



## Fusion City

*From Mt. Olympus Bagels to  
Puerto Rican Lasagna and Beyond*

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TO OUTSIDERS, the problem seemed frivolous. The solution even more so. But to a New Yorker, both concern and response were entirely appropriate. The crisis in the food tent at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival during New York on the Mall—the sudden lack of New York water for authentic New York bagel and pickle making—was clearly a state of affairs requiring emergency measures.

To ensure his supply, Steve Ross of Coney Island Bialy & Bagels had sent thirty-six gallons of hometown water to Washington. But when Herman Vargas of Russ & Daughters, Manhattan’s more-than-ninety-year-old appetizing store, borrowed some for its Lower East Side brine, Ross began to run out. Enter the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, which, on hearing of the problem, airlifted containers of Big Apple water to the capital. “Ridiculous,” I heard one person say. But we New Yorkers understood. Even if we did it with a smile.

Few of us may know why Acqua Naturale New York, our tap water, is so good, so critical to the taste of foods produced here, but we are aware that it is a composition of elements that come together naturally and create something unique, not unlike ourselves, the inhabitants of what is arguably the world’s greatest city. In a way, that water, brought here from all over the state as we are brought here from the earth’s four corners, symbolizes New York itself.

So when I “listen” to what in this book has been called the “food voice”—a term coined by Annie Hauck-Lawson to refer to each individual’s food-and-drink patterns—the rush of water is part of what I hear. But I also hear in it the collective food voice of the city, formed by a chorus more than 8 million strong. Listen hard and you will hear it, too, the whole greater than the sum of its magnificent parts, yawping, as

- 2 Walt Whitman would say, but also melodious, exhilarating, seductive, irresistible, vigorous, compelling. And endlessly mutable.

In approach, and in the multiform style and content of its chapters, *Gastropolis: Food and New York City* reflects the diversity of the city it depicts. Turn its pages and you move across time and history, from the city's pre-beginnings to today; turn them again and you are introduced to facets of its food life through archaeology, sociology, food studies, anthropology, and personal narrative.

The book explores "The Orient Express," a subway line. An archaeological dig. Russ & Daughters. The history of pushcarts. Restaurant dining and identity. Heritage Tourism in Harlem. A sensory approach to a street. The city's avant-garde food scene. The dilemma of hunger. The Lenape Indians. The venerable Port Arthur Restaurant. A collection of ten thousand Chinese take-out menus. New York iconic foods ("When I was a young man, no bigger than this, / a chocolate egg cream was not to be missed," sings Lou Reed in tribute to one of them). And, in addition, offers memoirs of growing up African American, Polish American, and Italian American in the city's boroughs.

This is a study of our town's inflections. Its gastronomic utterances. Of why it sounds (and tastes) the way it does. And these accounts work both to introduce those elements and to conserve them. No easy task. Listen to Walt Whitman on the subject. "A New York journal a few days ago," he wrote in *Preserving Tradition*, an essay for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, "made the remark in the course of one of its articles that the whole spirit of a floating and changing population like ours is antagonistic to the recording and preserving of what traditions we have of the American past. This is probably too true."<sup>1</sup> Neither Whitman nor the other journalist is likely to have been referring to foodways, but they easily could have been. And what was true for America was even more the case for New York.

As a writer with a deep interest in food and its meanings and history, and also as a native New Yorker, passionate about my city from its most grimy to its most tony bits, this way of looking at NYC (a logo recognized the world over) is special to me. For a dozen years, when the food, foodways, and food people of the city were my full-time beat for one of its newspapers, I would tramp the streets in disbelief that someone was paying me to do this privileged work. And when I would take a friend or colleague from elsewhere to one of our ethnic neighborhoods, I would wait expectantly for the yelp of wonder that always followed our emergence from the subway: "Cara, I feel like I took a plane to get here!" And then I would beam with native pride. I still do.

As a consequence of that joyful period (as well as exploring I have done since), when I picture my hometown, I see what everyone else sees, of course, but I also see a city map whose signposts are *thalis* (metal trays holding small bowls of Indian fare), grills, steamers, woks, pots, cleavers, *tagines*, samovars, markets, and restaurants, all of which delineate its beguiling highways and byways.

