

Are bialys an endangered species?

NEW YORK (AP) — Warren Bell's bakery in Brooklyn is a stronghold preserving an endangered species of ethnic bread: the bialy.

Bell's shop in the Canarsie section makes the onion-flaked flat roll the time-honored way. And food experts say he may be one of few left who do so.

"There aren't too many people left who know how to make authentic bialys," said George Greenstein, 64, a retired baker and author of "Secrets of a Jewish Baker."

What's a bialy? A cross between an English muffin and a bagel, said Bell.

The oddly shaped roll was created by Jewish bakers in Bialystok, Poland, more than a hundred years ago, according to food critic Mimi Sheraton, who is doing a history of the bread.

Although the bialy has been around, it never quite made it to the big time like its cousin the bagel.

"In this country people who make and sell bialys are not too optimistic about its future," said Sheraton.

"It's an acquired taste. Many people don't like the onions in the morning for breakfast," she said. "The bialy also is not as versatile as the bagel. It is difficult to cut its indented top and flat bottom to make a sandwich."

Bell attributes the second-class status of the bialy to the virtual automation in today's bagel business.

"You don't need a brain to make a bagel," Bell said. "All you need is a machine. Everyone can make one."

But Bell said it takes skill to bake bialys. In his shop they are still "pulled" by hand, following 40 years of tradition started by his father.

Bialys are a simple, peasant bread, said Greenstein. The dough consists of high-gluten, white wheat flour, salt, water and yeast. In the center is a dab of onion that gives it its unique taste.

In the metropolitan area, where there is a large Jewish population, a handful of bakeries still make bialys the way Bell does.

But there are not many elsewhere. "You can barely find a place to get a bialy in Israel," Sheraton said.

Some bagel stores claim to make real bialys, but do not, according to Greenstein, because they use bagel dough, which has sugar.

"They do not have the same texture and taste of a bialy," Greenstein said. "You can taste the difference."

Kossar's in downtown Manhattan is another tried-and-true bialy baker, said Sheraton. But the owner, Daniel Scheinin, 65, said the future does not look bright.

"We used to bake 2,000 dozen a day.



The Associated Press

Warren Bell cuts dough in his Brooklyn bakery before feeding it into a machine that makes smaller balls of dough. Below, Bell shapes a bialy.

Now we only do so on Sundays," Scheinin said.

Bell and Helmut Toro, the owner of H&H Bagels, one of the largest bagel bakeries in the city, hope there may be a future for the bialy outside of the city. They are both marketing frozen versions of the bread nationally.

Bell said his bialys are now being sold in New England, "Perhaps Bostonians dunk it in their clam chowder."

To survive the bialy will have to cross ethnic palates. They may, in fact, be doing so.

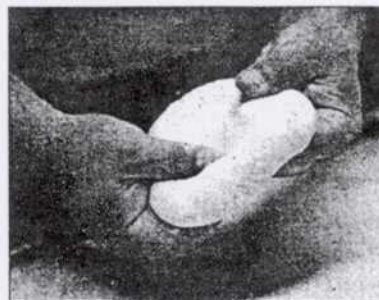
Pedro Ocasio, 37, of the East Village, said he takes his bialys with strong Spanish coffee. He'll eat it sliced and toasted with cream cheese and jelly, or with ham, cheese and a fried egg.

Originally people did not cut bialys before eating them, said Sheraton. They were eaten warm, fresh from the bakery. Butter spread on the top would pool in the hole or it was smeared on the bottom.

Sheraton recently visited Bialystok, but found no bialy bakers left. So she interviewed 50 former residents of the town about their memories of the food.

Bell said people differ about whether they should eat the top and bottom separately or together. He said he eats them separately. In his house, his daughter likes the top. His son prefers the bottom.

Bell said, "In my house, bialys don't go to waste."



Bialys aren't easy to make

NEW YORK (AP) — In Bell's Bialys and Bagels in Brooklyn the dough balls, or "tagels," of high gluten flour, water, yeast and salt are made by machine.

The tagels are then placed by hand on "schlusses," 3-foot square, flat stacking boxes, lined with wax paper coated with cornmeal and fine white flour.

"The meal protects the bialy from burning, while at the same time letting it get brown," Bell said. "Color is important."

The dough proofs or rises for a few minutes. On a recent Sunday, one of Bell's workers Andy Calo, 34 "pulled" around 1,000 dozen bialys in three hours.

Calo took each tagel, flattened it, and indented with his thumb. He then gently threw each one onto a slow-moving, steel mesh conveyor belt moving into the oven.

Other workers placed less than a teaspoon of a freshly grated onion mixture into the indentation before the bialys entered the oven.

"Other bialy makers use peel or freeze-dried onions," said Bell. "Not us. We may not make as much money in profit, but the quality is there."

He also adds a not-so-secret ingredient: old bialys. "They sop up the wetness of the onions," Bell said.

The onions keep the middle of the bialy down while they bake. Otherwise the bialys would puff up like a pita bread. The bialys bake for five minutes.