



The Iconic Duelling Bagel Shops of Brick Lane

Photo courtesy of @beigel_bake on Instagram

In London's busy and diverse Spitalfields neighbourhood, two 24-hour bagel shops famously sit next door to each other and reflect the history of the area.

- By John Moretti

On a road called Brick Lane, which cuts a cross-section through the famously lively and diverse neighbourhood of Spitalfields in London, two bagel stores sit side by side. At 155 Brick Lane is "Beigel Shop" and right next door, at 159 Brick Lane, is "Beigel Bake" (beigel is how the food is sometimes spelled in the UK – but there is technically no difference between a beigel and a bagel). To anyone who's heard of these shops, however, (and every Londoner has) they are known as "the yellow one" and "the white one", due to the colours of the garish signs that adorn their respective storefronts.

Both shops are open 24/7. Both are known for serving the iconic "salt beef beigel": a warm bagel stuffed generously with slabs of soft corned beef, salty gherkins, and spicy mustard. And, having served everyone from black cab drivers to tourists, London

royals to Londoners returning from a night out on the town, both duelling bagel shops have together become an East London institution.

A recent Monday evening visit to Beigel Bake, "the white one", revealed an operation as slick and large-scale as an industrial assembly line, but with an undeniably human touch. The women behind the counter—Kazakh and Ethiopian and Moroccan, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—managed the long queue of hungry customers. Someone would take the orders (one iconic salt beef beigel after the next); another would assemble the dish, cutting open the beigels and filling them with meat, mustard, and gherkin. All the while, they exchanged pleasantries with visitors and bantered with each other in a mix of Amharic and Arabic. Strewn about the shop were ingredients in vast quantities: huge paper bags filled with discarded

beigels; deep tubs of pickles; tall bottles of spicy mustard and other condiments.

At the back, two employees, Nathan and Nouri, were busy baking the last batch of the evening before the long overnight shift. The two men took round slabs of dough and boiled them in a huge tub of steaming water, 40 bagels at a time. Then, they scooped the boiled bagels out of the tub and laid them out on long wooden planks, spraying them with a cold-water hose so that they wouldn't bake in their own steam. Once all 40 were prepared, they were shoved into an oven set at 500 degrees Fahrenheit.

Neither Nathan nor Nouri hailed from baking families. "My family were Yemeni Jewish carpenters in Israel," Nathan says, "and they learned to make bagels once they moved to London in the 1950s". His late father, Asher Cohen, opened the shop in 1974, and the founder's portrait

hangs prominently on the wall of Beigel Bake. Nouri was a sergeant in the Peshmerga, the Kurdish military forces of the autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq and learned how to make bagels on the job after moving to Brick Lane in the 1990s, fleeing violence.

“I had an uncle who owned the shop next door,” Cohen says. He was, of course, referring to “the yellow one,” which is twinned with its neighbour in the minds of most Londoners. While Nathan and Nouri were putting batches of bagels into the oven, Ashley Zelman, whose family runs Beigel Shop, was pulling out piping hot trays of them next door.

The similarities between Cohen and Zelman were immediately striking. Both were young Jewish men wearing white t-shirts and dark aprons, making bagels with the same cheerful spirit, sharp wit, and banter.

Our conversation with Zelman was punctuated by the beeping ovens which summoned him to remove trays of freshly baked bagels. In between these trips to the back, he told us about the history of the shop, which touts itself as the original of the two, predating its neighbour by almost 120 years. Beigel Shop was founded in 1855 by Russian Jews before transferring ownership to another Jewish family in the 1920s. Around 30 years ago, the Zelmans — themselves Israeli immigrants like the Cohens — took over the shop.

New owners learned how to make bagels from old ones, through the generations: “From 1855 all the way down to us,” Zelman says, proud of the shop’s storied history.

Back in Beigel Shop’s early days in the 19th century, Brick Lane was a street of mostly Jewish-run factories, making products like leather and utensils. In

more recent times, starting in the 1970s, Brick Lane has also seen a boom in migration from Bangladesh. Beigel Shop now sells bhajis and samosas alongside bagels and other pastries. Zelman says that these are some of his favourite items in the shop: “I’m not going to lie, they are beautiful. Delicious. We buy those. Everything else,” he gestures to a glass cabinet filled with tarts, chocolate twists, cannoli, cookies, and tiramisu, “is made here.”

Now, Zelman dreams of expanding the business to other cities in the UK like Manchester, Leeds, and Birmingham and even around the world. “There are no good bagels in Birmingham” he says cheekily, citing intelligence

from his quadruplet sister who studies there. While Zelman has visions of conquering the UK bagel scene, he has no problem sharing the Brick Lane spotlight with his younger neighbours. “They copied us,” he says of the white one, with a wry smile. There is friendly competition between the two. But at the end of the day, they’re in it together: “We’re friends. When they run out of something, they come to us; and, when we run out of something, we go to them.”

John Moretti is a Greek-American writer based in London. His work has appeared in *Smithsonian*, *Revista*, *Harvard Review of Latin America* and other publications. Visit his website.



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