My mental slide show includes Mt. Olympus Bagels, my favorite New York food sign. When I see it, I picture Zeus and Hera on their thrones, glasses of nectar in hand, having Sunday breakfast on the mountaintop along with the whole family. Perhaps to them, as to us, it is a bagel and a schmear that is the real ambrosia. (A

related sign, in the window of a Greenwich Village bagel shop, also has a place in my gallery. Meant to make passersby think the store's version of this Jewish, and now American, specialty is the best, it lyrically enthuses, "Our bagels are baked at dawn in an Italian bakery.")

Other pictures flash through my mind. There is the Burmese temple atop the bean sprout factory in Brooklyn, where the abbot's birthday is being celebrated with offerings of Coke and American birthday cake. Gypsies eating pastrami sandwiches at Juniors in Brooklyn. *Laamb* (Senagalese wrestling) in Central Park as propitiatory milk is spilled over the combatants. Ganesha, the Elephant God, at the Hindu temple in Flushing with a tasty *laddoo* in his hand. A Brooklyn factory at night, rain pounding on the corrugated-metal roof, and its rudimentary tortilla-making rig at rest for a moment. Boxes being carried off airplanes by couriers bringing immigrants lonely for the taste of home, dishes prepared by their mothers and wives. The city's ball fields where, whether the game is soccer or baseball, some of its best ethnic food is to be had. And the fancifully nicknamed "Spaghetti Park," even today a bastion of Italian American life in increasingly Hispanic Corona Heights.

Change carousels and up comes the image of an SRO (single-room occupancy) immigrant hotel where a friend and I are sitting on a bed to eat delicious, but illegally prepared, African food. The *casitas*, or clubhouses, in East Harlem, the Lower East Side, and the South Bronx where club members cook whole roast pig. Crusty *banh mi*. (Think Vietnamese heroes. Grinders. Subs.) Spicy red bean soup eaten to the sound of domino tiles being slapped against tables in a West Indian restaurant. A menu offering Thai Chicken, Jewish Style. Latina women on street corners with homemade tamales or arepas or empanadas being sold from pots in their shopping carts. And Shanghai soup dumplings in which the soup is in the dumpling and not the other way around.

New York foods. And New York food voices. It would take a book the size of all the borough telephone directories put together to list every one. Each an expression of culture. Each loaded with meaning. Each completely distinctive. Each an element of New Yorkerness, representing the sui generis amalgam of people who call the city home.

If America was never quite "the melting pot" that Israel Zangwill dubbed it in his 1908 play of that name, still the phrase came to express a political and social ideal, if not an absolute reality. And because our immigrant heritage was, as it still is, a huge element of our identity, for many years the melting pot was an important part of the construct, a piece of how we, as Americans and as New Yorkers, thought of ourselves. But though we have been together in the crucible for centuries, and have mingled and combined, in fact, we have never quite melted.

In his 1938 book, *Around the World in New York*, Konrad Bercovici wrote:

New York! A fold that has multiplied one hundred and twenty times the original size in a hundred years. A fold that has increased itself not from within, of its own kind, but from without, from people of all nations, coming from all directions. . . . Crowding one another, and fusing against their wills slowly with one another, without ever becoming a compact whole.<sup>2</sup>

4 Not a perfect description, certainly not always against their wills, but, in many ways, on the mark.

And it is that kind of commingling, one in which merging does not rule out the retaining of distinctions and the building of new ones, that began to fascinate me as I wandered the streets of my hometown, “Fusion City,” a place seasoned with a singular spice blend of *ras el hanout* and hot dogs, asphalt, spirit, skyscrapers, traffic, and grit.

That fascination has never stopped. How could it? Exploring a neighborhood, learning to understand it, watching its foodways change shape and mingle under the press of urban forces is still a special pleasure for me.

Pervasive though it is in New York, I never set out to make fusion a focus. Initially, it was more a matter of accretion of information, acquired not by intent, but by circumstance and observation. Work, and then curiosity and delight, took me to locations where I saw it constantly, and the process, whether natural or manipulated, gradually became a regular subject of thought.

Ultimately, however, I realized that the ethnic beat I walked for my newspaper was not my introduction to fusion, and that I had first encountered it, as most New Yorkers do, in streets both elegant and mean, where it was, and is, simply a given. However, the real beginnings came even earlier, in my own immigrant family, when my artsy Polish Jewish mother, transported to New York, served maple syrup to accompany her blintzes and her matzo brei.

