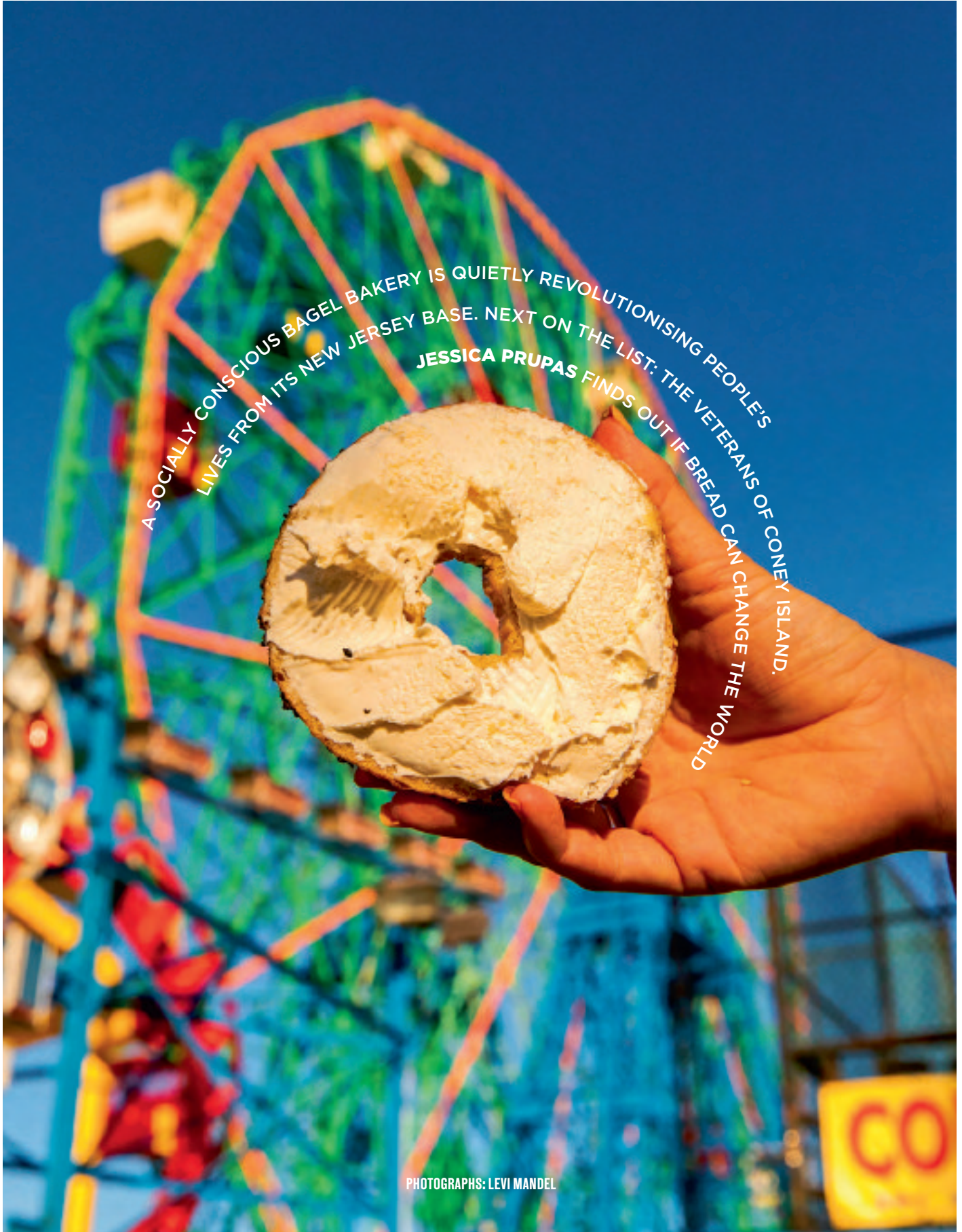




**Our holey
saviour?**



A SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS BAGEL BAKERY IS QUIETLY REVOLUTIONISING PEOPLE'S LIVES FROM ITS NEW JERSEY BASE. NEXT ON THE LIST: THE VETERANS OF CONEY ISLAND. JESSICA PRUPAS FINDS OUT IF BREAD CAN CHANGE THE WORLD.

