

TORN OFF

The Printed Matter of
Essex Street Market

by Harley J. Spiller

AMUSE-GEULE

On the last morning of January 2016 I set out to collect one piece of printed matter from each of the 26 merchants at Essex Street Market. This is what I do. Rather, did. For 35 years I collected takeout menus and other primary documents related to international restaurants. Why? Because building, studying, and sharing a focused collection is a fascinating way to learn about and support cultures. I stopped collecting in 2014 when my archives became part of the special collections library at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

I came out of retirement at the invitation of Nicolás Dumit Estévez Rafal. He knows I go weak in the knees for working class international cuisine and homespun eateries where customers commune one-to-one with cooks. I love hearty homemade fare I've never tried, especially with a dollop of mom 'n' pop shop *lagniappe*. Food is much more than a meal in hand – it's a process whereby the *gestalt* is as important as the *gefilte*. A vital part of this process is the creation of printed matter and there's a lot to be read in the texts, materials, colors, shapes and styles of menus, signs, business cards, labels, bags and receipts.

MAIN COURSE

First stop, Shopsins, a 10-table hole-in-the-market that has to be the most stimulating restaurant on the planet. Kenny Shopsin lavishes customers with creative succulence and coarse-chopped banter both poignant and provocative. His and his kids' cooking style leans more to *grebenes* than *mousse*. Their menu is a wonderment laying out hundreds of tersely-described combos most mortals would never think to put together. Wasabi-glazed donut sandwich? Check. Duck fingers, chili gravy and cheese curds in a bowl? Why not. Nigerian plump dumpling turkey curry? Coming right up. Such unique entries cram every inch of Shopsins double-sided legal-size menu. *Mais quel horror-vacui* - there is no blank space.

The "Indian Jew Boy Brisket Kati Roll (egged roti)" jumped off the page. I halfheartedly scanned the rest of the menu, opted out of the soup or juice menus, and went with my instinct. The sandwich is terrific, with all the textures brisket is supposed to have. It's moist, stringy, dry, chewy, tender, pully, juicy, fatty, and crispy in equal parts. It even had a nub of tendon, gooey as a July gummy bear.

Ken Shopsin chats with regulars, chastises rule-breakers, and hollers out to make sure the cook uses *rogan josh* and a zillion other foods. Most of the time Kenny keeps his back to the street. He cares deeply about his Camelot. Before his original lease was torn up, I was introduced via a New York friend so diehard he was picked to play a murdered Knicks fan on *Law & Order*. I'm an infrequent customer, but happily Kenny remembers me and my menus.

I sat down next to his makeshift throne to describe my project. Kenny caught on in a flash and cut me off: "You can't make the market more valuable because it's already more valuable. I don't need help," he declaimed, "I'm satisfied." A marketplace is a work of time he said. It should progress naturally and not be overanalyzed or it becomes artificial. Chewing over his estimations, I looked around. There was but one empty table, and not for long. Cognoscenti waited on line the rest of the day.

Kenny threw me a bone. "Why is my menu so long?" he asked and answered, "...to confuse the foodies. They can't come and get what's trendy, they have to know what they want." He took even more pleasure saying "A lot can't do that and leave." Shopsins' maddeningly complex bill of dare, its categories piled within categories like a *meshugge matrioshka*, points to higher-order thinking. He generously gave me a hardcover book his daughter wrote, but it was clear I wasn't getting a menu. I never even asked—a snapshot of his tabletop Hot Sauce Menu will do. At the end of the day, the brain of Shopsins is the spitting image of its menu, full of uniquely gruff and loveable character fomented by endless flights of imagination wrought real.

SIDE DISHES

Peasant Stock's stakes are put down at the northeast corner of Essex Street Market. Its menu is unavailable because the seven-foot tall chalkboard does double duty as a door. Peasant Stock's boss was surprised to hear I covet her singular menu. She gave me a business card instead.

I only collected two takeout menus in the entire marketplace, from Arancini Brothers and Davidovich Bakery. Still, my old thrills and skills flooded back. I scoped out every stall, learned about new foods, and circled round-and-round to make sure I didn't miss a thing. It was fun scoring all manner of printed matter while airing out my pitiful Spanish, Yiddish, and Japanese. I even tried Greek at petite Boubouki, where the chef was working intently and my request for a business card broke her concentration. I felt bad so I did what I often do when I feel bad. I bought a cookie. An amazingly-textured and elegantly-flavored nut cookie mind you. I think she smiled at my quavering *efcharisto*.

When a store didn't offer printed matter, I bought something. Thus accrued the largest subset of the collection, ragged-edged receipts. There are four such faintly-inked curls, plus a rubber-stamped pink rectangle made for me by one of the butchers at Luis Meat Market. He tore off excess cardstock before handing it over.

