

HUNGRY & BOROUGH-BOUND

A Gastronomic Tour of New York City's Far-flung Immigrant Havens

BY SAM SCHULZ

You're in America's best city for eating. You're surrounded by premiere gourmand destinations as well as by shops hawking those twin New York specialties, bagels and pizza, for a few bucks apiece.

You're also surrounded by some of the most varied ethnic foods within a subway ride—but if you stuck to your guidebook and stayed in Manhattan, you might not know it.

You've made your art museum pilgrimages. You've shopped on Fifth Avenue. And you've savored a famous chef's tasting menu. So now where can you get a good bowl of borscht or pho?

The immigrant Manhattan neighborhoods you've read about have dwindled. Many have been reduced to a few sanitized blocks of stalwarts as condos have taken over downtown.

But those immigrant neighborhoods aren't gone entirely, and neither are prime destinations for borscht, pho and dozens of other ethnic specialties. They've just relocated to the outer boroughs, and they're well worth the subway ride to find them.

Brighton Beach Dumpling Memoirs

The sands of Brighton Beach stay mostly untrodden this time of year. Only fur-swaddled local ladies, their tiny dogs and one camera-wielding day-tripper patrol the boardwalk. A mile down it, the Coney Island rollercoaster and Ferris wheel wait for springtime hordes.

This neighborhood at the end of Brooklyn is a sleepy one but for its main drag, where Cyrillic dominates storefronts, Russian pop music blares from shops and the elevated B train rumbles overhead. For years Brighton Beach was simply an orthodox Jewish community; it became a Russian Jewish one in the 1980s with a wave of immigrants who had faced anti-Semitism in the collapsing Soviet Union.

Today, inside the burg's cafés, hungry Slavs linger over borscht, dumplings and other wintry eats from across what was the Soviet Union. One eatery specializes in homemade vareniki, or ravioli, another in soups that betray the former nation's Afghani ties. Another serves mostly Uzbeki guests long skewers of delicate meat.

But the cafés' proprietors and waiters, well steeped in Politburo lore, shrug unsentimentally; all these local restaurants are fundamentally the same, they say. "This is simple food. You want a good restaurant," they ask? "Go to Primorski,"



they say—a restaurant-lounge down the block with a sleek facade and doormen clad in all-black suits.

But today, skip Primorski. Opt instead for Varenichnaya; recognize it by the massive gold amphora atop its unassuming awning. (If you want to make like a local, be sure to bring your own bottle of vodka, too.)

There, order the namesake vareniki. The ones stuffed with fried cabbage bear the sweet richness of caramelized onions, while those stuffed with potato pack a peppery, smooth puree into delicate dough. If it's meat you're after, order the Siberian pelmeni, tiny tortellini-shaped meat dumplings, in a dilled broth.

A few blocks away, the Oceanview Café—from which you can't see the sea—serves soups that challenge typical notions of Russian cuisine. Try the green borscht, whose brightly bitter spinach and crisp celery are lent left by

ribbons of egg, or the wonderful lamb soup, with its tomato-lemon scent, tender hunks of meat and fresh cilantro.

If you want to graze or just browse, visit M & I International Foods, and admire an overwhelming spread of Russian salads, smoked fish, deli meats, candies and beers; then explore one of the bookstores that line Brighton Avenue.

Better yet, join the daily promenade by the Atlantic Ocean: Buy a samsa, or meat-filled pastry, from a street vendor and head for the boardwalk. Turn up your coat collar and look away from the high-rises. Imagine they're instead the onion domes of Odessa.



Little Bogata, Little Seoul or Little Delhi?

Quick: What's the most ethnically diverse ZIP code in America? It's 11377, and it belongs to Jackson Heights, Queens. As ethnic communities are priced out of Manhattan, many have flourished here—making it an express stop on any foodie tour of New York.

Just take the subway to its 74th Street-Roosevelt Avenue transit hub, where several major thoroughfares converge and disparate cultures abut. Follow each street spoke out from that hub and, depending on your trajectory, you might hear a world's worth of music: bhangra on 74th, cumbia on Roosevelt, K-pop on Broadway.

You might also taste a world's worth of simple and exotic foods—from a maze of street vendors, tiny storefront shops, a range of restaurants and several massive supermarkets catering to local communities.

Visit the massive Indian grocery Patel Brothers for affordable saffron, mountains of egg-sized eggplants, an array of mango pickles and bulk bags of spices. Try Chong Jap for Korean staples like gochujang and high-quality kimchi, and try Pacific Supermarket for all your southeast Asian condiments and for live fish.

Once those forays have whetted your appetite, choose a street to amble down and a culture and cuisine to sample.

Korean restaurants line one stretch of Broadway; halal meat markets line another. (Halal indicates compliance with Muslim food laws, just as kosher does with Jewish ones.) 74th Street and 37th Avenue house a bustling desi, or south Asian, district where sari shops adjoin Indian diners. Roosevelt Avenue is home to a Filipino community and a thriving strip of central and south American businesses.

For the neighborhood's best Korean food, walk east on Broadway to Haewoondae Korean Restaurant. While you ponder the menu, sip the complimentary barley tea, and snack on the fried fish and homemade tofu you're brought along with the usual banchan, small side dishes. Order the particularly tender kalbi, or marinated short ribs, which you'll cook at your table and wrap in lettuce with rice. Sample the pork-studded kimchi stew.

Just across Broadway, in the Indian commercial district, the cavernous Jackson Diner has been feeding hordes Punjabi staples for decades. But if you want a more

low-key, upscale introduction to northern Indian cuisine's relatively mild, rich and complex flavors, head down 37th Avenue to Mehfil for its palak paneer, simmered greens with fried fresh cheese, or malai kofta, vegetable balls in cream sauce.

For fresh, authentic Thai dishes in an upscale, gracious setting, head a little further down Broadway—east to Ayada Thai or west to Sripraphai Thai Restaurant. These neighborhood haunts have steadily developed reputations among knowing foodies for some of the city's best ambassadors of their cuisine.

Finally, if you're still hungry, skip dessert and stick to savory snacks from the Latin community along Roosevelt. At Taqueria Coatzingo, each hefty \$2 taco is served with guacamole and a roasted jalapeno; the meat mounded on the tacos al pastor is strikingly tender and delicately spiced. Or if it's late on a weekend night, head to the corner of Roosevelt and 79th for the Arepa Lady, a former judge-cum-street vendor whose arepas con queso, thick Colombian cornmeal flapjacks with mild melting cheese, win her cart long lines of hungry devotees.

As you mop crumbs from your shirt, you might think you're a plane flight from New York. But then you'll hear the telltale screech of the 7 train pulling into a station above you. You'll see Spanish "help wanted" signs on Vietnamese storefronts. You'll pass a Chinese take-out storefront that looks like it could be any in America—except this one boasts of halal meat and desi-style dishes. For immigrants from everywhere, Manhattan rents might be untenable. Here in Queens, your appetite and theirs are the better for it.