

LA BAGEL DELIGHT'S JOURNEY ALONG SEVENTH AVENUE

September 8, 2026



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

September 8, 2026

By Zach Schiffman

There has been a La Bagel Delight on Seventh Avenue since 1986—just not always at the same address, and not always the same one. The original location of the local bagel chain opened that year at 252 Seventh Ave., in a space that had been a family-run Italian deli and is now a Just Salad, across from the old John Jay campus. Among the people working there was Mohamed Najar, who had immigrated to the United States a few years earlier and started out as the baker. Before that, his son Husain says, he was selling T-shirts off his back on Flatbush Avenue.

The store at 252 Seventh Ave. eventually lost its lease and moved south to 284 Seventh Ave., across from what is now New York-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist. Najar went the other direction, opening his own franchise of La Bagel Delight at 122 Seventh Ave. in 2003, when Husain was eleven, next to a Neergaard Pharmacy.

That store lasted 22 years—through the financial crisis, through the pandemic, through several different landlords, all the while becoming a regular stop for Coop members on their way to shifts.

Then the building sold in July 2025, the month-to-month tenancy was terminated that October, and, in March, a Brooklyn housing court judge ruled for the new owner in the eviction case that followed. The *Park Slope Times*, which has covered the story from the beginning, reported that the new owner, Oren Lund (who happens to be a Coop member), plans to open a family-run sandwich shop in the space.

Which is how La Bagel Delight serendipitously ended up one block north. The Bagel Market at 106 Seventh Ave. served its last day on May 23, and Husain Najar—who now runs the day-to-day business—negotiated the lease himself. He brought the ket-

tle, the grill, the deli case and the bagel rollers his father has worked with since the '80s. He also brought the debt it took to get in the door. We caught up with Husain Nagar around the corner from the Coop to see how business has been since the reopening.

Your family has been on Seventh Avenue since 1986. What does that look like from behind the counter?

We have four generations coming to us: grandparents, parents, the kids, the kids' kids. Kids that went to college, they come back. There are people I've known since I was six years old. Miss O'Brien, who lives on President—I'm 34 years old, and the first delivery I sent to her, I was fourteen. There's history, there's memories there.

How did you end up at 106?

I ended up knowing the landlord, and I worked out a deal so we didn't have to leave the neighborhood completely and my dad could keep his legacy. God bless Mr. Arnie, the owner of 106. He took us in.

Have the regulars come back?

The same customers we had came back. They were like, *thank God you're open*. They didn't know where to get bagels from. The other Bagel Market customers are slowly getting used to it. We have a little bit of problems here and there, but it's going through, man. The headache now is taking on the debt we had to take on to open up this new spot.

How has the neighborhood responded?

The neighborhood stood by us. We're grateful for the loyal customers, because without them we'd never be able to pay this high rent. It's not about profit—you could barely make a profit there. For the people who grew up here and have had business-

es for years, it's more about the emotional connection. These people immigrated over here and they built this off their backs.

What came with you to the new store, and what's new?

I brought in the top roller that we had back in the day, and now he's rolling the bagels. The guys that roll the bagels, they're from back in the day, since I was a baby. They've been the best. They've been running the show in New York City. They're the best rollers of bagels you could find in the world.

And we hooked up the deli. We got a different kettle, a different grill, different fridges. We got the hot deli box for the muffins. Everything in the front I tried to put out brand new, so I hope people like it.

How's your dad doing?

He's doing good. He's a little upset, because 122 was full of memories. When he immigrated over here, he was selling T-shirts off his back on Flatbush, before he had the chance—he got taken in at La Bagel Delight, back when it was still an Italian deli. So he had this emotional connection to 122. My dad still comes in here and there, but he's older. I dropped out of college to help him out with the store. I had to put everything on the sideline, because I just can't have that happen to him. I'd rather die than have that happen to him.

What's your favorite thing on the menu?

To be completely honest, I can't eat pork, so I'd go with a Godfather, but I mix it up with turkey instead of the ham, salami and pepperoni, and more in a breakfast direction. I'm a big turkey sausage and turkey bacon fan. I like to switch it up between eggs, cream cheeses. I grew up in it, so I like to switch it up.

What are your most definitive memories of Seventh Avenue?

