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July 4, 2001

Washington Gets a Taste of a Big Apple

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

WASHINGTON, July 3 — Senator Charles E. Schumer may want to consider the convenience of mail-order bialys.

"In my 20 years in Washington," Mr. Schumer, a Brooklyn native, confessed recently, "I still can't find a good slice of pizza or a great bagel."

"We need to get these down here," he added, a call to arms perhaps for an inside-the-Beltway bagel revolution. "In the ethnic food department, Washington is hurting."

But this week, at least, New York City aficionados here need look no farther than the grassy fields of the National Mall for a taste of home.

From pastrami sandwiches to New York cheesecake, fashion designers to costume creators, a Checker cab and even a No. 7 subway car, New York City emerges in all its flavor, as more than 350 artisans, bread makers, craftsmen and raconteurs take part in the 35th Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Organizers estimate that more than one million people will visit the event, which opened on June 27 and continues through Sunday.

"What this festival does," said Nancy Groce, the exhibition's curator, "is it gives the people a chance to be highlighted." Visitors get a chance to see a side of New York only New Yorkers know, she said.

A fifth-generation New Yorker, Ms. Groce has written several books on New York City culture and heritage. She worked for the Metropolitan Museum of Art before joining the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in late 1997.

Visitors to the festival have mingled with an assortment of "real" New Yorkers, as Ms. Groce calls the participants, including a stock trader, a transit executive and a radio talk-show host.

"They say if you can drive a bus in New York, you can drive anywhere," said Anthony Palombella, a New York City bus driver, when asked if he could handle driving among the unruly likes of Washington's aggressive taxi-cab drivers, as one visitor said.

Sitting in the driver's seat of a city bus driven down for the event (not by Mr. Palombella; he took the train), Mr. Palombella said, "Try driving in the Bronx or Brooklyn, where they try to attack you."

"Here," he said, glancing toward a traffic-less Jefferson Drive south of the festival grounds, "it's heaven."



Linda Spillers for The New York Times
Bruce Alexander, an engineering manager for the New York subway system, discusses his work in a replica of a subway car.

Three years ago, when Ms. Groce began canvassing New York City in search of its essence, her task was daunting: capture it, duplicate it and deliver it to Washington.

To transport the intoxication of New York City's cultural menagerie, Ms. Groce sought not to duplicate the iconographic images like Times Square or the Empire State Building, but rather to highlight the people, communities and personalities that define the city's character.

In a tent devoted to traditional music, Gypsy, West African and Puerto Rican bands perform. A makeshift sidewalk and stoop have been erected, and visitors can play such street games as stickball and double Dutch.

Visitors can even learn to speak "Noo Yawk" with a professional Broadway speech coach.

"How did they know I'm from New York when I asked for coffee?" asked Camille Ingui, who was at the festival with her husband, Gasper, a third-generation New Yorker and neon sign craftsman since the 1950's, and their son Robbie. "The minute I opened my mouth," Mrs. Ingui continued, "bingo."

"She's nice, for starters," said Estelle Ross, whose son, Steve Ross, is president of Coney Island Bialy and Bagel Bakery.

Even the most rapid-fire New York City wit could not convince all of the exhibition's visitors that they had just arrived at the banks of the Hudson, and not the Potomac.

"Are there any historical sites represented here?" inquired a nostalgic tourist hungry for a glimpse of the city's hallmarks. "How about the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island?"

Some less desirable aspects of New York City were impossible to duplicate on the swath of land between the Capitol and the Washington Monument, one prominent District observer suggested.

"We don't have the lack of sunlight and urban congestion" that defines much of New York City's landscape, Mayor Anthony A. Williams noted wryly. "But I guess we have the same traffic problem."

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