

ABOUT

The Jewish Deli

by Ben Nadler



By [Avery Robinson](#)— July 7, 2023

he past fifteen years have been a boon for cookbooks, memoirs, and histories about Ashkenazi Jewish food whose pages may as well be dripping in the schmaltz and pickle juice they describe. If you're interested in the history of bagels, bialys, and appetizing, or the trajectory of delis from Houston Street in NYC to Houston, Texas, these books will answer many of your questions about American Jewish comfort food: the pastrami, smoked salmon, bagels, and kugels that nourished twentieth-century Jewish American pop culture and communities.

In *The Jewish Deli*, author and illustrator Ben Nadler leans on these books as he elevates Jewish deli, appetizing, and baked goods into a delightful graphic novel. This book is 256 pages of joy, replete with Alaskan king salmon wearing crowns and an adorable cartoon parve rugelach cozily sandwiched between its buddies, a milk jug in Crocs and a chicken drumstick with plaid socks. The charming anthropomorphic pastries and Jewish historical characters that Nadler creates make this among the cutest books you will ever read.

Nadler weaves a cursory, interpretive Jewish history into the genesis and evolution of these foods. In the beginning, before Jews were pickling briskets on the Lower East Side, there were thousands of years in which exiled Diaspora Jews adapted and adopted local foods to fit their Jewish customs. At the turn of the twentieth century in America, these foods came into their own with the institutions we know today as appetizing (purveyors of cured, pickled, and smoked fish), deli (which sold corned beef, pastrami, tongue, and many other meats that made the perfect union with rye bread and mustard), and Jewish bakeries.

Nadler goes beyond the general, sharing insights from his visits to some of the most veritable Jewish Ashkenazi food purveyors of the twenty-first (and early twentieth) century. These experiences are then reported in whimsical play-by-plays that illustrate each of the steps in curing corned beef, filling a knish, and smoking salmon. He celebrates dark rye bread, "the unsung mascot of European Jewish immigrants," and reveals black-and-white cookies' true origin. This wonderful book will surely appeal to anyone who is hungry to learn more about the history of Ashkenazi comfort food, and it will serve as a great complement to those aforementioned histories and cookbooks.