

The Battle of the Bagel

By ReadWorks



In the summer of 1995, a bakery opened in Montreal, Canada and began to serve warm, New York-style bagels. Other cities across the world had been thrilled when New York bagels finally came to town, but the Montrealers were outraged. Bagelville, the new shop, went out of business and closed its doors in less than a year.

Montreal has a unique bagel tradition that dates back to at least 1919. The Montreal bagel is chewier, smaller, and less dense, but has a much bigger hole than its American cousin. Boiled in honey water and then baked in a wood-burning oven, it's a little sweet and has a harder exterior. It is hand-rolled in the shape of an oval hoop; you can wear one around your wrist like a bracelet.

People in both cities feel very strongly about their bagels, and there is something of an ongoing competition between them. Residents of Montreal insist their brand of bagel is better than the famous New York kind. The Montreal-born astronaut Greg Chamitoff even brought one-and-a-half dozen bagels, sprinkled with sesame seeds, with him when he boarded the International Space Station.

New Yorkers, however, think the Montreal bagel is too sweet—more like a doughnut than a genuine bagel should be. They complain that Montreal bagels turn dry and hard less than a day after they're baked. "I don't think a Montreal bagel place would work in New York," said Vince Morena, a co-owner of Montreal's famous St. Viateur Bagel bakery. "New Yorkers love New York bagels. That's how it is."

St. Viateur Bagel is an extremely popular tourist destination. There are no tables or chairs in the original shop, just a few sweaty men in T-shirts making sesame and poppy seed bagels and a line of customers waiting to eat them. The doughy rings are arranged in two rows on a long wooden plank and then shoved into a brick, wood-burning oven. Halfway through the 20-minute cooking process, the bagels are flipped over. When they're done, a baker flings them off the plank and into a bin that reaches right down to the cash register. Forty dozen bagels are produced every hour.

"You have to be an artist to bake in a wood-burning oven," said Irwin Shlafman, owner of Fairmount Bagel, one of Montreal's very first bagel bakeries. "The temperature in the oven is set by the guy who's putting the wood in and moving it around. It's terribly difficult." Fairmount's oven was built by Shlafman's grandfather, a bagel-maker, in 1949, and the training process at the shop is extremely tough. "It takes a year at least before I'll let anybody bake," said Shlafman firmly. "No one comes in here and says, 'I want to be a baker.'"

Shlafman added, "New Yorkers come here and reluctantly try our bagel and enjoy it somewhat, but when they get back, they feel better about the fact that they're home and can get what they call a real bagel."

Most of New York City's bagels are machine-made rather than hand-rolled and then cooked in a rotating gas oven. Machines for making bagels were first introduced in the 1960s by Daniel Thompson, a California inventor and the son of a baker. The double-bank machine, used now by big production companies, is capable of churning out 400 dozen an hour. That's 80 bagels per minute! These New York bagels are much fluffier than the ones in Montreal and about double the size.

"I saw them baking bagels in Montreal," said Florence Wilpon, co-founder of Ess-a-Bagel, a bakeshop on 1st Avenue and 21st Street in Manhattan. "When they came out of the oven, they were burnt and hard and sort of misshapen. I said to the man, 'Why are you throwing them in the fire?!'" She had never seen bagels baked in a wood-burning oven before, or bagels so small; her own are particularly gigantic.

So which bagel is better? The answer all depends on where you come from and what you are used to. The bagel wars are impossible to settle. In truth, there is no "superior bagel," just citizens attached to the cultures and traditions of their own cities. That's unlikely to keep people from debating about it, though!