

# The Catskills: beauty worthy of a painting

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

I have always loved the paintings of the Hudson River School. Their depiction of pastoral life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was as detailed as it was idealized. As a child visiting museums, I stood mesmerized in front of the romantic works of Bierstadt and Church, trying to imagine myself in the luminescent worlds they painted. I still search out works by Hudson River artists at other museums around the country, and particularly love finding those that depict the Catskills.

Visiting the Catskills as a kid afforded no such transcendent experience for me. Even though the area was at the height of its popularity during the 50s and 60s, I traveled there only to attend USY conventions or my Tante Dora and Uncle Morris's fiftieth anniversary party, all held within the confines of a hotel. The storied hotels with their wide-ranging activities and enormous feasts were things I had only heard about. The famous Jewish entertainers of the Borscht Belt I knew only from the "Ed Sullivan Show." I do clearly remember my cousin Myla rhapsodizing about the size of the tomatoes at the Nevele. But, I had never been outdoors in the Catskills.

The cover of Allegra Goodman's novel, *Kaaterskill Falls*, brought back memories of the Hudson River paintings and the feelings evoked. The plot revived the stories I had heard about life in the bungalows for New Yorkers fleeing summer heat in the city. Soon after reading the book, I finally got to the Catskills and had the chance to explore. I felt that I had stepped into one of those beautiful landscapes, and that Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the artists' spiritual inspiration, were leading me by the hand.

Derelict buildings line the roads, but the scenery is still gorgeous all along the way. The Borscht Belt is long gone, and along with it the Concord, Grossinger's, Nevele, and others of their ilk. Of the few kosher hotels that remain, the one that we visited for a Hasidic bar mitzvah was, as my husband Joel describes it, "old in 1950." The food, though, was vintage shtetl (e.g., kishke, kugel, and knishes) and abundant to the point of gluttony: fourteen meals in three days.

I have a particular curiosity about the Catskills, as my grandparents lived in Ellenville in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were there long enough for Bubbie to give birth to three of her children while Zaydie taught *heder*. I am told that Zaydie also tried his hand at farming, one of many Jews who farmed chickens and cattle. I don't know if he received any financial backing by the Baron de Hirsch, as many Jewish farmers did, but it appears

he wasn't very successful because the family moved after several years.

In preparing this article, I had a very nice chat with Geoffrey Miller, an ethno-musicologist with an abiding interest in all things historical. According to Miller, Kerhonkson and Ellenville have a long Jewish agricultural heritage dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. But, despite the rich history of Jewish life and culture in the Catskills, there is, sadly, no archive preserving the documents and artifacts of the area.

However, revitalization of the area is beginning. According to Miller, the old Reher Bakery has been revitalized into the Reher Center for Immigrant Culture and History. It is located in the historic Rondout waterfront district of Kingston, New York, where many Jewish immigrants settled beginning in the 1840s. Most of that part of town was demolished during the 1960s with urban renewal funds. While not a specifically Jewish museum, the Center will tell the story of the various immigrant populations that lived in the area.

## Rugelach

Rugelach is a traditional Jewish pastry that you might have found on the dessert buffet at one of the great hotels in the Catskills. Buttery and delicious, they can be filled with any number of ingredients. These are my favorite.

### Ingredients

- 8 oz. cream cheese, at room temperature
- ½ lb. butter, at room temperature
- ¼ c. sugar plus another 9 T.
- ¼ t. salt
- 1 t. vanilla extract (the real stuff)
- 2 c. flour
- ¼ c. light brown sugar, packed
- 1½ t. ground cinnamon
- ½ c. raisins
- ½ c. chocolate chips
- 1 c. pecans, finely chopped
- ½ c. good quality seedless raspberry preserves
- 1 egg beaten with 1 T. water, for egg wash

### Directions

Cream the cheese and butter in the bowl of an electric mixer until light. Add the ¼ cup sugar, the salt, and vanilla.

With the mixer on low speed, add the flour and mix until just combined. Remove the dough to a well-floured board and roll it into a ball. Cut the ball in quarters, wrap each piece in plastic, and refrigerate for about an hour.

To make the filling, combine 6 tablespoons of sugar, the brown sugar, ½ teaspoon of the cinnamon, the raisins, chocolate chips, and pecans. On a well-floured board, roll each ball of dough into a 9" circle.

Spread the dough with 2 tablespoons of the raspberry pre-

An exhibit available for viewing now is on display at the Matthew Persen House, a 17<sup>th</sup> century stone edifice in Uptown Kingston run by the Ulster County Clerk. The show reconstructs the neighborhood that the Reher Bakery once served.

The oldest Jewish dwelling in North America that of Luis Moses Gomez, is found in Marlboro. Gomez was a Sephardic Jew, part of the early group of Spanish and Portuguese immigrants who sought refuge in the New Netherlands. The merchant and trader built his fieldstone blockhouse to conduct business and maintain provisions as an extension of his work in Colonial New York. Since Gomez's time, prominent figures from the American Revolution to 20<sup>th</sup> century have lived there. In fact, the house was continuously occupied for nearly three centuries, and direct descendants of the various families that dwelled there since the 18<sup>th</sup> century sit on the museum's board.

It's worth a weekend trip to explore the Catskills.



serves and sprinkle with one quarter of the filling. Press the filling lightly into the dough.

Cut the circle into 12 equal wedges—cutting the whole circle in quarters, then each quarter into thirds.

Starting with the wide edge, roll up each wedge.

Place the cookies, points tucked under, on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Chill for 30 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F.

Brush each cookie with the egg wash.

Combine 3 tablespoons granulated sugar and the remaining 1 teaspoon cinnamon, and sprinkle over the rugelach.

Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, until lightly browned.

Remove to a wire rack and let cool.

Carol Goodman Kaufman has always loved to write. While writing a number of scientific papers as part of her doctorate and post-doc work over the years, she discovered her love of human interest stories, as well as her love of travel and food stories. Go to Carol's website <http://carolgoodmankaufman.com/> to learn more about this fascinating author.



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