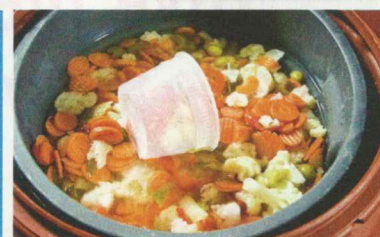




The author (above) gets a salty taste of New York City's Chinatown (left). The briny fare available at the Pickle Guys (right) represents an old method of food preservation favored by Jewish immigrants.



Savory City Safari

New York's Lower East Side offers culinary and cultural treats

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEREN ENGELBERG

I'm standing on a street corner in New York City, and I'm not sure what I'm eating. I taste a fruity sweetness—and salt. A lot of salt. I can't take a second bite.

I've been to New York many times, but I couldn't resist taking this Big Onion Walking Tours look at the Lower East Side. It will combine two of my favorite NYC activities—walking and eating—while imparting the history of this traditionally immigrant neighborhood. What's more, I'll be learning about a piece of my own family history.

Of course, a lot of what I'll learn will be completely foreign. The super-salty

treat I taste in Chinatown is an example. It turns out to be a salted plum.

We began the tour at the intersection of Delancey and Essex streets, in the Lower East Side's old Jewish neighborhood. Our guide, Pam, started with some trivia.

At the height of U.S. immigration around the turn of the 20th century, about half of New Yorkers were immigrants. Most lived in the Lower East Side. The area was impoverished and dirty. And it was the most densely populated place in the country and possibly the entire world—more than Calcutta and Mumbai are today.

What I know of my family history is a relief by comparison. Only one family member was so poor that he had to live in squalor. My uncle Kurt grew up in a Lower East Side tenement apartment on Rivington Street, with a toilet in the hallway and a bathtub in the kitchen. My great-grandmother, Rose, was luckier. She came here from Minsk and settled in a nicer sixth-floor Brooklyn tenement.

As we stood on the corner, Pam presented a bag of fried plantains for us to try. We dug in to the sweet, starchy banana as she explained that the largest immigrant community in New



Getting There New York City is served by LaGuardia Airport (LGA) and John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK), in Queens, and Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR) in New Jersey. Catch a cab, bus, subway, or train to the city from all three airports. Amtrak offers rail service into Penn Station (amtrak.com).



In Little Italy, visitors can savor authentic tastes of The Boot—from house-made cheeses and salamis (above) at Di Palo Selects market to fresh cannolis (left) at La Bella Ferrara bakery.

York City today hails from the Dominican Republic, where plantains are a staple.

If the plantains acquainted us with the Lower East Side's present population, full-sours from the Pickle Guys oriented us with the past. The store is a vestige of a once-thriving Jewish neighborhood. Its owners are the last ones here still carrying on the Jewish tradition of pickling, a pre-refrigeration method of preserving food. Second- and third-generation Jews have moved away as their means have improved.

Storefront signage changed from Hebrew letters to Chinese characters as we walked south into Chinatown. We stopped in front of a statue of Confucius and nibbled on sweet-and-spicy tofu while Pam explained that the statue was a token of goodwill donated by a Chinese community organization in 1976. The statue faces toward Wall Street, perhaps intending to symbolize the community's alliance with the American free-market system rather than the communist system from which it came.

After sampling the tofu, we walk deeper into the heart of Chinatown and are soon surrounded by Chinese restaurants and shops selling lanterns and other trinkets. Capitalism is definitely alive and well here.

It seems to be equally thriving on Little Italy's Mulberry Street, our last stop. Here, Italian flags adorn storefronts including restaurants, shops, and delis. We learn that Little Italy is smaller than its bordering neighborhoods because most Italians came to the U.S. only to earn money and return to Italy. Yet some Italian families did settle, and many made a business of catering to their countrymen. Di Palo Selects, a four-generation Italian market established in 1925, epitomizes this story. Tasting their parmesan cheese and soppressata salami, we understand firsthand how an Italian missing the taste of home might find a bit of it here. To end our tour, cannolis from La Bella Ferrara bakery give us one final, sweet taste of the immigrant experience.

Best of all, Pam informs us there's enough for seconds. 🍷

DO Big Onion Walking Tours (212-439-1090; bigonion.com) gives historical tours of New York neighborhoods from Harlem to Brooklyn most days of the week. The Multi-Ethnic Eating Tour, which typically runs four times per month, costs \$15, plus \$5 for noshes. For an interior look at a typical historic Lower East Side residence, visit the **Tenement Museum** (212-982-8420; tenement.org). Adult tickets cost \$20.

STAY Apple Core Hotels (800-567-7720; applecorehotels.com; rates start at \$119, including continental breakfast; AAA discount offered) has five midtown family-friendly hotels, including **The Hotel at Times Square**, which has a trendy, comfortable lobby with a fireplace and a flat-screen TV.

EAT From half-sours to pickled green tomatoes, **the Pickle Guys** (888-4-PICKLE [474-2553]; nycpickleguys.com) know their way around brine. A trip to the Lower East Side would be incomplete without a stop at **Yonah Schimmels Knish Bakery** (212-477-2858; knishery.com). Exotic sweets and savories await at **Aji Ichiban** (ajiiichiban.com.hk/eng/index.php). **Di Palo Selects** (877-253-1779; dipaloselects.com) and **La Bella Ferrara** (212-966-7867; littleitalynyc.com/labellaferrara) prepare foods like in the Old Country.

For additional information, call (212) 484-1200 or go to nycgo.com.

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