a handful of dough, if stretched into an unbroken, transparent “windowpane,” can reveal that a batch is ready for baking; how soda water is the key ingredient in spreadable cream cheese; how barley malt, sweet and thick like molasses, can transform a drab sheet of bagel rounds into lustrous rows of golden rings.



Ms. George teaching basics to Rich Adams of Legacy Bagels, soon to open in Frisco, Texas. Michael George for The New York Times



A new bagel business requires lots of capital, Ms. George said. “The first thing we talk about is money.” Michael George for The New York Times



“The thing people don’t know about bagels is, it’s a process — and people have to realize that they’re buying into that process.” Michael George for The New York Times

They toured a half-dozen local bagel shops, from old standbys like Absolute Bagels to newer arrivals like Black Seed Bagels, which makes a smaller, Montreal-style bagel. And after they headed home, the training continued — as it does today — through photos and videos and the occasional panicked early-morning phone call.

“Me losing 30 minutes is losing 200 bagels,” said Mr. Thill, 40, who for a time couldn’t figure out why his shop’s gas line kept cutting off. Ms. George and Mr. Mauro quickly identified an oversensitive carbon monoxide alarm.

“He told me, ‘You just need to do X, Y and Z,’ and sure enough it started working again,” Mr. Thill said.

But even before Ms. George starts sharing her spreadsheets of recipes comes the hard reality of dollars and cents. Opening a bagel shop costs about \$225,000, sometimes as much as \$250,000.

“The first thing we talk about is money,” Ms. George said. “Then we ask, ‘Who are you going into business with?’”

“My spouse” or “my partner” is often the right answer.

Among her earliest clients were the husband-and-wife team behind Bantam Bagels, whose stuffed mini-bagels went on to earn an endorsement from Oprah Winfrey in 2014 and, the next year, made a splash on “Shark Tank.” Goldilox Bagels; Bake a Bagel, in Queens; Black Sheep Bagel Cafe, in Cambridge, Mass.; and Marathon Bagel Co., in Florida, were all founded by romantic couples.

“You all the sudden get an order for a big catering job, you need someone to stay up all night with you to make bagels,” Ms. George said. “It’s much easier to do that with family rather than employees.”



Eddy Tice and his partner, Ania Kutek, used Ms. George’s guidance to open NYC Bagel Deli in Brisbane, Australia, in 2016. JD Suarez Photography

Eddy Tice and his partner, Ania Kutek, had a disastrous first day making bagels at NYC Bagel Deli, their shop in Brisbane, Australia, in 2016. They were only weeks into lessons with Ms. George when their landlord forced them to open the shop, in a new food hall, before they were ready.

“The oven was smoking and the bagels sticking, and the staff was running around not knowing what to do at all because we’d rushed and hadn’t had time to train them,” said Mr. Tice, 36. “It was mayhem.”

Four years later, the couple have two locations, and in March opened a new cafe called Superthing, serving croissants and sourdough breads as well as bagels.

“We wanted a new challenge,” Mr. Tice said. “We didn’t eat bagels for a few months. And then we went back and went, ‘Oh, we miss bagels. God, they’re so good.’ You forget how good they are.”

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