



EDIBLE EVENT: New York Gets Pickled

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The Lower East Side's fermentation festival.



In September 2001 Nancy Ralph, director of the New York Food Museum, asked Alan Kaufman if he would sell Pickle Guys sours at a festival she was planning to host in honor of the Lower East Side's great pickling heritage. Kaufman didn't skip a beat.

"International Pickle Day? We'll give 'em [out] for free!" And with an offer like that, New Yorkers lined up around the corner.

Ralph founded the New York Food Museum (NYFM) in 1998 to reconnect New Yorkers with the stories of how particular gastronomic traditions and delicacies came to be. There is no permanent collection, not even a building. Rather, all NYFM exhibitions are roaming and made possible by partnerships with cultural organizations like the Lower East Side Business Improvement District (LES BID), which teamed up with Ralph to devote a day to the world of pickles in our city.

The first festival was held just two weeks after the Twin Towers fell, and up until the morning of the event it was questionable whether the streets would even be open. In spite of drizzly weather, “Pickles are emblematic of New York and its immigrant history,” says Annie Hauck-Lawson, professor of nutrition at Brooklyn College and co-author of *Gastropolis: Food and New York City*. “Pickling is prevalent in all corners of the world where New Yorkers came from, and methods of preservation are culturally consistent.”

In 17th-century New Amsterdam, Dutch colonists farmed cucumbers in Brooklyn, put them up in barrels of brine and sold them at Washington Market in Tribeca. But pickle paradise came to the teeming Lower East Side in the 19th century, when pushcarts and appetizing stores alike peddled pickles. For many new immigrants, pickles were a good way to make a living. With minimal equipment, vegetables could be fermented in a home kitchen and turned around in three weeks, plus pushcart rental was cheap. The neighborhood’s pickle heyday saw close to 100 pickle businesses, including cucumber wholesalers, salt shops and manufacturers of wooden barrels. But as families became upwardly mobile, those who could afford to leave the tenements did. With them went the pickles.

By the time Nancy Ralph moved to Orchard Street in 1999, there were only a few pickle stores left on the Lower East Side, and she fretted that her new neighbors were unaware of the area’s history, packed with punch and vinegar. Now in its eighth year, the festival is hailed by the community, and its tents of history lessons, fermentation demonstrations and, oh yes, pickles from “around the world and around the corner” draw throngs of curious eaters who come as much for the novelty fare as for the tasting tradition.

This year, Pickle Day festivities are September 14 and will welcome back renowned picklers including Rick’s Picks, McClure’s Pickles and Sahadi’s among many others. Guss’s and the Pickle Guys will give out their traditional sours and half-sours. Nosh on pickled watermelon rind, smokra (pickled okra kissed with smoked paprika) and Austrian pickled apples. Chocolate-covered gherkins have been sighted.

If you get too puckered up, take a break and visit Annie Hauck-Lawson, her mother and daughter at their kapuska (Polish sauerkraut) demonstration. Peruse the educational exhibitions on the history of vinegar, pickling traditions in Asia and the war canning effort in the 1940s.

Picklemaster Rick Field of Rick’s Picks, who is thrilled to be part of the “pickle renaissance” in New York, says, “Pickles should not be marginalized by a sandwich, or ghettoized on the bottom shelf of a supermarket. Pickles should be justly celebrated. Pickle Day is the most picklicious day of the year.”

New York International Pickle Day is Sunday, September 14, 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m., rain or shine; Orchard & Broome Streets; www.nyfoodmuseum.org