

Bay Ridge Journal

Changing Tastes, From Lingonberry to Baba Ghanouj



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Myra Alperson leads a "Noshwalk": a culinary tour through Bay Ridge Brooklyn's diverse shops. [More Photos >](#)

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By [JOSEPH BERGER](#)

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Myra Alperson is a matchmaker of sorts.

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A NoshWalk Through Bay Ridge

She brings together people curious about exploring the city and introduces them to out-of-the-way neighborhoods they may never have visited. And like [Napoleon's](#) army, her crew travels on its stomach.

An effervescent and ambulatory [Zagat](#), Ms. Alperson has for 10 years run culinary tours that she calls NoshWalks through neighborhoods like Brighton Beach, the Grand Concourse and Richmond Hill. The other day she drew a group of 14 people to Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, to sample its [United Nations](#) of delights: [Palestinian](#), Greek, Norwegian, Danish, Lebanese, Moroccan and Turkish dishes. As they took a bite here and a bite there at the smorgasbord of groceries, bakeries and restaurants along Third and Fifth Avenues, she doled out juicy tidbits about Bay Ridge. Along the way, she demonstrated an essential secret about the magic of a city revitalized by new immigrants: that the whole world can be found in New York for the cost of a [MetroCard](#).

The touring foodies, hailing from New Jersey, Westchester County and Los Angeles as well as New York, learned a little history of a neighborhood that was once predominantly Scandinavian and then Italian — remember Tony Manero in “Saturday Night Fever.” In recent decades it has deepened its Middle Eastern flavor, evident in the cafes with hookah-smoking men and the head-scarved women pushing strollers along the sidewalks.

Ms. Alperson took the group, for example, to Salam Arabic Lutheran Church on Ovington Avenue. The 114-year-old brick church was once Salem Danish Lutheran Church: Dangling from the ceiling, there is still a model of a three-masted Scandinavian clipper. But a little sleight-of-hand — and a name that refers to peace in English and Arabic — allowed for an ethnic conversion after the Danes moved out or married into other tribes.

There are more than two dozen neighborhood walking tours like hers, Ms. Alperson said, but most are in Manhattan and focus on historical and architectural gems. She takes Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island, too, and her chief focus is food, glorious food. “Through the food, you’re going to get a sense of who the people are,” Ms. Alperson said.

Even before they visited their first shop, Ms. Alperson gave the walkers a taste of a heavy prosciutto bread from Cangiano’s, an Italian market where, she said, “the owner is now Lebanese and the baker is a Puerto Rican.” She ripped off a morsel and passed the loaf along, giving a whole new meaning to the term bread line.

Next was the Family Store, founded in 1977 by Minerva Dabas, a Palestinian immigrant from Nazareth, as a Middle Eastern grocery; it is now managed by her son Sam as a more eclectic gourmet shop. Along with hummus, baba ghanouj, and stuffed grape leaves made by Ms. Dabas, it sells barbecued spare ribs, a linguinilike string cheese called halabi, and a creamy **cheesecake** called knaffe that could rival the old Lindy’s cheesecake in its heyday.

“My mother made a cheesecake like this,” said Jerry Romain, 65, an Upper East Side psychotherapist, sampling a cube and drawing a pleased nod from Mr. Dabas.

“That’s how we bring people in,” Mr. Dabas said of the variety of cultures he peddles. “After 9/11 it was hard to get people interested in Middle Eastern food.”

At moments, the gaggle of strangers drew curious stares. But in a neighborhood where the exotic is common, those stares did not last.

“Who doesn’t want to come to Bay Ridge?” said Tracy Chellis of nearby Dyker Heights, a customer waiting to pay at the Family Store.

Right next door was Nordic Delicacies, which Ms. Alperson said was the only comprehensive Scandinavian store in New York (her definition did not include Leske’s Danish Bakery, a more specialized shop, where they stopped to taste kringler, a custard and almond ring). Nordic, owned by Helen Bakke and her daughter Arlene Bakke Rutuelo, has been open since 1987. The tourists had slices of gjetost, a caramel-colored cheese, and krumkaker, a cannolilike pastry roll filled with lingonberry jam and whipped cream.

Ms. Rutuelo recalled when Bay Ridge had 250,000 Scandinavians. “You’d walk along the street,” she said, “and you’d hear Norwegian. Now it’s Chinese and Arabic.” Her Italian last name, acquired from her ex-husband, offers an inkling of how the neighborhood’s Scandinavian flavor has blended into something more ethnically mixed.

Hearing this, Mr. Romain chimed in with his own story: His father was a kosher butcher in East Flatbush, and after Jews began leaving the neighborhood in the 1960s, he developed a following among Seventh-day Adventists who preferred kosher meat.

“My father was like the king of the Seventh-day Adventists,” he said.

Not one to be topped, Ms. Alperson, a graduate of [Barnard College](#) who lives in Washington Heights with her 13-year-old daughter, Sadie, recalled a Lebanese market that went out of business a few years ago. The owners were known by the usually Jewish nicknames Abe and Mo — short, in this case, for Abdullah and Mohammed.

After all this palaver, the group headed toward Fifth Avenue. “We’ll actually get some walking in,” said Ms. Alperson, who earns her living teaching school in Inwood but runs 30 tours a year, charging \$40 a person. They passed a characteristic Bay Ridge line of white limestone row houses with brownstone stoops and bay windows. Along the way, Bill Gordon, 64, who lives in Downtown Brooklyn, said he had taken 10 NoshWalks.

“She finds things nobody else would find,” he said. “That grocery store doesn’t look like anything. But because of Myra you explore a place you’d never think of exploring.”

After a few blocks, the group stopped in the Baladay Market, owned by a Palestinian from Jerusalem, and shared a ring-shaped bread stuffed with dates and a bag of green almond fruit. At Hookahnuts, they sampled nougat coated with cardamom. At Bay Ridge Bakery, they looked at twin towers made of chocolate, a tribute to the 9/11 casualties. At A & D Turkish Market, they sampled candied chickpeas.

“You can go around the world in a few blocks,” said Jim McGuire, 60, a retired Air Force officer from Hoboken, N. J., who was taking the tour with his wife, Carla Sylvester.

After more than three hours, the tour made its next-to-last stop at Al-Safa Restaurant, where, for the first time, they ate sitting down, scooping roasted eggplant and hummus with pita. One walker, Linda Eaton, a 34-year-old textile designer, confessed that she had just moved to Bay Ridge, not far from the Family Store, but “still didn’t know what to buy, what’s good.” So she took a NoshWalk to find out what in her neighborhood was hiding in plain sight.