

Traveling with Jewish Taste®

The Catskills: A Jewish “Once” with a Future

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



I have always loved the paintings of the Hudson River School. Their depiction of pastoral life in the nineteenth century was as detailed as it was idealized. As a child visiting the Berkshire Museum, I would stand mesmerized in front of the romantic works of Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Edwin Church, trying to imagine myself in the luminescent worlds they painted. I still search out works by Hudson River artists at other museums, and particularly love finding those that depict the Berkshires and the nearby 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 United Synagogue Youth conventions or Tante Dora and Uncle Morris’s anniversary party, all held within the confines of a hotel.

The storied hotels with their wide-ranging activities 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 1999 novel, *Kaaterskill Falls*, brought back memories of the Hudson River paintings and the feelings evoked. The story within 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.

We did have to close our eyes to the disrepair bordering on dereliction rampant along the roads leading us to our destination. The Borscht Belt was long gone, and along with it the Concord, Grossinger’s, the 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 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 twentieth century. They were there long enough for Bubbie to give birth to three of her children while Zadie taught *heder*.

I am told that he 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 from 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 about Jewish life in the Catskills with Ken Salzmänn, Director of the Jewish Federation of Ulster County. Salzmänn, in turn, referred me to Geoffrey Miller, an ethno-musicologist with an abiding interest in all things historical.

According to Miller, Kerhonkson and Ellenville have a long Jewish agricultural heritages dating back to the late nineteenth century. But, despite the rich history of Jewish life and culture in the Catskills, there is no archive preserving that information.

There is, however, a small library of books on the subject of the Borscht Belt available in bookstores and online.

However, revitalization of the area is beginning. According to Miller, the old Reher Bakery, through the efforts of the Jewish Federation of Ulster County, is being restored and made into a history center, located in the section of town in which 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.

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

With a second floor added circa 1772 by succeeding owner, the oldest Jewish dwelling, circa 1715, in North America can be found in Marlboro. Luis Moses Gomez was a Sephardic Jew, part of the early group of Spanish and Portuguese immigrants



The majestic beauty of the Catskill Mountains



‘Autumn Woods,’ by Hudson River School Artist Albert Bierstadt



A Catskill bungalow housed New Yorkers fleeing the summer heat



The Reher Bakery, being restored and made into a history center

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 twentieth century have lived there. In fact, the house was continuously occupied for nearly three centuries. Direct descendants of the various families that dwelled there since the eighteenth century sit on the museum’s board. Due to damages from Hurricane Irene, the Gomez Hose was closed for repair. It is scheduled to reopen around the time you read this article, April 14. Although technically not in the Catskills, one must-see resort is a short drive away. The huge and rambling Mohonk Mountain House is a Victorian fairy tale castle perched atop a mountain overlooking crystalline Lake Mohonk in New Paltz. Built in 1869, its thousands of acres are chock full of wonderful outdoor activities,

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including swimming, horseback riding, and hiking. Indoors, you can find a fabulously decadent spa, dancing, yoga, featured speakers, and more. And, of course, buffet tables laden with dozens and dozens of food choices.

New Paltz itself is an adorable little town, home to one of the New York State universities. Antique shops, funky boutiques, cafes, and tea rooms line the colorful main street. You can also take a walking tour of Huguenot Street, the oldest intact street in America, lined with the original stone houses.

The Catskills are a short drive from the Berkshires, and yet a totally different world. It's worth a weekend trip to explore.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She recently launched the blog "Food for Thought," on her website at carolgoodmankaufman.com. She invites visits and comments.

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The long-gone Borscht Belt's long-gone Grossinger's resort



The Luis Moses Gomez House, the oldest Jewish dwelling, circa 1715, in North America



The rambling Mohonk Mountain House, a Victorian fairy tale castle

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:

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| 8 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature | 1/4 cup light brown sugar, packed |
| 1/2 pound butter, at room temperature | 1-1/2 teaspoons ground cinnamon |
| 1/4 cup sugar plus another 9 tablespoons | 1/2 cup raisins |
| 1/4 teaspoon of salt | 1/2 cup chocolate chips |
| 1 teaspoon vanilla extract (the real stuff) | 1 cup pecans, finely chopped |
| 2 cups flour | 1/2 cup good quality seedless raspberry preserves |
| | 1 egg beaten with one tablespoon of water for egg wash |

Directions:

- Cream the cheese and butter in the bowl of an electric mixer until light.
- Add the 1/4 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 six tablespoons of sugar, the brown sugar, one-half teaspoon of the cinnamon, the raisins, chocolate chips, and pecans.
- On a well-floured board, roll each ball of dough into a nine-inch circle.
- Spread the dough with two tablespoons of the raspberry preserves and sprinkle with one quarter of the filling. Press the filling lightly into the dough.
- Cut the circle into twelve 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 fifteen to twenty minutes, until lightly browned.
- Remove to a wire rack and let cool.



In an earlier era, many Jews in the Catskills farmed chickens