

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

Grant, Lee and Matzo? Exhibit Traces History of Kosher Eating in America

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Published: November 10, 2003

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/10/nyregion/10KOSH.html?ex=1073852325&ei=1&en=28de87cf787402b8>

Rabbi Yaakov Y. Horowitz's version of American History 101 runs something like this:

When the colonies were settled, the shochet, or kosher slaughterer, was not far behind. When gold prospectors flocked to California, so did the kosher inspectors. When Passover arrived at Army camps during the Civil War, so did the matzo.

The founder of American Jewish Legacy, a nonprofit historical organization, Rabbi Horowitz has created an exhibit of kosher practices that offers glimpses of how Jewish dietary laws were followed from the earliest arrivals of Jews in the mid-17th century into the last century.

"The development of Judaism was tied to kosher food," Rabbi Horowitz said last week. "I have to get the word out that all of this stuff we're dealing with, the history of traditional Jews, is endangered. People with memories are dying before their oral histories are taken. Synagogues are being demolished. Archives are being thrown out of synagogues and basements."

The rabbi's historical account, illustrated on a series of large display panels, was briefly on display last week at Kosherfest 2003, a trade fair at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center with a head-spinning array of kosher products, such as gnocchi in tomato and basil sauce, margarita mix-flavored nuts, ginger teriyaki marinade, \$400 bottles of French wine and Poppy Chocky Wocky Doodah Gourmet Popcorn Sensations.

Together, the exhibit and the trade show conveyed a remarkable evolution, from a sometimes primitive struggle for traditional Jews to observe ancient dietary laws to a modern industry with \$170 billion in sales that also markets to mildly observant Jews, seekers of healthful foods, vegans and the lactose-intolerant.

The rabbi's effort is tied to the 350th anniversary of the arrival, in 1654, of 23 Jews in New York. Historians say they were the first group of Jews to reach North America, and institutions across the Jewish world are using the occasion to celebrate the history of American Judaism. The rabbi said he was also hoping to take his display on the road.

Rabbi Horowitz is a great-grandson of the founder of the Bostoner Hasidic community, and leads the Bostoner Bais Medrash congregation in Lawrence, N.Y. The exhibit's theme also fits nicely into his day job, which is supervising rabbi of the B. Manischewitz Company. While paid by the Union of Orthodox



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

An exhibit on the history of kosher eating in America at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. Rabbi Yaakov Y. Horowitz, who created the exhibit, hopes to take it on the road.

Jewish Congregations of America, he is assigned to the company, which pays the Orthodox Union for its services.

Richard A. Bernstein, the chairman of Manischewitz's holding company, R.A.B. Holdings, has personally donated to the Legacy and said he planned to back the exhibit's tour.

In colonial times, the beneficiaries of kosher sales were mainly congregations. Congregation Shearith Israel, which was established in New York in 1654 and built what the exhibit says was the first synagogue in the colonies, had a monopoly on the kosher meat supply until 1813. Congregation Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia, which had roots dating back to 1740, produced Passover matzo for the Jews of the city and provided donations for the poor. A kosher table was prepared for Jews in Philadelphia in 1788 at a celebration marking Pennsylvania's ratification of the Constitution, although the exhibit's account has a hazy moment, calling it the ratification of the Bill of Rights.

As it does today, the degree of observance varied. In Savannah, Ga., in 1738, a Lutheran minister, Martin Bolzius, wrote, "The Spanish and Portuguese Jews are not so strict in so far as eating is concerned as the others are . . . The German Jews on the other hand would rather starve than eat meat they do not slaughter themselves."

The exhibit includes accounts of the difficulty of trying to maintain dietary laws amid the hardships of the frontier. The Helena Daily Independent described a Montana woman named Mrs. Wolf Sabolsky in the 1870's as "so rigid in her observance that she might be said to have been a vegetarian."

Indeed, kosher slaughterers traveled from town to town, butchering as they went. Rabbi Benjamin Papermaster came from Lithuania in 1890 to serve the Jews of North Dakota. His son Isadore recalled the rabbi's regular visits to an outpost of Jews in Starkweather. "He spent several weeks there as each of the colonists wanted to put in his supply of kosher meat and fowl for the winter." As railroads spread, Jews in small Great Plains towns waited for deliveries by train, often receiving food that had spoiled.

The kosher food business grew slowly until the late 19th century, when the large influx of Eastern European and Russian Jews created a broader market. New York had more than 5,000 kosher butchers and 1,000 slaughterers, the display said, which gave rise to scandals over the sale of meat fraudulently presented as kosher.

In the early decades of the last century, established companies began marketing to observant Jews.

The final part of the exhibit shows advertisements for mainstream kosher products from the 1920's to the 1940's, from the collection of Shulamith Z. Berger, the curator of special collections at Yeshiva University and co-director of the exhibit.

Among them are ads for Pillsbury flour ("For Your Sabbath Chollah"), Canada Dry ginger ale ("the royal drink for millions of ordinary people"), Borden's homogenized milk ("Buba never dreamed of such milk!") and Maxwell House coffee ("50 Years of Progress for the Jewish Woman").