Oh man, everything. I went to PS 10 on Seventh Avenue. My middle school was on Seventh Avenue. I was born in Methodist Hospital. It's everything over there. When I was a kid we weren't allowed to go outside, from how bad it was. And then, as I was growing up, the neighborhood flourished. That's all you could remember, playing man-hunt in the neighborhood. Just a million memories.

Do you see a lot of Coop members in the store?

A lot of people from the Coop always lose keys or something in the store, and we always bring it back over there.

What's your message to Coop members who want to support the business?

I love them no matter what, even if they come in and buy a dollar bottle of water. It does not matter if they spend fifty cents in there—just them coming to support our business means the world. They could go pick anywhere else to buy a drink or food from. But to come and keep us there for another 40 years—without them, we wouldn't be able to do that. And I'm trying to stay there for another 40 to a 100 years. So they're the ones that are going to keep us open, the community. That's who's kept us open this long, since 1986.

Anything else coming?

There's more to come—I'm trying to bring in smoothie machines and everything. It's a lot.

SEA & SOIL, A WORKER-OWNED SANDWICH SHOP, TAKES ROOT ON ATLANTIC AVENUE

September 8, 2026



July 28, 2026

By Liz Yap

Every customer who steps into Sea & Soil, a cheery worker-owned cooperative on a busy stretch of Atlantic Avenue, has two choices to make: what sandwich they'd like to order and how much they'd like to pay for it.

The sandwiches, with inspired combinations like cumin-paprika roasted chicken and aji verde (“The Wren”) or roast turkey with cheddar, peach habanero jam and creamy cilantro slaw (“The Lulu”) are made with ingredients cooked from scratch and bread baked in-house.

“WE LEAVE THE CHOICE UP TO YOU FOR WHAT YOU CAN AFFORD AT THIS TIME AND WE RECOGNIZE THAT THIS MAY SHIFT FROM DAY TO DAY,” THE MENU READS.

They’re also priced on a sliding scale. The range is from \$13 to \$24, with suggested prices of \$16 to \$18. A note on the menu gives a brief explanation on what the model makes possible: high-quality ingredients, accessibility for as many as possible and just compensation for each hour of labor worked.



Sandwiches are cooked from scratch and made with bread baked in-house. Photo courtesy of Sea & Soil

The lower end of the range enables Sea & Soil to sustainably offer well-made food to a wider range of customers; the higher end helps them move closer to their goals of providing health care benefits and pensions for all their workers.

“We leave the choice up to you for what you can afford at this time, *and* we recognize that this may shift from day to day,” the menu reads. “Every option is a good option. No matter what, you are supporting our worker-owned co-op.”



Gabby Gignoux-Wolfsohn and Noah Wolf started their worker-owned coop during the pandemic. Photo by Rod Morrison.

As a worker-owned cooperative, Sea & Soil is built around shared labor and profit, shared decision-making and shared ownership. It began as a pandemic-era project for worker-owners Noah Wolf and Gabby Gignoux-Wolfsohn. Wolf (who uses “he/they” pronouns) had always been interested in working in food, but the restaurant industry’s structural issues never sat right with them. “The existing ownership models felt inevitably exploitative,” Wolf said. “I wanted to do something worker-owned—where every person whose labor was involved had agency in the project and could benefit from any profits we’re able to generate.”

The pair, along with another founding partner no longer involved, started out making sandwiches and selling them in Prospect Park and Grand Army Plaza on weekends

while juggling their regular jobs.



SANDWICH ORDER CARD

Write in gilly's kit, and let's make substitutions or allergies!

the WREN corn, olive, pork, fermented carrots, dill, onion, salsa, white de tomatoes, onion greens, lettuce ☐ GF

the NICO corn, olive, pork, fermented carrots, dill, onion, salsa, white de tomatoes, onion greens, lettuce ☐ GF

the LUCY smoked trout, fermented carrots, dill, onion, salsa, white de tomatoes, onion greens, lettuce ☐ GF

the FIONA sea egg, tomato, onion, dill, onion, salsa, white de tomatoes, onion greens, lettuce ☐ GF

the ISAAC corn, olive, pork, fermented carrots, dill, onion, salsa, white de tomatoes, onion greens, lettuce ☐ GF

the IZ corn, olive, pork, fermented carrots, dill, onion, salsa, white de tomatoes, onion greens, lettuce ☐ GF

the ELLIOT corn, olive, pork, fermented carrots, dill, onion, salsa, white de tomatoes, onion greens, lettuce ☐ GF

the RAFA corn, olive, pork, fermented carrots, dill, onion, salsa, white de tomatoes, onion greens, lettuce ☐ GF

the VEGAN RAFA corn, olive, pork, fermented carrots, dill, onion, salsa, white de tomatoes, onion greens, lettuce ☐ GF

Sliding Scale Price

Mark below the price you'll pay, to be applied per sandwich.

