

Gotham Bagels: Holy cream cheese, Batman!

By Raphael Kadushin

We were heading to Mount Horeb for lunch when one of those oddly apocalyptic summer storms whipped up, the kind that seems to have become, suddenly, freakishly routine. The radio was making noises about running for cover, and we decided maybe it wasn't worth the broken bones and twisted neck, and that long, tempting tunnel of light, even for a really good lunch. So we turned back to Madison, and that's how we ended up, drenched, at Gotham Bagels for lunch instead.

The mystery is that I haven't eaten here sooner, and it's a mystery for two reasons. First, I'm one of those obsessives who think the perfect sandwich is the perfect meal, especially in summer; when you don't want to sit down to a steaming heap of food. And while Madison offers a real range of supernal sandwiches (anything on Caspian Cafe's fresh flatbread; Brasserie V's knockout muffuletta and its smoked turkey with cheddar and chipotle aioli; and Wasabi's new love love maki, a Japanese take on a sandwich that rolls kiwi, crab, avocado, salmon and caviar into the best, brightest-tasting, one-bite summer dish in town, period), it could always offer more.

The other reason it's odd I haven't been loitering at Gotham is that I'm one of those inveterate whiners who are always complaining about the lack of good delis and decent bagels in Madison. If a sandwich is high art, there is no finer art than a perfect smoked salmon (preferably hand-sliced into translucent sheets by the smoked-fish cutters at Zabar's) on a perfect bagel, or a steaming pastrami sliced hot straight off the brisket.

And none of those have been easy to find in Madison, starting with the bagel, which is too often — okay, pretty much all the time — a limp, spongy, porous, tasteless loafah of a thing at the local chains.

The fact that Gotham's hand-rolled bagels are the antidote to those imposters — something that's obvious the minute you lay eyes on them — is reason enough to come. And, in fact, the Gotham namesake alone, without a shmear of anything added, is satisfying, because these are bagels with a real chew and an authentic taste.

There is a subtle sweetness to them, a satisfying crunchy crust and a brown patina that is the sign of a real, well-loved, artisanal bagel, and each rendition has its own distinctive tones. Maybe best is the sesame seed bagel, because each sesame seed is a little world of nutty, toasted flavor.

If a naked bagel seems too spartan, you can, of course, choose from an epic list of fillings, from curried chicken salad to kosher salami, roasted eggplant, roasted poblano peppers and Applewood bacon, or you can opt for one of the house specialties. We opted, and most were good.

Especially and surprisingly good: the Oyster Bay sandwich, which stacks battered Alaskan cod fillet, shredded lettuce, tomato and house-made tartar sauce on the bagel of your choice. While a fish fry on a bagel sounds like a guaranteed bust, this was in fact a memorable sandwich, because the crispy, very sweet cod and



CAROLYN FATH

tangy tartar played perfectly off the nutty bagel.

Also good was a Spanish Harlem sandwich that layered shredded roasted pork (lots of it, and very tender), hot capicola ham, melted baby Swiss, pickles and Dijon mustard. If the meat had been just a shade less dry, this would have been another little wonder.

Leave that to the Brighton Beach, which is simply the best version of a bona fide lox and bagel in town. While the caper cream cheese, watercress, red onion and tomato add flavor, the subtly smoked, thin-sliced, light pink Alaskan salmon was all the bagel really needed, and the sandwich is something I could eat every other day.

The only real disappointment? Gotham's Williamsburg sandwich, its take on pastrami on rye. The easily mortified might want to avoid the thing in any case, because the energetic sandwich makers, impersonating New York deli men, are prone to call out "Here's your Willie, sir" when the order comes up.

But the problem is bigger than that. Though the pastrami is an honest try — it is clearly sliced fresh off the brisket, so it's already a big leap up from the usual leathery, generic, microwaved deli "meat" that passes for pastrami at other local lunch counters — it is too chewy, and it is sliced into layers that are way too thick. Pastrami needs to be shaved into very thin slices and layered up, or you're going to choke on even the tenderest meat.

That's my only complaint. The big, boxy dining room is fine for what it is (there are a few pillowy lounge chairs and big chunky tables), the counter service is energetic and cheerful, and the black and white cookies are okay.

But in the end, none of that matters. Being able to get a dozen real, authentic bagels to go, right here in Madison, is worth any kind of detour. ♦

