

# Lee Makes Rugelach



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Melting Pot.  
Salad Bowl.

If one homogenizes and the other isolates, let's add the cookie dough mixer to this imperfect list of food-prep metaphors for America's supposed embrace of multiculturalism. With a steady churning of identities that smear and dissolve and thicken against each other just to tumble back into chunky but sticky new formations, the cookie dough mixer renders urban culture as a messy process of appropriation and

recombination. Salt assimilates but gives the dough strength. Yeast takes sugar, returns air. Butter almost becomes flour, but stays almost butter. Fruit and nuts dig in but stick out. Becoming by borrowing, giving by taking, this culture is an incessant struggle, not so much to preserve identity but to claim it, and this is especially true for the kind of culture we call food.

Enter the rugelach: a curious morsel of rolled-up pastry dough with inter-layer fillings of jams, nuts, berries, and chocolate. Its etymology draws from either the Polish or Yiddish word for "horn," its shape is often reminiscent of the rolled and



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layered French croissant, while the ingredient that gives the dough its distinct consistency is the wholly American cream cheese.<sup>1</sup> This churned and smeared origin, in many ways, makes it the quintessential New York snack, or “nosh,” as the Jewish bakers who developed the recipe at the beginning of the twentieth century likely called it, thus claiming it as their own in the process.

The rugelach is also the pastry that in recent years has gained wide renown for Harlem-based baker Alvin Lee Smalls. With press coverage as diverse as the global *New York Times*,<sup>2</sup> the local *New York Amsterdam News*,<sup>3</sup> the *Jewish Forward*,<sup>4</sup> and the foodies’ *Serious Eats*,<sup>5</sup> Lee’s identity-mashing and self-aware “rugelach by a brother” has firmly established his shop as part of a burgeoning culinary scene in the midst of a “revitalizing” Harlem. The fact that the shop has long been a local fixture, and is now getting absorbed by foodie hype, not only garners Lee Lee’s Baked Goods a cachet of valuable, place-based authenticity but also points to the broader cultural currency that traffics through the rugelach. It is through these foodways that traditional recipes from one community are adopted and unsanctimoniously

appropriated to become mere suggestions to another; it is here that a trade earned through years at vocational schools and back-of-house kitchens turns from a marker of class to a badge of distinction called “craft”; and it is here that gentrification sweeps through the community like a double-edged sword which severs and isolates just as it clears the way for new prospects.

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It’s just prior to closing and I’m in Lee’s modestly sized shop on 118th Street near Frederick Douglass Boulevard, snacking on the famed rugelach while sipping coffee, chatting with the baker who’s clearly proud of his fifty-year career. “Now, everybody is coming to me, . . . nobody does it from scratch anymore,” he says, lamenting the loss of craft and know-how. I bite into one of his acclaimed pastries: the rich, buttery dough crust is somehow both flaky and snappy while the raspberry filling delivers a tart but subtle zing—the perfect counter to the barely sweet, doughy exterior. “I’ve seen a guy sit around a table, eat five of those things with no water,” Lee tells me half in boast, half in warning. As I realize I’m dispensing with



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number three, a woman and her daughter walk into the shop. The mother sets down her heavy grocery bags while the young one makes an all-too-familiar beeline for the display case (Lee is known for treating neighborhood children to snacks without charge). But today, eyeing the sweets inside with hands and forehead pressed to the glass, the girl doesn't see what she wants.

"No more cookies?" the mother asks Lee with some concern.

Lee leans back in his chair slightly and calls out, seemingly to no one, "What time is it?"

The mother, feeling like she's asked the wrong question at the wrong time of a baker's long day, doesn't dare respond.

But Lee calls out again, this time more clearly toward the kitchen: "Kevin! What time is it? Any more cookies?!"

There are none, apparently, and another batch would take thirty minutes: an unlikely outcome when it is already 5:30 (as it turns out). The young sweet tooth is unimpressed with such mundane details and her mother, predicting oncoming disapproval, presents the obvious alternative.

"How 'bout some rugelach? Rrrrugelach! From the Rrrrugelach King!" she grandly offers, savoring the Yiddish loanword on the palate of her own, black New Yorker dialect.

Lee takes pleasure in such tribute as he leans back into reminiscence.

"I introduced Harlem to rugelach in 1988," Lee tells me. "That's when I started my first bakery"—a shop he ran successfully until 1994 when health problems from "too much time on my feet"<sup>6</sup> forced him to close. But retirement turned into a hiatus as Lee got bored and decided to return to baking, opening up Lee Lee's Baked Goods at the present location on 118th. This shop and the rugelach make a convenient index of the changes to the neighborhood over the last fifteen years. Opening on September 10, 2001, Lee's business remained slow in the aftermath of the war that followed. "When I came here, it was just the methadone clinic. They were my only customers. They were hell-raising, but they were my customers!" By the end of the new millennium's first decade, punctuated by a recession and the closing of the clinic, Lee was forced to shutter once again.

But as the new Harlem renaissance regained momentum—this one driven by newcomers to the neighborhood seeking real-estate bargains and (at least initially) by middle-class blacks seeking communities of kin<sup>7</sup>—devoted patrons found the prospect of living in the neighborhood without an artisanal baker unpalatable. Writing on the blog *HarlemCondoLife* in

May of 2010, HarlemGal made an impassioned appeal for the community to take up the cause of keeping Lee afloat:

I encountered a loyal following of this place when I moved to Harlem more than five years ago. When I needed sweets, most people in Harlem would direct me to Lee Lee's Bakery on 118th. The only thing I can think of now is to make a public plea on this site to try and save Lee Lee's Bakery in Harlem. It's worth a try . . . right?<sup>8</sup>

Over the course of just a few weeks, locals banded and mounted a social media campaign to save the bakery, and it worked. "There was something about me on the computer . . . business was crazy after that," Lee told the *NY Daily News*.<sup>9</sup> "Now everybody's eating it. Especially the part of Harlem near Columbia [University] and especially at my church. Every Sunday morning, we have a line out, just for rugelach."