113 114 115 116 117 118 119 120 121 122 123 124

*suggested

Sliding scale pricing is in their DNA. Photo courtesy of Sea & Soil.

To keep the business viable and ensure prices remain within reach for their community, sliding scale pricing has been part of Sea & Soil's DNA from the start. The twin pillars of affordability and accessibility are at the core of what they do. "We really wanted to build those values into the foundation of what we were doing," Wolf said. "It had to be in the roots; otherwise, it couldn't take hold."

Wolf continued: "We're always trying to square the circle, sourcing ingredients as ethically as possible. How local can we get this thing? How seasonal can we be?" They added, "How conscious can we be of the labor standards of the companies we work with, while also providing just compensation for workers?"



Loaves baked by the Sea & Soil team. Photo courtesy of Sea & Soil.

In July 2023, Sea & Soil opened its first brick-and-mortar location, a small shop in Red Hook. Despite loving the neighborhood and the community they'd formed there, they eventually realized that they needed more space to truly grow. Running a tiny sandwich shop on a shoestring budget, the team began looking for a way to finance their next step.



The Working World, who provide funding for worker-owned businesses,
provided funding.

In a moment of serendipity, someone from The Working World, an organization that funds worker-owned businesses, dropped by the shop and encouraged them to get in touch if they ever needed financing. Its mission, Wolf explained, is to help create

more cooperative businesses by addressing one of their biggest barriers: access to capital.

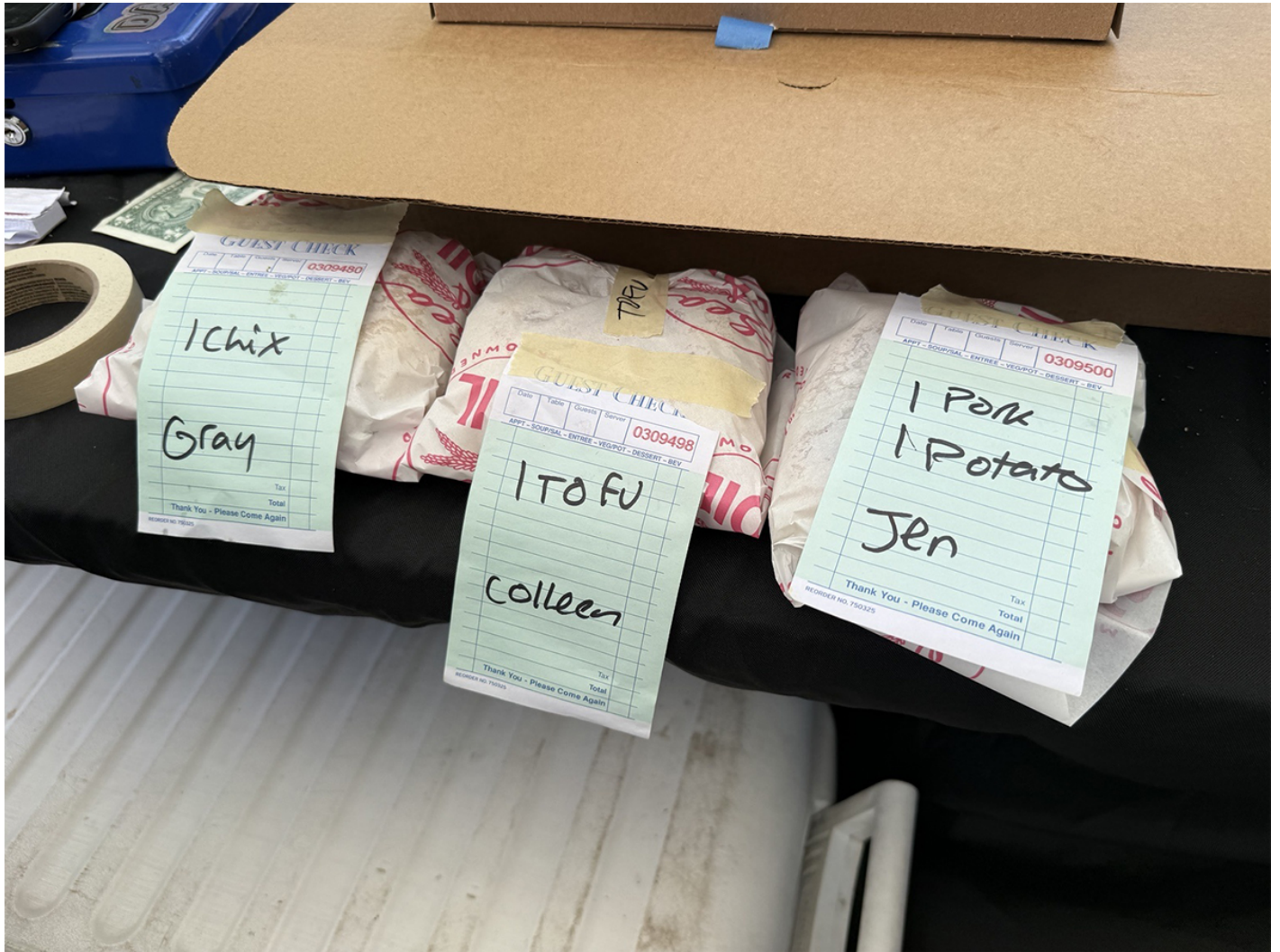
THE GOAL IS TO MAKE OWNERSHIP THE NORM AND NOT THE EXCEPTION, INSTEAD OF MAINTAINING A HIERARCHY IN WHICH A SMALL GROUP OF OWNERS HOLDS POWER OVER A LARGER GROUP OF EMPLOYEES.

