

A hole in the market

Are bagels the new lattes? **Lara Rabinovitch** reports on the birth of Toronto's Primrose Bagel Company and the rise of hand-rolled bagels

Inside Primrose Bagel Company, opening its doors in Toronto's St. Clair West neighbourhood on Jan. 10, there's a large picture window with a view directly into the kitchen. There, at almost any point in the day, one of the bakery's staff members laboriously rolls bagels by hand. It's a rare sight for a bagel shop – but that's the point.

Primrose's co-owners are Sam Davis and Jesse Rapoport, two young chefs who've worked at some of Toronto's top indie restaurants, and they are determined to restore the largely forgotten tradition of hand-rolled bagels.

Most bagels these days, even those sold from otherwise reputable bakeries, are made by machines. But speeding up the process means losing flavour and texture. Worse are industrialized bagels found on grocery store shelves and made with chemical additives. But the most offensive, according to Davis, are those professed by "Tim Hortons, God forbid," which he says are created "with the sole intention to last after being made in some far-away factory, then trucked to a store, then finally sold to a customer, without spoiling in between."

In contrast, Primrose's versions are made with little technological intervention. As Davis says, "All of our bagels are done in the most traditional way, the way bagels were originally done in the old days, when you couldn't take any shortcuts. Hand-rolled, baked on burlap bagel boards – the whole shebang."

Chalk it up to millennial malaise. Digital detoxes, knitting and

record-collecting are other hallmarks of this generation's reverence for the past. By baking bagels in the analogue ways of their ancestors, Davis and Rapoport are recovering a piece of what the 21st century has left behind.

At Primrose, this translates into a classic bagel menu: sesame, poppy, everything, marble rye, honey oat, onion, garlic and rock salt. But za'atar bagels make appearances, as do other specials, such as tuna with Ontario apricots and frisée. Rapoport also smokes all the lox, sable and other fish in-house.

A dozen Primrose bagels will set you back \$15. The prices might be relatively steep for this up-graded Ashkenazi cuisine, but across North America artisanal bagels are becoming the designer lattes of the food world, and Primrose is part of a larger movement of small-batch bagel makers restoring the ways of long-forgotten craftsmanship. Young entrepreneurs are opening artisanal bakeries in places such as Brooklyn, Detroit, Minneapolis and Austin, Tex., where the specialty is wild-fermented, hand-rolled bagels.

In Los Angeles, the epicentre of the food zeitgeist, tattooed hipsters and former gluten-fearing models now line up at Maury's Bagels, Belle's Bagels and other shops that have cropped up in the past few years peddling the seeded rings.

Because these makers use quality grains and fermented dough, some claim these bagels have more nutrients than their commercial counterparts. And most artisanal bagels are not

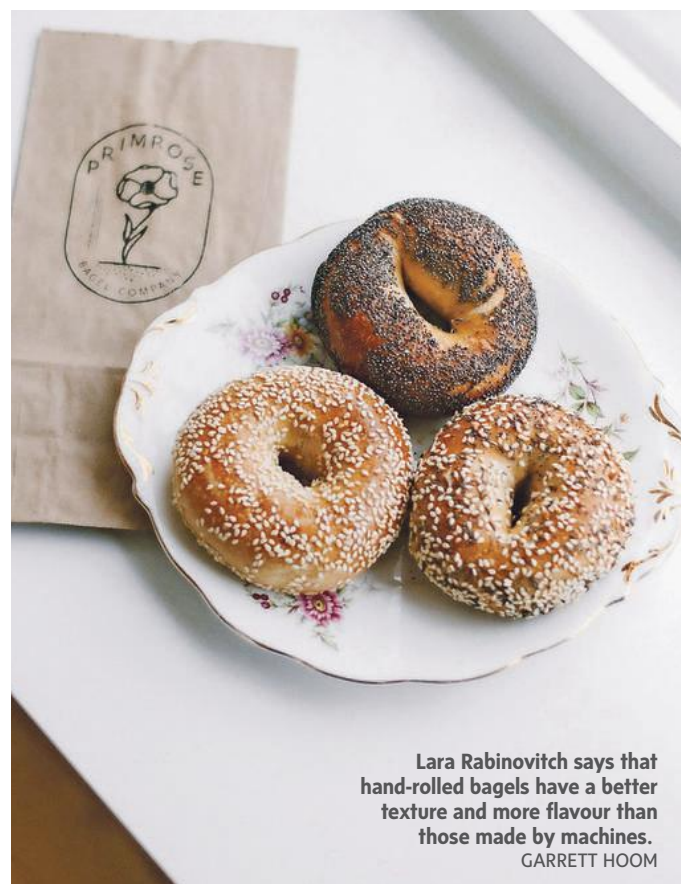
giant calorie bombs.

Primrose's bagels nevertheless have heft – they're not light and fluffy like other Toronto specimens. Their flavour veers savoury and sour, akin to fresh bread.

"There are very few bagel producers who are attuned with the humidity and the timing of the proofing, the mixture of the dough, the composition of the yeast and other nuances to make a quality bagel," says Nathan Ladovsky, a fourth-generation operator of United Bakers Dairy Restaurant and a Primrose fan.

The bagels are also malt-boiled as in New York, where Davis was a music writer in his 20s. He believes the malt adds a "creamy" texture to the crumb while preserving a thin crust that cradles the riot of seeds.

Even with this generous coating, you would not confuse Primrose's with a Montreal bagel, a tradition Primrose must contend with given the latter's hegemony in Canada. Some believe the century-old Montreal bagel, with its gaping hole, is closer to what Polish Jews baked in the old country, where bagels originate, though Davis isn't as convinced. It could be a regional variation that was brought to Saint Laurent Boulevard by immigrant Jews, or one that became iconic in Montreal over time. Either way, it has become part of the identity of Montrealers and their converts, so much so that the sweet, dense and thin varieties appear routinely at meals, whether in homes or restaurants (a Montreal-born astronaut even brought some into space).



Lara Rabinovitch says that hand-rolled bagels have a better texture and more flavour than those made by machines.

GARRETT HOOM

have now opened across Canada – in St. Catharines, Ont., Calgary, and Vancouver, for example – and at one delicatessen in Winnipeg they continually fly bagels in from Montreal's legendary St-Viateur Bagel Shop. Even in Toronto a few Montreal-style shops dot the urban core, making it near impossible to find a hand-rolled bagel that is anything but Montreal-style deep in Leafs' territory.

That's why shops such as Primrose could disrupt the bagel landscape in Canada the way that the arrival of individual farmers' markets changed our relationship to produce: We are just beginning to amass contenders against the onslaught of industri-

alized bagels.

Cookbook author Bonnie Stern has followed Primrose's ascent and attended two of its pop-ups last summer. "This is such a classy bagel," she says.

Acclaimed chef Grant van Gameren was also an early supporter, and not only because he was Davis's former boss at Bar Raval. He argues that although Toronto now has excellent artisan bakeries, it is lacking in comparative bagel options.

"Most of the bagels I have eaten [in Toronto] are not great," he says. "These bagels are incredible. I've eaten four in a day."

It's not hard to imagine.

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