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Raised in South Carolina, in 1962 Lee moved to New York City where he got a job as an onion peeler at the cafeteria of the New York Presbyterian Hospital. A year of onions later, he was promoted to pan greaser at the hospital's bakery after showing interest in the work. "We had six bakers on staff, a cake guy, a pie guy, . . . pudding, from scratch! Just like everything else . . ." he trails off with wistful pride. I struggle to imagine a hospital cafeteria with a fully staffed bakery and instead conjure the pre-packaged, over-reheated, and intentionally flavorless commodity scraps that today's institutional contractors pass for meals.

While greasing pans, Lee immersed himself in baking, working, and absorbing everything he could at the hospital during the day, attending night school to learn the craft in the evenings, and after getting home around midnight, experimenting with more baking in his own kitchen. By 1987, when "the hospital was getting ready to eliminate the bakery and everything started coming in packages," Lee was ready to move on and open up his own shop.

The origin story that Lee most often likes to tell is that one day he saw a recipe for rugelach in a newspaper and after considerable experimentation arrived at the perfect treat: a kind of nostalgia-wrapped New York moment where a resourceful upstart samples from the cultural detritus of others, alters it without regard for convention, and at last delivers a wildly popular novelty (also see DJ Kool Herc's invention of hip-hop in the Bronx). I find this version too neat, but as my rugelach count edges upward, more details emerge. While still at the hospital, Lee took part-time work at other bakeries around the city, getting exposure to New York staples like coffee cake, babka, and rugelach, but came up short gaining true expertise and know-how. "If you're the bench man, they

wouldn't give you the recipe; the dough was already mixed, so I never really made [rugelach] in other people's bakeries."

Seeing the published recipe for a pastry with which Lee was familiar but never made from scratch must have come as a revelation, but when he prepared the recipe as written, the rugelach came out "hard as bricks."<sup>10</sup> Dissatisfied but far from resigned, Lee began to experiment with the pastry at the hospital kitchen. Reflecting on the process, his talk turns to dough: "My dough is different. A lot of people make rugelach with cheap shortening and that's why it's soft like a croissant. But I make mine more like a pastry or a pie crust, because I got a lot of crunchy stuff inside!" And more dough: "Mine's a lot of work. In the summertime it's hard to make, there's a lot of butter; the high temperature, the heat. But wintertime is also hard. When the dough is stiff, it'll shrink in the oven and get tubby. So you have to roll it out, melt the butter a little bit and then roll it again. A lot of work, getting the butter into the dough." Then, finally, after so much trial and error, the moment of affirmation: "I played around with that recipe for a long time. On Christmas [at the hospital] we used to make pies for the patients to take home, but one Christmas my rugelach came out so good, they let me sell them at the cafeteria. But they never got my recipe! Can't give them the recipe."

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Lee's committed experimentation is intriguing. Of course, it's not uncommon for chefs and bakers to explore and elaborate on a recipe, making it "their own." This is, after all, how cuisines develop, especially in America where ideas of tradition are often loose, and thus even well-established dishes are granted leeway in interpretation. The Chinese-American classic General Tso's chicken, for instance, only took on its trademark sweet-sour-savory profile after the dish's original Hunanese inventor, Peng Chang-kuei, unceremoniously modified it for American palates in the 1970s. With local exposure to Hunanese food virtually nil at that time, no one protested.<sup>11</sup>

Still, Lee's determined experimentation with the Jewish rugelach implies that he was not only unhappy with his initial results, but that perhaps there existed for him some idealized version, and getting it right became a way to recover that ideal. Curious about what might have drawn him to rugelach in the first place, I reference a few Southern cookbooks. The closest thing I find to rugelach is a pecan tassie: a bite-sized pecan pie with a sugarless butter-and-cream-cheese dough and a rich open-faced filling with nuts and sometimes fruit. It's close, but when I ask Lee if his rugelach reminds him of anything he may have had while growing up in Myrtle Beach, the question



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makes no sense to him: “I’m from South Carolina, we didn’t have rugelach! Like I said, all of it was luck. I didn’t know I was going to get the result. I was experimenting for a while, and at one point for me that was it. I was giving it around to people. They call it rugelach, so it’s rugelach!”

The chance provenance of Lee’s “rugelach by a brother” suddenly comes into focus. For him, the Jewish nosh is precisely *not* a way to harken back to some cultural purity or originality. For Lee, the rugelach is an immediately available and earnest expression of a multilayered culture, competitive craft, and ever-shifting place. To him, the historically contingent ownership of the rugelach is just another turn of the dough mixer: smearing, dissolving, thickening. Indeed, with orders and visibility afforded by the internet, the appeal of Lee’s rolled-up pastry from a local newspaper clipping continues to disperse. He’s even shipped rugelach as far as Morocco.

“You’ll always have people in this world wanting real stuff,” Lee tells me as I’m wiping the crumbs from my hands and mouth. They call it rugelach, so it’s rugelach. 🍪

#### NOTES

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