Their application was accepted and, along the way, they learned that Seed Commons, a national network that provides financing and support to worker-owned cooperatives, which The Working World is part of, had recently purchased a building on Atlantic Avenue in Boerum Hill for their headquarters. The building's previous owner had run a small café on the ground floor before closing it during the pandemic. It required some work to transform it into what Sea & Soil needed, but the space was there.



"The Iz" sandwich. Photo courtesy of Sea & Soil.

"It's easy to remember the difficult moments, when things don't feel like they're going your way," Wolf recalled. "But it also feels important to remember the moments when everything clicks—when hard work, luck, collaboration and shared values all come together."



Pre-orders awaiting pick-up. Photo by Rod Morrison.

The Working World offers non-extractive loans, which means Sea & Soil is not required to begin repayment until it is profitable. Rather than prioritizing immediate returns, the model is designed to help worker-owned businesses become sustainable, supporting them for the long term. “It creates a collaborative relationship,” Wolf said.



Their Atlantic Avenue store opened in April 2025. Photo courtesy of Sea & Soil.

Since opening their doors last April, this new space has laid the foundation for Wolf, Gignoux-Wolfsohn and fellow worker-owner Nilda Ortiz to build a more equitable, empowered workplace. Full-time hires enter a year-long candidacy process as worker-owners in training, during which they and the existing worker-owners decide whether the relationship is the right fit. After the candidacy period, employees are expected either to become worker-owners or to move on.



Working owners Gabby Gignoux-Wolfson, Nilda Ortiz and Noah Wolf.
Photo courtesy of Sea & Soil

The goal is to make ownership the norm and not the exception, instead of maintaining a hierarchy in which a small group of owners holds power over a larger group of permanent employees.

Building this kind of workplace is not without its growing pains. Wolf said Sea & Soil is

learning in real time how to make decisions collectively, communicate across different roles and unlearn the practices of conventional work environments—all while handling the constant day-to-day pressures of running a business in New York City.

“It’s really beautiful, and it’s also really challenging,” Wolf said. “It’s easy to make mistakes. You’re figuring it out and navigating. It’s cool and exhilarating and difficult.”



Noah on the grill at their Pioneer Works pop-up stall in Red Hook. Photo by Rod Morrison.

