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## Fish for a King

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### A Taste of Heaven on NY's Lower East Side

by Victor Dorff

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Smoked salmon. Pickled herring. Whitefish. Sable. Sturgeon. Caviar.

If you have already begun drooling, have I got a treat for you!

For almost one hundred years, a small family business on New York City's Lower East Side has been supplying those wonderful comfort foods – and so much more – to a steady stream of loyal customers.

Russ & Daughters, at 179 East Houston Street, has been a mecca for my family for more than half a century. My father refers to the food as his “sustenance,” and at 84 years old, he still gets on a cross-town bus at least once a week to stock up.

The single aisle that runs the length of the store is barely wide enough for two people to pass. On the left, as you walk in, the display cases show off a wide variety of the finest fish.



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Behind the counter, with sharp knives at the ready, experts are carving the thinnest slices of smoked salmon I have ever seen. Toward the back of the store, the display is taken over with herring – on its own, with mustard sauce, or (my personal favorite) covered with cream sauce and pickled sweet onions. The herring fillets melt in your mouth with the texture of butter, as the sauces provide their distinctive flavors. For fifty years, as I've moved from city to city around the world, I have yet to find anything to match.

On my last visit, earlier this month, the featured item was new-catch herring from Holland, a younger variety of fish that aficionados await in the way wine connoisseurs look forward to the next release of Beaujolais Neuveaux.

On the right side of the center aisle, the display cases are filled with gourmet cheeses, baked goods, candies, and dried fruits. You have never truly tasted rugelah (small, fruit-filled pastries) or noodle kugel (a loaf-shaped concoction of



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noodles, raisins, and cheese) until you have eaten from Russ & Daughters.



One of my earliest memories is of those two rows of display cases. At three feet off the ground, they were too high for me to peer into, even if I stood on my toes. I felt very privileged, indeed, to be invited behind the counter for a better view. There was sawdust on the floor and a row of barrels filled with pickles floating in brine, waiting to be scooped up and brought home for the feast to come.



The way the story goes, when Joel Russ first arrived from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 20th Century, he sold herring from a pushcart. In 1914, he opened Russ' Cut-Rate Appetizers on Houston Street, where the store has been ever since. By the 1940s, Russ' three daughters had grown up to become full partners with their father, and the store got its new name.

In the 21st Century, the operation continues to expand, with a website that offers mail-order and menu-planning. In fact, it has become something of an institution: Martha Stewart is a regular and has featured the store on her show. The Smithsonian designated the store "part of New York's cultural heritage," and PBS featured the story of Russ & Daughters in its "Jews of New York" series.

Through it all, the store remains a family business, with Russ' great grand-daughter now a part of the management team.

In my family, Russ & Daughters has been such an important part of our heritage that my parents stopped there on the way back from the hospital after my younger brother was born – to show off the new member of the family, and to pick up the "sustenance" that would be part of the celebration of bringing him home.



That's pretty much the way it has been ever since for us. If there is a reason to celebrate, you can count on a little pickled herring and smoked salmon from Russ & Daughters (<http://www.russanddaughters.com/>). And if there is nothing special going on, a quick trip to the shop on Houston Street is guaranteed to start a celebration all its own.

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