

Can Bagels Save a Struggling Upstate New York Town?



We built this city on lox and roll

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As far as bagel cities go, everyone knows that [New York City and Montreal](#) are leading destinations, but on August 14, there was only one place in North America where you could walk down a street named Bagel Boulevard, view the original prototype of a 1968 U.S. patent-holding bagel-making machine, and win a prize for rolling, throwing, and stacking [bagels](#) better than anyone else. That place was the [Bagel Festival in Monticello, New York](#), a village in the Catskill Mountains, which, after a 2013 resolution of the New York State Assembly and Senate, is officially [“The Bagel Capital.”](#) The decree doesn’t specify whether Monticello is the bagel capital of the U.S. or even the world—it’s simply The Bagel Capital.

In Monticello, the [Bagel Festival](#) isn’t just a quirky celebration, but an attempt at economic salvation. For decades, the village thrived alongside the Borscht Belt hotels catering to middle-class Jewish vacationers from New York City. But when air and cruise travel became more affordable in the 1960s, the hotels started closing one by one, and Monticello, along with other towns in Orange, Ulster, and Sullivan counties, suffered. On Broadway, the village’s main thoroughfare, businesses shuttered and people lost their jobs. A lot of people moved away. Today, 26 percent of children in Sullivan County, which includes Monticello, live in poverty, and residents there are the [second-unhealthiest in New York State](#).

“When people have stopped caring about their communities and throw up their hands and say, ‘This place sucks,’ that’s a really hard problem to deal with. I think Monticello had gotten to that point at some stage,” Helen Budrock, a community planner at beautification and community development organization [Sullivan Renaissance](#), told me.

In 2011, Sullivan Renaissance invited Dr. Peter Tarlow, a tourism expert and rabbi, to speak with local community groups about how to turn things around. Among those groups was the Monticello Business Association (now the Monticello Chamber of Commerce), whose members wanted improvement but seemed, in his mind, overly nostalgic for the glory days of the Borscht Belt.

“Finally, I told them, ‘You have to stop sitting shiva. You have to move on. Yes, there was a time of the great hotels, but it’s gone! So let’s move on to other things,’” Tarlow told me.

Other communities in the region had in recent years attracted visitors in curious but irresistible ways. In 1998, Rosendale hosted its first International [Pickle Festival](#), and in 2003, Margaretville its first annual [Cauliflower Festival](#). In 2005, Hobart became [Hobart Book Village](#) after a disproportionate number of bookstores opened in the small town of fewer than 500 residents. During a meeting with Tarlow and village business leaders, resident and event producer Jeff Siegel argued that Monticello had a *raison d’être* for something equally offbeat. Not only did it have a historic bagel shop, the Fleischman family-owned [Monticello Bagel Bakery](#), but in the 1960s, Louis Wichinsky of nearby Hurleyville, a Monticello fixture, had invented a [unique bagel-making machine](#). In 2013, after lobbying his senator and assemblywoman, Siegel got the geographically ambiguous “Bagel Capital” distinction formally recognized by the state and took charge of organizing the inaugural festivities, which he hoped would lure dollars and investment.

More than 5,000 showed up the first year and 12,000 showed up the next time around. The 2016 festival again drew about 5,000, far fewer than the 50,000 Siegel initially hoped the festival might draw by its fifth year. The explanation may lie in the fact that the bagel festival, ultimately, is more a marketing feat than a culinary or cultural one. This year, as in every previous year, the only bagels to be found there were at the Monticello Bagel Bakery, and while perfectly decent, they could use some company. Siegel said he’s tried to attract bagel shops from other towns and cities, but since they tend to be local business, they generally don’t have the resources or the incentive to peddle their goods far from home.

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The only bagel-related fun and games, meanwhile, was a “triathlon” consisting of contests for bagel rolling, throwing, and stacking. One contestant rolled a rainbow bagel 98 feet, which was impressive. But one couldn’t help but feel that bagels weren’t celebrated so much as accommodated at the festival, amid all the other eclectic activity on the street.

Siegel admits that Monticello could do more to own its state-sanctioned identity. If he had his way, he told me, he’d change Monticello’s name to “Bageltown USA,” line Broadway with bagel statues, and advertise the village as a dining destination on the highway. Tarlow attended the

first two festivals, and while he said they were “much more successful than anybody had hoped,” he sees room for growth. He says bagels are infinitely “pliable from a marketing standpoint,” and could be incorporated into a wide range of activities and business settings.

“If I were a store owner, I’d have every store have something connected to bagels. If I were a jewelry store, I’d have bagel earrings. If I were a lingerie store, I’d come up with some way of connecting that. I’d have every store have free samples of bagels,” he said.

There’s still an opportunity to make those kinds of changes. The fifth annual bagel festival is already on the docket for next year, and the event will, for the first time, be managed by the Monticello Chamber of Commerce. Monticello Mayor Doug Solomon says that the festival can only be just one piece of a larger effort leading to Monticello’s eventual revival, and it may take some time, even though some recent [renovations of Broadway businesses](#), including the Monticello Bagel Bakery, are a good sign of economic movement.

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“Not for me so much, but for the little kids. You see that baby in that baby carriage, all these young kids walking around with their mothers and fathers? Those are the ones I wanna see it change for, because it ain’t gonna change for me,” he said. “I’m already a little too old. I wanna see it change for them, man.”

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