DESSERT

A few days later I returned to Essex Street Market to finish my quest. The chocolatier was still closed. The barber shop was also shuttered, but I hope to meet Mr. Aminova one day. I'm curious about the 35 different clocks on his stall's walls.

Santa Lucía Religious was open. Going to this kind of religious goods purveyor for the first time made me nervous. There was no one behind the counter though, and I looked over the stock without feeling too self-conscious. The proprietor returned. A stack of chalky International Klein Blue tablets caught my eye. Nearby a transparent bottle of *azufre* glowed yellow. I asked to buy some, in Spanish. Repeatedly, in *basso profundo* English, he asked me to clarify. Finally he understood what I was trying to say. He translated *azufre* into English but the tables had turned. In the time it took me to figure out he'd said "sulfur," I saw in his eyes that he understood I didn't know what I was buying.

Asking for a receipt for a buck seemed petty. As I desperately tried to figure out how to get what I came for, he slipped the unmarked bag of sulfur into a second bag, this one imprinted with a red line drawing of Kwan Yin, the same kind of waxed-paper pouch used for takeout egg rolls. I was back in my groove.

The quest concluded at Tra La La with a celebratory lemon/coconut muffin. It seemed unlikely that this homespun bakery had receipts so I asked "Do you have a business card?" The clerk's reply trailed off, "No I'm sorry we're all...."

COFFEE & CIGARS

It's hard to generalize about Essex Street Market. Here, like everywhere in Fun City, fair deals coexist with exaggerated worth. Signs touting the roster of tenants can't keep pace with the market's fluctuating cast of characters. From teeny start-ups to a boisterous bi-level restaurant with tables for twenty, Essex Street Market runs a gamut of attitude, style and ambition. The shopkeepers' printed marketing and promotional materials range from none (and neither the time nor inclination to change that) to beautiful and thoughtfully-designed pieces; from standard menus and business cards to Formaggio's custom set of twenty-first century paper marketing materials boasting two different types of cheese wrap. As the collection of twenty-one artifacts and four photographs I gathered attests, the printed matter of Essex Street Market is as disparate as its vendors.

Building this collection gave me a greater appreciation for two realities. One, it seems close to all-consuming to run a business that satisfies today's diverse and demanding Manhattanites; and two, just because a market is in one building under one roof and one name doesn't mean it contains, or should contain, a cohesive team. There are as many reasons for a merchant to set up a business as there are merchants, and it is precisely because the Essex Street Market is a disconnected realm of fiefs that it serves the most purposes for the most people.

DOGGY BAG

The reality of NYC realty means this 76-year-old marketplace has to move. Only time, and supply and demand, can determine whether the next iteration thrives. It's hard to uproot a business and maintain its *je ne sais quoi*, let alone relocate an entire marketplace: viz. The New Fulton Fish Market Cooperative at Hunts Point. The anomalies and tweaks that lend particular sites their character often derive from creatively conceived work-arounds, from steel-nerved escapes from sticky wickets. After all, at any time NYC a shopkeeper might

- hit the jackpot and buy their own space;
- become stuck in one spot with no way of getting ahead;
- crap out; or
- like starfish, regenerate severed rays and grow even stronger.

Human resilience blossoms with the support of community. Community can grow by word of mouth and, yes, via offerings brought to the fore by printed matter. The Essex Street Market was, is, and will hopefully always be a bastion of creative community. Viva la Marqueta!

ESSEX INDEX

amuse-gueule – French idiom for a one-bite starter, literally “amuse-mouth”

arancini – Italian breaded and fried rice balls

azufre – Spanish for sulfur

basso profundo – Italian for deep bass

cognoscenti – Italian for people with superior understanding of the arts

efcharisto – Greek for thank you

formaggio – Italian for cheese

gefilte – Yiddish for fish meatballs

gestalte – German for the character of something

grebenes – Yiddish for crispy, gooey nuggets of rendered chicken fat

International Klein Blue – deep blue hue created c. 1960 by artist Yves Klein

je ne sais quoi – French idiom for an intangible quality of distinction

kati roll – Indian bread wrap

Kwan Yin – Chinese goddess of mercy

lagniappe – New Orleans slang for extra

mais quel horror-vacui – French & Latin for “But what fear of empty space!”

marqueta, la – Spanglish for the market

matrioshka – Russian nesting dolls

meshugge – Yiddish for senseless

mousse – French for smooth, aerated food

rogan josh – Kashmiri spice blend for braising meat in intensely hot oil

viva – Italian and Spanish term meaning “long live” - used to show support

viz. – abbreviation of Latin for see

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