What she was doing, combining the New World and the Old, was not unusual, and on these shores must certainly have begun in New Amsterdam when the already diverse population—it is said that more than seventeen languages were spoken in a settlement of only a thousand people—needed substitutions for what couldn’t be easily had, or, as was often the case early on, simply needed food.

And certainly there came a day when some Dutch goodwoman, wanting a change, threw some local berries into her *olykoeks*, the progenitors of our doughnuts, as Andrew F. Smith points out here. There were also Native American corn and cornmeal to explore. And if a bottle of Japanese soy sauce was common on the tables of the rich in Amsterdam, as early as the seventeenth century, used to add saltiness and more flavor to soups and meat dishes, might it not ultimately have come here, as well?

The English arrived. The Jews. The Africans. Germans. Irish. Italians. West Indians and East Indians. Russians. Poles. Chinese. Latinos. Southeast Asians. The Spanish. And still more. And with each arrival, then as now, the pattern was repeated, and the city further fortified by the power of diversity.

Fusion in New York has been in full swing for centuries. With every war, with every change in the immigration laws, with every revolution, with every flight to freedom and away from hunger, and with every search for a better life, the city’s foodscape has shifted.

Over the years, as a result of increased understanding of the processes at work here in Fusion City, my own interpretation of the term “fusion” has broadened substantially, growth that really began with Mt. Olympus Bagels. The sign made me aware that where food is concerned, fusion goes far beyond the usual, and far too limited, definition. “A style of cooking that combines ingredients and techniques

from very different cultures or countries,” says the *American Heritage Dictionary*, most inadequately.

For me, the name, cleverly suggesting bagels of mythic quality to the population at large, while marking them for local Greeks as in some way the food of home, quintessentializes certain aspects of urban fusion—the movement of foods from one ethnic group to another. The way food is used as an identity marker. Or as a form of ethnic signaling. The effects of commerce. Of mingling. And those, of course, are only the beginnings. Come with me now and see.

An immigrant travels with luggage of several kinds. There are suitcases packed with practical goods and memorabilia (for example, a handwritten cookbook, a *lefse* rolling pin, or a gefilte fish pot, such as those in the museum on Ellis Island), and there is the baggage carried only in the mind, which contains flavors, aromas, and images from the kitchens of homeland and family.

Of the 12 million people who came to Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954 (the vast majority by 1924, when the National Origins Act reduced the flow), forming the most momentous migration in history, one-third stayed in New York, adding to the already pulsating mix.

If at first they attempted to cling to foods they knew, or that resembled those they knew, and offered comfort through their familiarity, they were, ultimately, forced toward change by circumstance; by contact with other ethnic groups even within their own tight enclaves (at that time, the Lower East Side was one of the most crowded places on earth); by the urging of misguided social workers; and by the power of enculturation.

That process had been under way even before they began their lives here. Creolization, whether created by epochal forces such as mass migration, or by a single immigrant leaving home, begins at the airport or pier, when a sense of “us” and “them” is first established. On arrival, language, clothes, mores, manners, traditions, ways of thinking, consumption patterns, always at risk, are at once clung to, and slowly, and to varying degrees, altered, the process helped along not only by societal pressures, but also by the natural inclinations of immigrants themselves, impelled to move on out, to taste the new, and to be, and act, a little bit American.

Inevitably, food culture is part of that negotiation. The accommodation starts when immigrants, especially the first to arrive, must use the ingredients available in the new country to make the dishes of the old. In that sense, ethnic foods are often, and inescapably, fusion foods. (The irony is that, at first bite, we tend to regard anything ethnic as traditional. Indeed, we use the term “ethnic” as a measure of cultural authenticity. Yet in some sense, the word implies dilution. Or at the very least, difference.) Of course, the larger the group grows, the more likely that the real thing can be found here, but that is still not always the case. Sometimes fusion is simply the result of making do, a matter of substitutions made for economy or simplicity.