For Wolf, that willingness to adapt is one of the strengths of worker-owned cooperatives. As a Park Slope Food Coop member, Wolf appreciates that it’s always changing and looking for better ways to operate and work together, in conversation with its community. “We’re always generating new ideas and trying new approaches. There is

not one fixed right answer. You can keep experimenting, and there may always be a better solution down the road,” they said. “The Coop has been around for 50 years, yet people are still finding new ways to work within a relatively small space.” (The Park Slope Coop has its own non-extractive loan fund as well, helping food coops that rely on member labor start and sustain their businesses.)



“The Lucy” sandwich. Photo courtesy of Sea & Soil.

Sea & Soil wants to bring that same spirit of experimentation, iteration and collaboration to what they do. Beyond sandwiches, they envision the space as a venue for building community. Having recently hosted a worker-owner happy hour, they hope to make the space a home for classes, readings, pop-ups and other events—a place where people can gather, exchange ideas and grow together.

The goal is to become part of the fabric of both the neighborhood and the broader worker-owned community in New York: where people can get good food at a price they can afford, and where the people making it can build sustainable lives in a city that's becoming increasingly out of reach for many of its residents.



"The Isaac" sandwich. Photo courtesy of Sea & Soil.

The name Sea & Soil, Wolf shares, takes its name from the Pablo Neruda poem "Ode to Bread." The sea is the salt in each loaf, and the soil is the wheat. It's a fitting name for a shop trying to make something humble and essential—good food, shared work and profit, and community—more available to everyone.

Liz Yap is an editor-turned-strategist with a focus on naming and verbal branding.

She has been a member of the Coop since 2021. lizyap.com

THE NEW MEMBER WHO JUST OPENED A STANDOUT NEIGHBORHOOD PIZZERIA

September 8, 2026



PHOTO BY AZIKIWE ABOAGYE

June 16, 2026

By Zach Schiffman

Ben Wexler didn't grow up in Park Slope, but he might as well have. A born-and-raised New Yorker, he spent the pandemic years running a seasonal pizza business on Peaks Island, off the coast of Maine—all while his girlfriend held down an apartment here and a Coop membership going on 10 years.

But the city kept pulling him back. So this past November, after a long hunt for the right space, he opened Il Leone just around the corner from the Coop on Seventh Avenue: a sit-down wine bar built around long-fermented sourdough Neapolitan pizza, with the produce treated as the main event.

That obsession traces back to a stint on a small organic vegetable farm, where picking what he'd cook each morning rewired how Wexler thinks about food. It's a philosophy that lines up neatly with the Coop's, which makes his timing perfect: after years of circling, he's finally an official member. We caught up with him just as his first New York tomato season comes into view, to talk Maine, Naples, the heirloom seeds in his backyard and how to shop the Coop like a chef.

How did Il Leone come to be on Seventh Avenue?



PHOTO BY AZIKWE ABOAGYE

Ben standing in front of Il Leone.

I started the business on Peaks Island, off Portland, Maine, during the pandemic. I'm a born-and-raised New Yorker but went to college in Maine, then moved back and was mostly working on political campaigns. In between campaigns, I did various things in the food business, including working on a small organic vegetable farm.

Right before the pandemic, in about 2019, I was burnt out from living in the city and wanted to move to Maine and start this business. At first I was looking to start it on a farm up there, partnering with a farm, and then when the pandemic hit, that fell through. So I started it on the island instead and lived up there for a few years, running it as a seasonal business, and I just really started to miss the city. The native New Yorker in me was pulling me back.

My girlfriend was living here in Park Slope, so I'd spend some of my off-season time down here in the winter, exploring what the business might look like in the city. After a few years of looking at spaces, I found the one we're in now. Having spent that off-season time in Park Slope, it just felt like a really great fit. There was a dearth of restaurants in the neighborhood, and not a lot of people doing conceptually what I was trying to do. So that's how this all came about.

How much of your business is local repeat neighbors versus people from all over the city?

I'd say we're about 75 percent Park Slope right now. I started this to first and foremost be a place for the neighborhood, and the reception's been really positive. People are just looking for another restaurant to go to, whether it's with their kids or without. They love that we emphasize sourcing as locally and organically as possible, and that we offer a sit-down wine bar experience alongside the pizza and the food. They love that we're doing the sourdough with a really long fermentation, putting a lot of love, care, and intention into the food. It's been a really positive first six months.

Have you been aware of customers who are Coop members?

