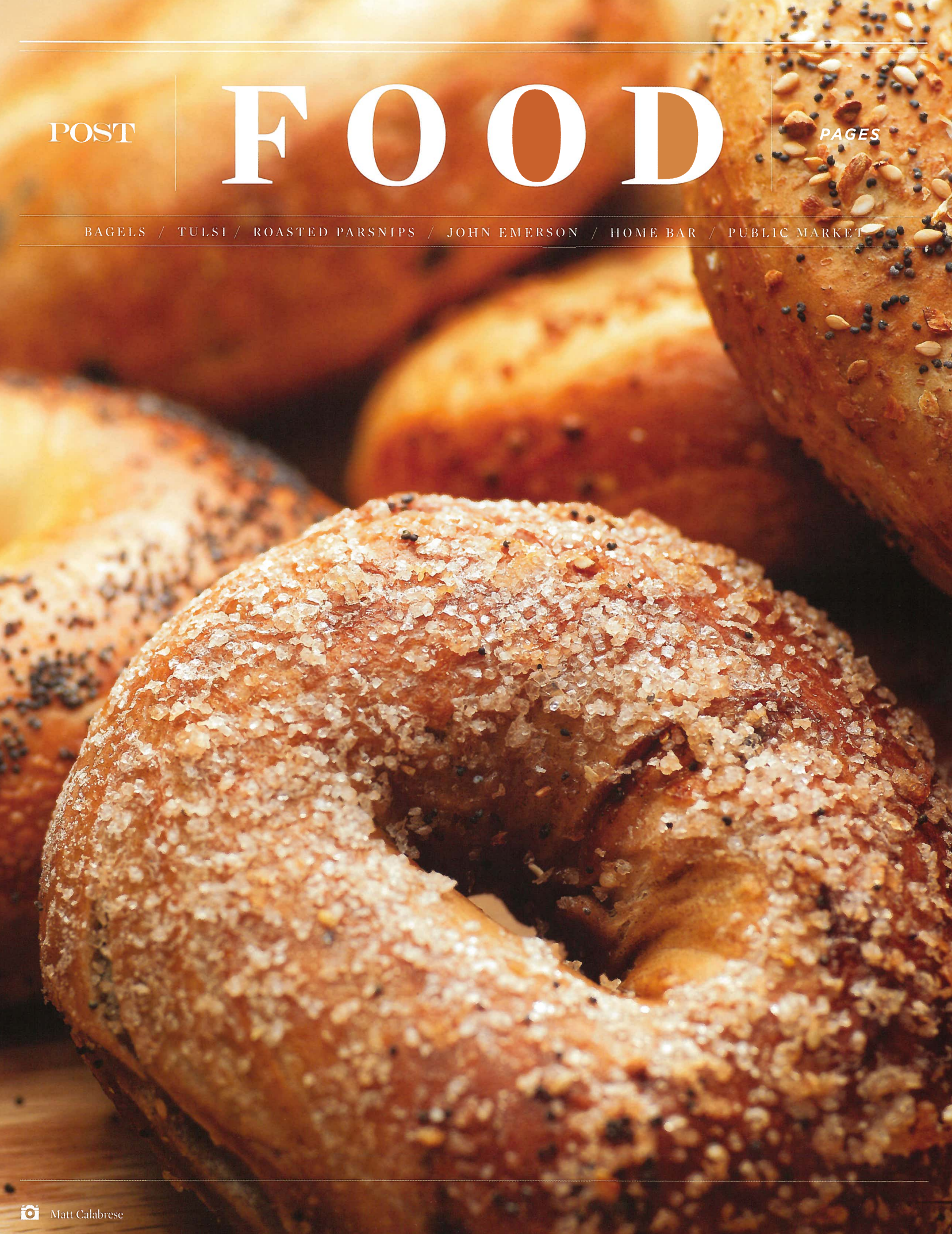


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BAGELS

Ain't nothing like the real thing

BY CARLIE FISHGOLD

Though not necessarily recalled as a Jewish specialty these days, the bagel entered the American culinary tradition by way of Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants arriving in New York City from Eastern Europe in the 1880s. For those Rochesterian accents that utter “bagel” with the rounded *a* like that in “bag,” let it be known that the flat-*a* bagel pronunciation is truer to its linguistic origin. From the Yiddish *beygal* (which arose from the Middle High German *boug* meaning “ring,” or “bracelet”), the hand-sized treats exemplify centuries of acculturated European culinary customs developed and disseminated via Jewish diaspora.

Dropped into a kettle for a moment or two, then finished on a stone-shelved oven at 500 degrees, bakers utilize the chemical properties of water to catalyze, or “proof,” the yeast, creating that crunchy, shiny shell to protect the moist inner density which connotes a proper bagel. If you can think of a bad bagel (you know, dry, spongy) it probably wasn’t boiled. Water quality is even a determinate factor—good luck finding a decent bagel in Phoenix, AZ, that isn’t shipped in from New York or elsewhere. Unlike champagne, “There is no strict rule or mandate on what you can call a bagel,” laughs Roni Malek, owner of Balsam Bagels. “Someone can make a roll with a hole and call it a bagel if they want. Truth is, a ‘real’ bagel is just [sighs] ... *different* from other breads.”

Malek is explicit: bagel baking is a discipline. “It takes time. I don’t rush it. [The dough] has to be made, it has to be dried, refrigerated for at least a day—aged, you know? It has to be rotated. I just love making bagels, and I’ve been doing this seven days a week for 18 years.”

Bob Juliano of Brighton’s Bagel Land agrees with Malek: a good bagel requires finesse of process. “It’s the way you make the dough, how long you spin it in the mixer, the time it’s boiled in the kettle, how long you let it proof; it’s the kind of oven ...”

Added after the boil, before baking, authentic Eastern European top-

pings evoke the bagel’s original landscapes: valleys tawny with sunflowers, scarlet fields bristling with poppies, pink florets crowning lanes of garlic shoots, and pungent urban bazaars rife with crates of sesame seeds and spices like the 13th-century Main Square Market in Kraków, Poland’s Old Town district. Even today, Krakówian bakers conveniently string garlands of bagels from their stalls. The hole at the center developed, perhaps, for the sake of mobility and bulk sale in the marketplace.

“The way I once read it,” says Juliano, “the [Austrian] people wanted to honor the king of Poland, and a baker made a bagel in the shape of his stirrup because the king rode a horse into battle for them.” Malek imparts the same folklore regarding King Jan Sobieski III’s 1683 Viennese escapade, which is also etymologically logical as *beaugel* is the word for stirrup in the Austrian-German dialect of that era.

However, culinary scholars such as Maria Balinska set the stirrup story aside as legend and draw attention to the oldest written document referencing the bagel: a 1610 Jewish sumptuary law from Kraków alluding to appropriate times for enjoying luxuries of Poland—land of rye—including wheat products such as bagels. Balinska explains that, like the Torah, interpretations of the document vary but all point to the bagel being associated with activities surrounding childbirth and possibly celebrations of male circumcision.

Nonetheless, King Sobieski is credited with disregarding restrictions on the production of wheat breads and parboiled baked goods in Kraków. Thus, Jews were able to expand within the local industry and compete with the production of *obwarzanek*, a secular, Polish roll-like cousin of the bagel that actually predates the arrival of Jews to Poland from Bavaria in the late 1500s. That all being said: no scholar, baker, historian, or culinary archaeologist has truly identified the genesis of the bagel.