And so it happened that years ago, while dining on *fejoaida* in a Brazilian eatery in Manhattan, I noticed something oddly out of place among the flavors. Because it was easier to get at the time, the chef was substituting pastrami for the *carne seca* with which the dish is traditionally made. Writing a column about Eritreans in one of the city’s Eritrean-owned restaurants (most often simply identified as Ethiopian),

- 6 I wondered of what the *injera* (fermented tablecloth bread that is one of the staples of that cuisine) had been made. I knew the traditional grain, teff, a relative of millet, was not yet easily available here. The waitress responded to my question with a smile, “Why Auntie Jemima, of course.” Then the market for teff grew, and today “Aunt Jemima *injera*” is most often replaced with the more authentic variety, just as the *fejoaida* is most often made with *carne seca*. Yet even now, sometimes Aunt Jemima or pastrami is made to do.

The new New Yorkers have, in general, been part of the huge influx of peoples from Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and eastern Europe that began after a change in immigration law ended the quota system in 1965 and that was fed, too, by the fall of the Soviet Union and the breakup of Yugoslavia. Today, these immigrants, in company with those who came before them, have been creating an even more varied society, one so heterogeneous that even we, whose roots from the beginning were set down in immense diversity, and who live in its midst, are unlikely ever to have experienced anything like it before.

If the notion of the melting pot was contested by some almost from its inception, it has never been more in question than now. These days, metaphors are more likely to invoke a mosaic or a salad or a stew, in which each component remains separate, distinct, while at the same time becoming part of a whole. They reflect the idea of pluralism, of a multiethnic society, in which the heritage of each immigrant group is to be maintained, with little pressure to shed it in order to become A New Yorker, and no need to cohere except in ways that are much more minimal than in the past. Today, the fact that you are an immigrant may actually be the thing that most makes you feel you are an American and deeply a part of New York.

Boris Fishman, a Russian émigré, put it tellingly in the *New York Times*:

Modern America is kind to ethnicity. A hundred years ago, when the country was less certain of itself, the greenhorns who sailed from Eastern Europe for the tenements of the Lower East Side were expected to assimilate and lose themselves to America’s cultural largess. Today, immigration has so thoroughly redefined the American narrative that I feel American precisely because I am an immigrant. New York has subsumed ethnicity so thoroughly that I feel more American than a Russian plowing through a plate of blintzes at the Russian Vodka Room.<sup>3</sup>

But blintzes and other good things to eat remain part of the story. While reinventing New York (and again confirming its centuries-long role as a destination for people around the world), the new immigrants are also reinventing New York food—as did their Irish, Jewish, and Italian ancestors a century ago. By adding their dishes to the city’s already heavily laden table, they are creating a feast even more various than any that has preceded. And we New Yorkers, like little birds with beaks open, are ready to savor every aspect of it.

Its initial force, of course, is still in immigrant communities where, if we could peep into home kitchens, we might find not only the traditional foods we would expect, but jerk pork tossed with spaghetti, French fries flecked with *za’atar*, or Puerto

Rican lasagna heavy with cilantro and green chiles (lasagna is a *tabula rasa* for many ethnic groups).

Perhaps the process begins in the schoolyard when Pedro tries what Ahmed is eating and goes home and demands it from his mom. Or arises out of practicality when both parents are working and there is a product on the market that resembles the original, even if it is American made (and originally from somewhere else entirely). Thus mozzarella often stands in for any white cheese. And pita is often substituted for any flatbread, or, as in a case that Annie Hauck-Lawson learned about from a student, refrigerator biscuit dough stands in for that in Chinese steamed buns.

The compounding can result, too, from immigrant creativity and the lure of new ingredients. When a Ukrainian-born woman learned I was doing a story about her East Village neighborhood, she approached me in the street to offer her recipe for the best-ever pierogi. Reaching for my notebook, I began to write, sure this would be the version I would run home to make. Temptee Whipped Cream Cheese was the first ingredient. Velveeta was the last.

It happens when ethnic neighborhoods are contiguous and their borders are like the borders of foreign countries, with all that lies on the other side. It happens, as with earlier generations, out of yearning to be American and like everyone else. (The Pakistani-style Thanksgiving turkey I once saw for sale in Manhattan's Little India was a wonderful example of the ethnicized version of the holiday, as defined by immigrants for whom it is the turkey that is iconic, the thing that makes the meal American, but who think nothing of surrounding it with Chinese fried rice, curried vegetables, *foo foo*, or *kapusta*.)