I haven't asked, so that's hard to say. But a lot of the Park Slope community are members. My girlfriend has been a Coop member for 10 years, so I'm very familiar with it, and there have definitely been customers who've mentioned they work there. I'm sure many members have come through our doors.

Living in Maine, with your girlfriend being a member—what was your awareness of the Coop as you were going back and forth?

I've known about the Coop for years, just from being a New Yorker. Right out of college I had a sublet in Park Slope and I was on the verge of joining about 10 years ago, but didn't, because I ended up moving out of the neighborhood. Growing up here, I've always respected what it does—both as a community model for increasing access to affordable, quality fresh produce, and just as a great grocery store. The foodie in me loves a grocery store that has a lot to offer, and the Coop clearly stands out as one of the better ones in the city.

How does your experience working on farms change you as a restaurant owner?

The most fulfilling part of working on that small organic vegetable farm was getting to pick what I'm cooking with that day. It really drew me back to the roots of not just Italian cuisine, but Neapolitan-style pizza making—because in Naples, where pizza was invented, there's such a profound emphasis on simplicity, the quality of ingredients, and sourcing everything as locally as possible.



PHOTO BY AZIKWE ABOAGYE



PHOTO BY AZIKIWE ABOAGYE



PHOTO BY AZIKIWE ABOAGYE



Ben in his restaurant backyard planting basil, which he uses for his dishes.

I came to realize more and more that what makes the best food, particularly the best Italian food, is not overdoing it—using just a few really great ingredients. That’s how you make the best tomato sauce: just tomatoes, olive oil, and sea salt. You don’t need oregano, you don’t need garlic, you don’t need all these add-ons. The best pasta in the world, arguably, is just a simple spaghetti pomodoro with in-season tomatoes and some fresh basil. That’s what Neapolitan pizza has always been about.

So as a pizza maker, I was really excited to bring that philosophy to my pizza. There are some people doing Neapolitan-style pizza, and some doing sourdough Neapolitan specifically, like Anthony Mangieri of Una Pizza Napoletana, who I’ve always looked up to. But I feel like there aren’t that many people in the city really offering a “farm--to-pizza” experience, focused on the quality of the produce. That’s an area I’ve focused on since working on that farm.

How are you feeling about your first tomato season in the city?

We opened in November, so we haven't had a tomato season yet. This'll be my first one open in New York. I'm so excited. For the last five years in Maine, I've done a pizza I call the "l'estate," which means summer in Italian. It's literally just peak in-season heirloom cherry tomatoes from a small organic farm, ripened right on the vine. When you harvest cherry tomatoes at peak ripeness, there's just nothing like it—they carry so much flavor, unlike any tomato you'd find in a grocery store. I'm so excited to get that pizza back on the menu.

There's another we do in summer called the "Fiore," with squash blossoms and local organic zucchini—also really special. And there's one we'll be doing shortly with in-season garlic scapes from the farmers market.

In Maine I got all my produce from one or two small organic farms, and those partnerships let me develop a lot of these pizzas. They rest on traditional Italian ingredient combinations, but they also work because we're able to get such great produce. We're just getting into farmers market season here, and I'm so excited to start putting some of these seasonal pizzas on the menu—that's part of the challenge of launching in late fall and early winter, not being able to do quite as much with in-season produce as we traditionally have.

Is there anything you're considering trying here that you never did in Maine?

Of course. We love to try new things. We've got a few things in the works with some really special heirloom tomato seeds that I'm actually growing in my backyard at the restaurant right now. I won't announce it just yet, until the tomatoes are ready, but there's some fun stuff coming.

I'm a big believer in walking through the farmers market, talking to farmers, and seeing what looks exciting and what's going to work on a pizza. One we're doing right

now that's been a big hit is organic asparagus with fresh lemon spritzed on top, fresh mozzarella, pecorino, and black pepper. As we transition out of asparagus season, we'll start doing the garlic scape pie I mentioned, and some others as the summer heats up.

As we head into summer-produce season, do you have any advice for people shopping at the Coop?

I always like to shop as much as possible day-of when I'm cooking. You generally get the freshest stuff that way. I keep an eye out for what looks really perky and fresh, what was truly just harvested that day or the day before. That always makes for the best meals in my experience. So use your eyes and follow your heart, and see what's truly poppin' on those shelves. That's going to lead to a lovely dining experience.

