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‘Oy! Such a Home’

A New Yorker flees to New Orleans and finds himself surrounded by Jews

BY **BORIS FISHMAN** | Jun 23, 2010 7:00 AM



Breakfast at Cake Café in New Orleans: a cupcake and an everything bagel with lox.

CREDIT: © Kyle Petrozza

The hyperactive Jewishness of New York has never been a relief to me. A Jew by birth, I grew up an atheist in the former Soviet Union, moving to the United States when I was 9. My Soviet childhood was so comprehensively different from American life that, even more than 20 years later, my primary identification is as an immigrant, an outsider. Assertive Jewish identification, the kind that I encountered in New York, seemed like clannishness, and clannishness frightens this immigrant as only a sentence of eternal apartness can. My goal has been to get beyond the stubborn borders of the culture in which I was reared, not into ever-smaller compartments of identity.

Which explains why it was such a relief to leave New York for a month in New Orleans, where I needed to do research for a novel. And the Jewish issue was only a part of it. The things that Jews, and everyone else, seem to find inspiring about New York—the intensity, the pace, the crowds, the expense—leave me feeling roughly the way clannishness does.

I arrived at the apartment I was renting—in the [Marigny](#)^[1] neighborhood, full of old-time New Orleanians of moderate means, white hipster imports, and random cast-offs—to find an African-American repairman at work. The landlady had sent him to fix the kitchen fan.

“Nolan,” he introduced himself. I reciprocated. I asked him if he was from New Orleans.

“No,” he said. “I’m from Israel.”

When Nolan—Yehuda to his Israeli friends—was 8, his mother had what he calls a “religious stroke” and decided to move to the Holy Land. Nolan spent the next 17 years in Israel, where he learned fluent Hebrew. His younger siblings are still there, one married to a Jewish woman from the former Soviet Union.

“We should go out for some Middle Eastern food sometime,” Nolan said. “I know a couple good spots.”

After unpacking, I went to find lunch. One of the charms—I guess you'd have to call it—of New Orleans is the modest place of commerce in the city's life outside the French Quarter. Initially, this felt like a liberation from the manic din of New York, as did the general ease of getting around: New Orleans is small, and still too large for its population.

Eventually, though, it would become clear that, say, buying a six-pack en route to a friend's house was going to feel trickier than a weekend navigating subway-route changes in New York. The busiest stretch of the city contains no more than a handful of grocery stores. And Verti Marte, you see, burned down recently. And Royal Street Grocery & Deli decided to do away with the Grocery part a year ago. Meanwhile, nowhere but in the dark recesses of its cooler does the Quartermaster Deli betray that it is also, in fact, a grocery. ("New Orleanians would find it pretty funny that you found it tough to find a place to buy beer," a friend pointed out. Accustomed to New York's ubiquitous bodegas, I had no idea any bar—and New Orleans has bars—would sell me what I needed.)

So, that first afternoon searching for lunch, my options were limited. I'd heard good things about [Cake Café](#)^[3], five blocks from my apartment. In line, I was preceded by a specimen of the Hipster Army that has the Marigny and neighboring Bywater in a pincer grip. He was straw-haired, stringy, baroquely tattooed.

"I'll have an everything bagel with that lox stuff on it," he said.

I had to sit down. Jews, everywhere Jews! Cake Café is owned by Steve Himmelfarb, a music executive turned cake specialist. In addition to the standard New Orleans delicacies, the menu is loudly Jewish, its lodestar what Himmelfarb calls "the best bagel south of the Mason-Dixon line."

I wasn't going to get got so easily. "Pork boudin and eggs," I announced—imperiously, scornfully—to the counter-woman.

My resistance was no use. Driving later that day, I saw a bumper sticker: "New Orleans. Oy! Such a home." (A play, by the Mardi Gras club [Krewe du Jieux](#)^[4], on the [city's ubiquitous](#)^[5] "New Orleans—Proud to call it home" bumper stickers.) Google hits promising information about music shows led me instead to interviews with people like Abram Shalom Himmelstein, the co-founder of the [Neighborhood Story Project](#)^[6]. The park benefactor prominently celebrated on the entry plaque at New Orleans's lovely City Park, which is larger than Central Park (and considerably less crowded) is [Samuel Zemurray](#)^[7], a Russian Jew who made his fortune in South American bananas. (His former mansion on St. Charles Avenue is now home to the president of Tulane University.) By this point, it was no surprise to learn that the program director for Growing Home, a landscape-improvement program where I volunteered one afternoon, was Abigail Feldman, or that the CEO of the [St. Bernard Project](#)^[8], where I spent several days painting and mudding drywall, was Zack Rosenburg.

The next time I visited Steve Himmelfarb's Cake Café, the cake virtuoso—and [Jewish boy made good](#)^[9]—Duff Goldman was, natch, at the next table. By now, my defenses were shredded. Not only by the Jewish onslaught, but by how poorly I was fitting into New Orleans at large. It is, indeed, a charmed town: friendly, easy-going, full of sweet surprises and coincidences. But, especially to a big-city newcomer untutored in how wonder works in New Orleans, the city can quickly come to feel small. Claims to the city's singularity are more justified in some departments (music, culture) than others (politics), the grating arrogance of its defenders notwithstanding. Since Hurricane Katrina, the city has drawn a tremendous amount of grassroots, enterprising talent, but just as much down-on-its-luck flotsam hiding out from reality. And the flipside of that easygoing friendliness is an equally easygoing outlook on commitments. You make plans with people, and they just don't show up.

I didn't come to New Orleans to find myself, so none of this should have mattered much. But my difficulty finding fluency in the freewheeling nonchalance that makes New Orleans tick (or stop ticking) made me feel as apart as my difficulty ratcheting up in New York. I felt too wound up, too intense, too searching for the place. Jews don't have a monopoly on those qualities, but I associate them immediately with Jews—and with New York, the Jew of America. Over the course of the month—invisibly, forgivingly—Jewishness came to feel like a metaphysical refuge, a portable homeland, in lonely New Orleans.

On that second visit to Cake Café, I ordered the everything bagel with cream cheese. It was—no contest—the best bagel I've ever tasted. (Yes, yes, I've been to Montreal, too.) A cake in a bagel—the dough moist and chewy, the crust bronze and crisp, the onion filings as redolent as a grandmother's latke. Steve Himmelfarb was being too modest in his assessment of it as the best bagel of merely the South. Even in New Orleans, regarded as a chosen place by so many of its inhabitants, people tend to defer to New York. Scarfing down the bagel, jazzed from that tiny pride of association that we feel when we come across a Jewish achievement, I thought: Maybe there's something to that.

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Cake Café and Bakery in New Orleans

CREDIT: [Kyle Petrozza](#)^[2]

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[1] Marigny: <http://cityofno.com/pg-99-48-faubourg-marigny.aspx>

[2] Kyle Petrozza: <http://www.kylepetrozza.com/>

[3] Cake Café: <http://www.nolacakes.com/>

[4] Krewe du Jieux: <http://www.tabletmag.com/news-and-politics/25752/the-krewes-and-the-jews/>

[5] city's ubiquitous: http://www.dadeweb.com/pages/new_orleans/bumper_stickers.htm

[6] Neighborhood Story Project: <http://www.neighborhoodstoryproject.org/>

[7] Samuel Zemurray: <http://www.unitedfruit.org/zemurray.htm>

[8] St. Bernard Project: <http://www.stbernardproject.org/v158/>

[9] Jewish boy made good: http://www.jewishjournal.com/articles/item/ace_holds_all_the_cards_when_it_comes_to_cakes_20060915/

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