

The Dairy Restaurant
by Ben Katchor

Review by Kalman Goldstein

Ben Katchor is a cartoonist, illustrator, essayist, Yiddishist, and historian of bygone byways of Jewish life in New York. Ostensibly, this large volume is a memorial to now defunct dairy restaurants. Katchor's survey occupies only half of the book, following an idiosyncratic history of the relationship between Jews and dairy, beginning with the Creation and culminating with Ratner's. This journey is as much, if not more, fun than the destination!

There are cartoon illustrations, containing witty or unexpected commentary. The inner cover embraces a two-page description of the Creation: a light bulb suspended over "Primordial Borscht", already priced at 75 cents a bowl. The outer cover is of a classic kosher restaurant, with mamma offering blintzes, waiters and diners oblivious to the wrinkled napkins on the floor. The last-page reveals a re-purposed dairy restaurant now serving tofu-burgers while diners strike Covid- masked Hindu poses.

The book is full of menus and ad copy, usually in Yiddish. As a chronicle, it proceeds slowly from biblical times and the adoption of kashrut, through rabbinic opinions on the proper handling of animals' udders: "The possibilities of violations are endless." There are sections describing Europeans' milk consumption over the centuries, a sour milk craze, milk cures and early dairy enthusiasms, assessing their influences on both Jews and gentiles. Katchor locates famous historic creameries like Warsaw's Mleczarnia. His historical survey is very learned, but always leavened with humorous or sardonic commentary. He is as adept at citing Midrash, Mishnah and Talmud as he is of dismissing traditionalists' sometimes "obsessive-compulsive behavior." He is also fond of digressions, as in poet Heinrich Heine's ode to cholent, and devotes 17 pages to Sholem Aleichem's Tevye.

One-liners abound. Trotsky's favorite vegetarian restaurant in Czernowitz served "a bean soup legendary for its regenerative and unpalatable qualities." To illustrate his skepticism about dairy certifications, he includes 27 examples of competing heckshers (neglecting my personal favorite, the outline of Peru enclosing a "K"). Current sanctions, he argues, might "overwhelm an 18th century kabbalist."

Arriving finally at the era of proliferation of dairy restaurants in New York neighborhoods, he explains both their rise and decline. For early 20th century immigrants and their children, the dairy restaurant represented clean "commonsense" kashrut,

convenient and affordable lunches, less chewing required by older folks who had lost teeth, and popularized health and ethical benefits of milchig over fleischig.

Katchor reminisces about how he met his wife in a dairy restaurant. Eventually, after his tours of now non-existent emporiums, he explains their gradual disappearance. One reason was the mid-century attractiveness of luncheonettes advertising “kosher-style” menus, which provoked “no negative theological consequences, such as eternal sin.” More seriously, he considers medical warnings about high cholesterol, high rates of lactose intolerance among Ashkenazim, and a younger generation’s association of dairy restaurants with their unassimilated grandparents’ quaint habits. Urban gentrification has promoted changing and broadening tastes in cuisine. Raconteur that he is, Katchor cannot forego recounting his own timorous encounters with falafel.