Zach Schiffman is a social editor and writer at New York magazine, comedian, and Park Slope local.

CHEF AIMS TO CREATE MOST SUSTAINABLE RESTAURANT IN AFRICA

September 8, 2026



By Leila Darabi

Although foodie culture is evolving, the consensus in cities like New York, London and Paris has historically been that fine dining means European food—not non-Western immigrant cuisine. In 2016, the popular food podcast *The Sporkful* produced a six-part special series titled *Other People's Food*, covering several themes, including why we expect Mexican and Chinese food to cost less than Japanese and Italian food.

“MOST OF THE BIG RESTAURANTS IN AFRICA AREN'T AFRICAN. EVEN IN AFRICA, THE AFRICAN FOOD IS NOT PRESENT, IS NOT VALUED.”

CHEF MICK ÉLYSÉE

Even in countries like Ghana, European cooking techniques often eclipse indigenous food culture. Congolese-born chef Mick Élysée is on a mission to change that—and to elevate African ingredients and cuisine in the eyes of the world. His restaurant Nsuom-Nam in Accra, Ghana, showcases sustainable seafood, local ingredients and traditional methods of preparation.

“Most of the big restaurants in Africa aren't African,” he said in a video interview. “Even in Africa, the African food is not present, is not valued.”

A CHANCE RECOMMENDATION

Before diving into Élysée's culinary history, let me first explain why I requested an interview from him. In October of 2023, members of the *Linewaiters' Gazette* squad gathered for the first-ever “Gazette Fall Mixer.” The event brought together editors, reporters, photographers, illustrators and Coop staff who had worked together remotely for years—many without ever meeting in person.

Upon receiving my invitation to the mixer, I immediately reached out to my developmental editor at the *Gazette*, Petra E. Lewis, to see if she would be attending the gathering. Lewis, a member of the *Gazette* since 1999, has edited my articles since I joined in 2016. I had hoped to finally connect live, but she informed me that she was headed out of the country to a wedding in Accra.

“I FELT SOMETHING WAS MISSING. AFRICAN FOOD WAS NOT VERY ON THE MAP. I DECIDED TO CREATE MY OWN STYLE, INTRODUCING AFRICAN CUISINE TO NEW AUDIENCES.”

CHEF MICK ÉLYSÉE

Lewis’ destination piqued my interest, in particular because I myself have spent time in Ghana through my day job in global health. As luck would have it, I had seen friends in Accra post mouth-watering photos of seafood on Facebook that same day.

Knowing Lewis to be a fellow foodie, I sent her the name and Instagram account of the restaurant my friends had tagged on the off chance she would have time to check it out during her trip. That restaurant was NsuomNam, which Élysée heads.

While in Ghana, Lewis did eat there—twice. When she returned, she suggested that the *Gazette* feature NsuomNam and Élysée.

INTRODUCING AFRICAN CUISINE



Photos provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

Born in Brazzaville, Congo, Élysée left in 1993 at the age of 13 when his family fled the first Congolese civil war and relocated to Toulouse in southern France. At 16, he entered culinary school, where he gained a foundation in classical French technique. At 22, he opened his first restaurant, as he put it, “not because I love to cook, but because I love to eat.”

Three years later, he sold that restaurant and, still only 25, set out to travel the world and explore what it has to offer. He lived and cooked in London, Japan, Brazil and Canada, before returning to London to work under master chefs at well-known institutions, including Soho House and the Haymarket Hotel.

For 12 years he worked as a consultant, helping restaurateurs open new establishments. Yet, despite the professional success, Élysée remained frustrated with the culinary world.

“IN AFRICA WE HAVE SOME OF THE OLDEST GRAINS. I BARELY USE WHEAT. I USE SORGHUM FLOUR TO MAKE MY PASTRY AND MY PASTA.”

CHEF MICK ÉLYSÉE

“I felt something was missing. African food was not very on the map.” To rectify this, he explained, “I decided to create my own style, introducing African cuisine [to new audiences].”

He began to experiment with applying his classical culinary skills to preparing menus featuring African staples. “I had popups and local events [in London], so people could start to understand what my mission was.”

It was in London that he met Edwina Akufo Addo, daughter of the current Ghanaian President, Nana Akufo-Addo, who was interested in the growing Ghanaian food scene. With Akufo Addo as lead investor, Élysée relocated to Accra and launched Nsuom-Nam, which means “food from the sea.”