And it can also come about while rehearsing to be American. At a Taiwanese banquet, roast beef was served alongside traditional fare, so diners could practice for their new lives in Flushing, Queens.

The adoption of foreign techniques is another form of fusion—say, the use of stir-frying to cook non-Chinese dishes—or the use of new cooking implements—for example, the wok. Or see Anne Mendelson on the Lenapes' adaptation of iron kettles after the arrival of the fur traders, providing the Indians for the first time with a long-lived cooking utensil.

Fusion can even be a matter of proportion. The combining and changing increase when ingredients that were an extravagance back home become more available or affordable. Meat, perhaps eaten once a week or a month, or used largely for flavor in the countries of many who passed through Ellis Island, fell into this category when, here, it became the central ingredient of the meal, and a powerful symbol of pride and plenty.

And, of course, substitutions may be made for religious reasons. A kosher restaurant in New York that once served Jewish deli on one side of the center aisle, and Chinese food (a Jewish favorite) on the other, also made its sweet-and-sour pork with pastrami. Muslim diners sometimes frequent halal Chinese restaurants run by non-Muslim Chinese. And the late-night halal cart at Fifty-third Street and Sixth Avenue, which began business many years ago to feed Muslim cab drivers, has won itself a fan base of non-Muslim eaters described by the owner as largely American or Spanish.

8           And sometimes it is simply a matter of who is doing the cooking. Many immigrants—people who were engineers, accountants, or teachers in their own country—open simple restaurants here because they cannot get a job or cannot speak English. And quality or authenticity or respect for tradition are not always the first priorities—especially when a vitiated version of the original can be a selling point. After I had written a story about Vietnamese restaurants in Manhattan’s Chinatown, one owner confided in me with delight that he had finally found the right way to serve his customers *nuoc mam*, the fermented fish sauce that characterizes Vietnamese cuisine. “Now,” he said contentedly, “we dilute it with flat 7-Up.”

Inevitably, fusion occurs when the variety of foodstuffs available grows larger with each new influx from around the globe and changes the already complex foodscapes of the city, as it always has. And those foodstuffs often have complex histories of their own. Of course, the swap meet didn’t begin here. Many of the foods that have added to the amazing ferment in the city’s kitchens arrived in New York already fused.

After all, cuisines have been converging and forming unions since day broke on the world’s first civilizations, and new combinations have been created with every war, at every colonial outpost, and with every movement across borders, whether by force or in search of a better life. In the city’s Peruvian restaurants you will find *tallarín verde* (*tallarín* from the Italian *tagliarini*), served tossed in a pesto-type sauce made with spinach. In those of the Trinidadians, you see curry powder, and dishes such as roti that show the Indian influence on the island’s foods. In another restaurant, say Jamaican-Chinese, it is the use of ginger and stir-frying that mark the effect of the island’s Chinese population. An Ethiopian or Eritrean restaurant in New York will sometimes have spaghetti on the menu, a throwback to the time when Italy was the colonial power there.

Combine Spanish, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and American influences with a basically Malay cuisine, and you are eating in Filipino Jackson Heights or along First Avenue and Fourteenth Street in Manhattan. *Nonya* cooking, the food of the Straits Chinese, is a nineteenth-century Singaporean product of marriages between Chinese men and Malaysian women who blended their husbands’ native fare with Malaysian and Indonesian techniques and flavors. In the “purely” Malaysian eateries of New York, it is the *mélange* of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cooking that offers historical insight.

Whether created through empire and expansion or indentured labor (brought to work railroads or sugar plantations) or by miscellaneous other causes, such fusions defined the cooking of the immigrants from these countries long before they arrived on American shores. Yet odds are, something new was added here.

During the heyday of Ellis Island, if one immigrant carried her recipe for rugelach in her head and heart and the muscle memory of making it in her hands, others brought, to name just a very few, pizza, pasta, pita bread, and bagels, all of which were adopted and adapted. And still today, one of the primary ways that the fare of hyphenated Americans—whether New York’s Mexican-Americans, Italian-Americans, Russian-Americans, or even Americans who have lost the hyphen—develops and spreads is simply through exposure.