PHOTOGRAPHS: LEVI MANDEL

Beth George is crying about bagels.



Left: BYOB co-owner Frank waxes lyrical about bagels. Opposite: Boss Beth takes a bite

Well, it's not really about bagels, exactly. It's more about what they represent – the bagel, not just as a ring of yeasted bread but a talisman.

"I'm sorry," she apologises, blinking back tears. "It's just that when I think about all the people whose lives we've changed with these bagels, I get emotional."

These life-altering rings of bread are the product of Beth's company, BYOB Bagels. The unshortened name – Be Your Own Boss, Build Your Own Business, Bake Your Own Bagels – hints at what they're about: Beth and her business partner, Frank Mauro, are the world's only full-time bagel consultants.

It is, admittedly, a niche market, which is why Beth and Frank have managed to corner it (or, rather, encircle it) entirely. They help aspiring bagel-shop owners nail their recipe, sketch out business plans, lay out their kitchens, and give rise to their doughy empires. So far, they've helped build nearly 100 bagel shops across four continents – you'll find their fingerprints on businesses in Paris, Brisbane, Saudi Arabia and beyond. And, though they've been quietly in business since 2013, the pandemic supercharged demand: it seems, suddenly, that everyone wants to open a bagel shop.

"We are tired," confides Beth. "But I keep going, because I like seeing the results – it's about showing people they can do something, helping them take control of their destiny."

Now Beth and Frank are extending that bootstrap philosophy to their first BYOB-run storefront. The shop – opening later this year in Surf Vets Place, an affordable, mixed-use housing development in Coney Island – will employ some of the formerly homeless veterans that make up most of the building's residents, equipping them with new skills and helping them take a leap back into the job market. It will also bring Beth's proprietary bagel recipe to this underserved corner of Brooklyn, which Beth considers a quasi "food ▶



desert” due to the limited choice of fresh food options in the neighbourhood.

The bagel shop will be a departure from the faded Burger Kings and hot-dog stands that dominate the peninsula. Once a thriving seaside escape visited by New Yorkers from every borough, Coney Island began to decline in popularity after World War II, when it was forced to compete with the new, less-crowded amusement parks and beaches of Long Island. Many of the restaurants – often owned by Italian and Polish immigrants – that thrived in the last century have now shuttered. The long-neglected boardwalk is lined with the same food stalls that have been around since the 60s, decorated with clown mascots and burnt-out marquees.

Beth and Frank are working hard to bring their bagels to Coney Island and beyond. When I first meet them, they’re buzzing around their industrial bakery and office space in New Jersey, training a family of aspiring bagel-shop owners from Connecticut in the art of the schmear (cream cheese spread). Open on the worktop is a laptop screen of spreadsheets, each detailing – down to the half ounce – the exact ingredient ratios for Beth’s signature spreads (she has so far developed two dozen varieties). “I know this is a little unorthodox,



“They have the weight and shape of a classic New York bagel, only once you bite through the crispy, sesame-studded crust, there’s a twist – the dough is lighter, but still has a satisfying chewiness”

but I love this recipe,” she says, dripping melted chocolate into a bowl of cream cheese.

“Stop it with the chocolate bagels!” the octogenarian Frank wails, his Downtown Manhattan inflection exaggerated in outrage. “I told you I don’t like chocolate bagels.”

“If you weren’t here, I’d smack him,” Beth says to me, half grinning.

After more than 12 years of working together, Beth and Frank have settled into a professional dynamic – Beth is the scrappy doer and face of BYOB; Frank is the back-seat businessman, handling the finances and occasionally offering full-throated critiques. The two met when Beth was running a spelt bagel business out of her home in Maine.

Beth, a lawyer by trade, began baking spelt-based breads to accommodate her son’s digestive issues. When she decided to turn it into a full-time gig, she needed a large oven – and Frank worked at a company that manufactured them. So she called him up.



Clockwise from right:
The all-important
sesame seed dredge;
bagels ready to bake;
hot from the oven



“When she told me what she was doing, I told her she was crazy,” says Frank. “I said there was no way in hell she could make a bagel out of spelt flour.”