FARM AND SEA TO TABLE



Gazette editor Petra Lewis (left) with Chef Élysée and friend. Photo provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

When Lewis visited NsuomNam for the first time, she was struck by the restaurant's open layout. "The ceiling was very, very high. And a large, spacious, grass-filled outdoor lounge dotted by chic, modern outdoor furniture appeared to be a happening scene," she said. The day her dining party ate there, Lewis described "a young, well-heeled crowd dining and enjoying each other's company in the yard, including a group that were Black and British. The crowd that night was an African diasporal mashup."

Her party sat inside, on high-back chairs in the restaurant's large dining room. "The service was fantastic—impeccable." Lewis said. "We had prawns, kelewele [a spiced plantain dish that's a Ghanaian specialty], jollof rice, and the best calamari I've ever tasted in my life."



Photo provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant

When she returned a second time, Lewis and a friend had sorbet served on a bright red bed of reconstituted millet, a form of alchemy that reminded her of wd~50, the New York restaurant that popularized molecular gastronomy in the early 2000's, where Lewis and members of Chew, the dining club she founded, had once eaten.



Photos provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

“In Africa we have some of the oldest grains,” Élysée noted, via Zoom. “I barely use wheat, he added. “I use sorghum flour to make my pastry and my pasta.” His menu features what Élysée calls smarter cereals: sorghum, millet and fonio, all gluten free, rich in iron and budget friendly.

Élysée speaks English with a Francophone West African accent, slipping between English and French when searching for the most vibrant possible descriptions of his food. He is quick to laugh, and, as evidenced by his personal Instagram feed, well-coiffed and a sharp dresser. A recent post featured the chef taking followers behind the scenes as he sourced millet from a local farm and transformed it into a starter on the menu.

The clip starts with Élysée visiting a rural setting, milking a cow, pounding grains in a traditional pot and interacting with men, women and children in traditional dress. It ends with Élysée back in his kitchen in the capital, dressed in his chef's uniform, using tweezers to position elements of the final dish—including edible flowers—to put the

finishing touches on the plate. The value proposition of NsuamNam lies in connecting - worlds: traditional African cuisine and staples with European and Asian culinary techniques.



Photo provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

When asked about his intended clientele and whether Ghanaians or Western tourists make up the majority of his lunch and dinner crowds, Élysée is quick to insist that he attracts a diverse crowd. He prides his restaurant on being “in the middle—” not as inaccessible as fine dining in London or Paris, but also intentional in its mission of “elevating African cuisine.”

“When they see the design, it looks a bit too posh and people are scared,” he said, noting that most are pleasantly surprised by the prices, especially for seafood. Being owned by the Ghanaian President’s daughter has also prompted some accusations of high prices at NsuomNam, though a Google News search found an equal number of reviewers who called the prices fair.

“I WANT PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND THAT IT’S NOT JUST A PLACE WHERE YOU COME AND EAT. THE RESTAURANT HAS A MISSION.”

CHEF MICK ÉLYSÉE

Élysée is also clear that in elevating African cuisine, he aims to stress local ingredients and traditional methods of preparation, not fancy food for the sake of fancy food.

“I cook my fish in banana leaves, using the old technique. And I use a lot of smoked fish, which we prepare a lot in West Africa,” he clarified. “I want people to understand that it’s not just a place where you come and eat. The restaurant has a mission [to showcase local ingredients and African cuisine].”

A recent post on the restaurant’s Instagram features a tantalizing plate of locally sourced prawns served on a traditional clay platter. Local pride is just one part of the values Élysée seeks to advance. His restaurant features local seafood in part to promote environmental sustainability. From the relationships he has built with local fish-

ermen to highlighting locally grown produce, each item on the menu serves Nsuom-Nam's multi-pronged mission—ranging from sustainability, to locavorism, to furthering the reach, and appreciation, of African cuisine.



Left: char-grilled organic and wild lobster with spicy pasta. Photos provided by Nsuom-Nam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

“I’m hoping that more Americans, and non-Ghanaians, will get hip to him,” Lewis said of Chef Élysée, “because he really needs to be in that class of people who are called upon as international culinary thought leaders.”

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She is the cohost of the feminist TV podcast Cringewatchers and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients via @persian_ish on Instagram.