Moreover, fusion results whether foreigners come to our tables—or we come to theirs. It happens when people travel for business or pleasure or even military purposes, enjoy the local food, and come back wanting to have it at home. And once adopted and adapted, whether under these or other circumstances, it draws the rest of us as well. During the 1939 World's Fair, which had a pronounced effect on the city's food culture, foreign cuisines were offered for nationalist and political reasons, as well as commercial ones. Thus New Yorkers who had never been abroad could taste dishes from afar and learn to crave them. "If you care for variety, there are approximately twenty restaurants in the Foreign Government area, where France, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Poland, the Soviet Union, and even the Dutch East Indies among others, will offer their favorite delicacies," said the *Official Guidebook*.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, it was not only the place in which fusion most obviously makes itself manifest—that is, the home kitchen, whether that of new immigrants or native-born New Yorkers—that I kept turning over in my mind in the course of this years-long adventure.

I thought about many other manifestations of it, one of which was pizza and the pizzeria—yes, the pizzeria. If creations such as smoked salmon pizza with mascarpone served at high-end restaurants are one kind of pizza fusion, there is also another, more basic. Pizzerias have been ethnicizing their product and fusing ingredients and styles for years. If New York pizza is pizza by the slice, it is frequently also pizza made ethnic. The pie's eternal popularity and the fact that the pizzeria business has relatively low startup costs has long made it attractive to immigrants. After Gennaro Lombardi opened the first New York pizzeria in 1905, pizzerias became a foothold occupation not only for Italians, but for Greeks (prominent here in the restaurant business) and Arabs (and even South Americans and, occasionally, Chinese or Indians). They still are. And their pizzerias do not make only Italian American pizza. Often, and increasingly it seems, in keeping with the growth of our interest in the food experience writ large, they make it their own.

In the pizzerias of New York, I have had Greek pizza with feta; Israeli pizza topped with falafel; double-crust Indian vegetarian pizza; pizza topped with *pebril*, a Chilean sauce; Argentinian pizza topped with *faina*, a chickpea flour pancake with Italian origins (a combination eaten here, but created there because of Argentina's large Italian population). And the city has long had a "pizzeria" owned by an Iraqi, in which the toppings come on pita bread.

Often, though, the ethnic statement appears not only in the form of toppings, but also in the form of small bites from home. The Salvadoran owner may also sell *pupusas*; the Chilean owner, empanadas; the Yemenite owner, *malawach*.

And I also saw that fusion is not only about immigrants. Learning about one another's cuisines, even among those who are native born, can produce related effects. Sometime ago, waiting for a friend at the bottom of that great stage, the staircase of the Metropolitan Museum, I heard a man approach a woman with a flirtatious line that was certainly original, if not unique. "I wonder," he asked, "if I could I persuade you to cook for me?" "What would you like?" she replied, happy to join in the game. A list of his favorites followed—pork chops and gravy, grits, sweet potato pie—but although she was nodding, he suddenly stopped to reconsider. Then,

10 surveying her face, he continued, a big smile on his own: “Actually, I think it would be better if you made me chicken soup, gefilte fish, and some rugelach. After that, I will teach you how to make the rest.” Gasping with pleasure at this New York exchange, they slapped their thighs, spun around, and laughed out loud until they cried. And to me those two New Yorkers, shouting with delight on upper Fifth Avenue, and connecting through the cuisines into which they were born, is also fusion, and yet another aspect of the city’s multilayered, multifaceted, multiflavored food voice.

Through writing about fusion and lecturing about it, I came to realize that, too, in the past several decades something had been added to the city’s usual gastronomic free for all. In both concept and reality, the fusion process was taking place faster and at many more levels, and to a greater degree than ever before, happening not only naturally, through immigration and through exposure to one another’s cuisines, as it always has, but also through contrivance, the result of our enthusiasm for it, chef creativity, globalization. And, in particular, commercial forces.

Fusion was a gastronomic idea whose time had come, we all latched onto it, and the melding became dazzlingly visible, affecting local delis to supermarkets, luncheonettes to fine-dining restaurants, big food companies and small, and how and what we ate (and eat), from the lowliest table to the finest.

Of course, when a particular cuisine or culture is in vogue, and much imitated by others, dishes are reformulated to suit perceptions of the marketplace. The desire to be modish, on the part of both restaurateur and diner, is a great determinant. And so it was here.

