The Epoch Times
Epoch Times International

# The Last Pickle Standing

By Kristen Meriwether On October 24, 2012

Mike Chu, who has worked in the pickle business for 15 years, takes out pickles from a barrel at The Pickle Guys store on the Lower East Side of Manhattan on Oct. 24. The Pickle Guys is the only remaining store left since the early 1900s that sells only pickles in New York City. (Benjamin Chasteen/The Epoch Times)

NEW YORK—As the Jewish immigrant population exploded near the end of the 19th century, many settled on Manhattan's Lower East Side (LES), bringing with them one of their favorite foods—the pickle.

Pickle vendors lined the streets and dozens of retailers and wholesalers set up shop in the neighborhood, the smell of brine thick in the air.

"One of the things that most struck outsiders when they walked to the Lower East Side was what they described as the 'stench' of pickles," Adam Steinberg, senior education associate for walking tours with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, said by phone Wednesday. "The whole neighborhood just reeked of pickles."

Steinberg said during the early 20th century, near the peak of the pickle business, there were nearly 200 Jewish pickle stores in New York City and nearly half of them were on the LES. He cites a 1929 Saturday Evening Post article.

My, how times have changed. A visit to the LES today will yield only one pickle store: The Pickle Guys on Essex Street.

This Sunday the streets of the LES will once again be filled with the smell of pickle brine for the 11th annual Pickle Day. There will be live music, and of course barrels of locally made pickles, a memorial to the glory days of the booming pickle business on the LES.

Assorted pickled fruits and vegetables for sale at The Pickle Guys store on the Lower East Side of Manhattan on Oct 24.

## History

With a large Jewish population at the time, the pickle was a popular item, largely because it was a familiar favorite in a land far from home.

“When you are an immigrant and you come here, you are going to bring recipes that are familiar to you,” said Allison B. Siegel, resident historian.

It was also the perfect “on the go” food. Much like the busy New Yorkers of today, the residents of the LES often worked multiple jobs and needed something to snack on as they hustled from place to place. “Pickles were their fast food,” Steinberg said. “Pickles were something they could get on the street that would fill them up and get them to the next shift.”

With no refrigeration pickled foods would keep longer, allowing residents to eat fruits and vegetables out of season.

“It was a useful food for the people who lived here,” Steinberg said.

## Pickle Crunch

Despite its popularity, the pickle became a casualty in an ever-changing modern world.

At the same time the popularity of pickles was on the rise, technology was evolving. Heinz Company invented a way to mass-produce and market pickles in jars.

This didn’t kill off the whole industry, but it changed how New Yorkers bought their favorite snack. New Yorkers no longer had to suffer through the “stench” of the LES to get pickles. They could head down to their local market and pick up a jar.

The wholesale pickle market was still thriving, but in 1967 Hunt’s Point Terminal Produce Market opened in the Bronx and the wholesale market moved to the Bronx.

By the 1980s only 40 or so pickle stores remained, catering to a local Jewish population that preferred locally bought pickles certified Kosher by a familiar rabbi.

Alan Kaufman, owner of The Pickle Guys, began working at Guss' Pickles in 1981, which was one of the few remaining pickle shops from the boom days of the early 1900s.

Over the next 30 years the pickle industry continued to decline as commercial rents increased and the storeowners began hitting their golden years. As the storeowners got older, the newer generation was less inclined to keep the old fashioned businesses open. "It's a lost art," Kaufman said. "Our goal is to stay there to keep the tradition alive."

Kaufman opened The Pickle Guys 11 years ago, using the same recipes the pickle masters of the early 1900s used. "We have not changed the recipe since 1910. The pickles are the same as if you bought them 100 years ago," Kaufman said.

## Expansion of Flavors

But, the pickle business, as well as the LES, has changed a lot since the early 1900s and a new breed of pickle makers have popped up recently to take on one of America's tastiest treats.
Rick Field grew up making pickles with his family and continued to do so as an adult while working as a television producer. In 2004, he took his culinary expertise and love of pickling to create Rick's Picks. With offices on the LES, Rick's Picks pulls from the rich pickling history of the LES, adding a new spin with fun flavors.

"We are trying to bring new energy to the category with interesting flavor profiles and dynamic combinations," Field said.

Kaufman remains the sole survivor of the "old school" pickle vendors in the LES, but said he has also changed with the times. What was once a selection of six or seven barrels of pickles has grown to an offering of over 30, including pickled pineapples, an item his co-worker suggested they sell to cater to a new immigrant population.

"That says so much about where the LES is today. There are still immigrants in the neighborhoods and that is reflected in what Alan and his co-owner sell," Steinberg said. "They sell traditional Jewish style pickles in a kosher pickle store, but they sell kinds of pickles now that they never would have sold 30 years ago."

*The Epoch Times publishes in 35 countries and in 19 languages. Subscribe to our e-newsletter.*

*Please send news tips to nyc_news@epochtimes.com*