As any New Yorker knows, the panino (or as we call Italian grilled sandwiches here, a panini [the plural erroneously used as a singular]) has taken the city. A few months ago, lunching in the Meatpacking District, one of Manhattan’s “hot” areas, I saw a Cuban panini featured on the menu. Composed of regular ham, cheese, and tomato, it was neither a Cuban sandwich nor an Italian one, and to top it all off, literally, it was also served with salsa, adding a south-of-the-border note. A sign in a restaurant window in Midtown offered a Reuben panini—corned beef, sauerkraut, Swiss cheese, and Russian dressing, a classic New York sandwich (whether by adoption or through invention) made to sound more trendy by serving it in the style of the moment. My favorite? The greengrocer on my corner, among whose offerings is an “Italian” panino made with *bulgogi*, a style of grilled beef often referred to as the national dish of Korea.

At the fine-dining level today, chefs romance the city’s increasingly bold palates with fusion dishes born both out of brilliance and out of folly—for example, a dish of eggplant topped with soy sauce, mozzarella, and kiwi at a restaurant best left unidentified. (Although more freewheeling and also more globalized now, chef mix and match is not entirely a new phenomenon. Seventy years ago, Le Perroquet, a French restaurant in Manhattan, was offering diners “Steak Vermont,” a dish of beef topped with cheese. Not, however, American Cheddar, as one might expect in a dish so named, but rather French Roquefort.) In skillful hands, however, fusion cuisine can at once seduce, entertain, and startle. Consider the parsnip tart with quinoa, hazelnuts, and bok choy at WD-50; the luscious foie gras ravioli served with a

green cabbage marmalade at Le Cirque; or the dish of Vietnamese “minestrone” with charred pineapple and cilantro found at Spice Market.

In restaurants and on menus, fusion also happens linguistically and notionally with the loosening and deterioration of meaning in food terms and the incorporation of culinary catchphrases to mean other things. At Spice Market, “minestrone” had at least been placed in quotation marks, suggesting that it wasn’t exactly authentic. But other chefs are less careful. For example, anything raw and thinly sliced, even vegetables, is likely to be called a “carpaccio”; anything layered, a “napoleon”; or any legume puree, “hummus.” And recently, I heard a woman order a *caffè latte* “with almost no milk, please.” A heavily milky coffee drink whose very name in Italian means “coffee with milk” was being requested without milk. And even more amazing, the *barrista* knew exactly what she meant.

However, it may be the bill of fare at an Italian restaurant in Rockefeller Center that trumps them all. The lounge menu features something called “Italian sushi,” defined, rather startlingly, as sushi-inspired tapas. In just those few words, there are two terminological extensions, or dilutions, of meaning, sushi and tapas, and the mixing of three cultures: Italian, Spanish, and Japanese. Moreover, when you scan the list of offerings, you see that two of the four “sushi-inspired tapas” are meat—*prosciutto* and *bresaola*—and one is very un-Italian smoked salmon, Italianized by the addition of buffalo mozzarella.

The culinary combining appears unstoppable. From the Spanish rice knishes I saw long ago at Mrs. Stahl’s Knishes in Brighton Beach to the Polish *empanada* (*kielbasa* and sauerkraut-filled) I saw a few weeks’ ago in Hells Kitchen. From the “We serve grits” notice at a Korean luncheonette, to Irish breakfast served in an Indian-owned diner, to pretzel croissants, cappuccino in Chinatown, and a BLT burrito, food here, as always, continues to reflect the gastronomic pandemonium that is New York. The city that never sleeps is, in addition, the city that always eats. And its restlessness and energy keep its foods and foodways constantly coalescing, but always in motion.

Yet this current infusion of fusions, this diffusion of fusions, this effusion of fusions, and this confusion of fusions are as much a matter of fission, a blowing apart, as they are of a bringing together. And soon enough, they, too, will change. Just stay tuned to the city—murmuring and roaring and, of course, chowing down—and it will tell you, between bites, just what is coming next.

## NOTES

1. Walt Whitman, “Preserving Tradition,” in *Walt Whitman’s New York, from Manhattan to Montauk*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989), 3.

2. Konrad Bercovici, *Around the World in New York* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938), 3–4.

3. Boris Fishman, “Where Is Home, If the Place You Come From No Longer Exists?” *New York Times*, November 21, 2004.

4. *Official Guidebook of the New York World’s Fair, 1939* (New York: Exposition Publications, 1939).