But when Beth fed him one of her creations, he ate his words. He was so impressed by her ingenuity that he convinced his business partner to lend her an industrial space he owned in New Jersey. Beth moved her family and business to the Garden State; they’ve been “squatting” – as Beth puts it – at that same warehouse ever since.

“When I moved to New Jersey, Frank convinced me I should consider becoming a bagel consultant,” says Beth. “But I didn’t want to do it if I wasn’t making the best bagels myself.”

So she started experimenting with wheat bagels. She began tinkering away at BYOB’s HQ, tweaking and perfecting her own take on a New York bagel. It obsessed her for eight years. It wasn’t until the 2020 lockdowns – when she spent long stretches in her kitchen, free of life’s usual distractions – that she finally nailed it: the perfect bagel.

“Making bagels is an art, it takes creativity,” says Frank. “What Beth has done is a new level in bagels.”

It’s a lofty claim – but after I taste one, I can’t help but agree: they have the weight and shape of a classic New York bagel, only once you bite through the crispy, sesame-studded crust, there’s a twist – the dough is lighter, but still has a chewiness that’s as satisfying as a mouthful of Gummy Bears. When they’re hot, each bite releases a cheek-warming puff of steam. They are delicious – this time, tears of joy are warranted.

But what exactly makes these bagels so special is a closely guarded secret. Beth is tight-lipped about her recipe. “Everyone is always trying to ▶

The hole truth

FOUR TOP TIPS FOR MAKING THE PERFECT BAGEL



A great bagel starts with simple high-quality ingredients: water, flour, salt and yeast. Focus on sourcing the very best of each and you’re halfway there.

Bread flour is best for a New York style bagel – using all-purpose flour is fine, too, they just won’t be as chewy.

BYOB uses a futuristic steaming machine to pre-cook the bagels before they’re baked, but you’ll most likely be boiling them. Add some barley malt syrup to the water to give their crust that sweet, golden crunch.

Don’t neglect the schmear (cream cheese spread) – get creative with it by mixing in leftfield flavours like blueberry or jalapeño, and add a bit of soda water for a perfectly spreadable topper.

get information out of me,” she says. “I can’t give away too much.”

The only thing she’ll tell me is that they’re made from five simple ingredients – water, flour, sugar, salt and yeast – that are sourced from trusted vendors. I also manage to piece together that they are fermented for less time than your average deli variety, and baked in a clever oven that steams the bagels before baking them. The only people who know the recipe are BYOB’s clients – and they sign a strict non-disclosure agreement.

Beth may keep her bagel recipe close to her chest, but she has no problem feeding her bagels to people. When we visit the sea-facing Surf Vets Place – a few blocks west of the looping, Technicolor rides of Luna Park – Beth comes with an army of fresh-baked bagels. Her trusted intern, Sergio (a friend’s teenage son, on an extended visit from Mexico), hauls two cool boxes filled with schmears into the building. They cut them and pass them out to the building’s residents and staff. A muffled, full-mouthed chorus of “Mmmm” and “Oooh” rises around me. People mingle happily, dots of cream cheese speckling their cheeks.

I’m reminded of something Frank said earlier that day: “The bagel is a universal symbol of joy.” He tells me that whenever he travels – as he often does for work – everyone, from South Korea to central Europe, is desperate to try their bagels. When I ask him why that is, he says he doesn’t know. He alludes to the bagel’s appeal being alchemical, beyond the realm of language.

I have some guesses, though. First, the overstuffed bagel we associate with New York City is uniquely American – a variation of the original, which was introduced to New York City with the arrival of Jewish migrants from Poland in the 1800s. They were originally a street food, small, hand-rolled and baked – a staple among poor migrant workers. By the 1980s, the size of the



“The bagel represents melting pot America – migrant communities, ordinary people striving, bootstraps and helping hands”

average bagel nearly doubled and the voluptuous New York City bagel as we know it, oozing with schmear and lox and butter, was born.

Beth is keen to stress that many communities have their versions of boiled, yeasted bread: the Turkish have twisted, crunchy simit; Ukrainians sprinkle poppy seeds on top of chewy bublik. Beth herself is of Lebanese descent, and her family eats sweet rings of ka’ak.

Today the bagel not only puts you in a New York state of mind, it’s reminiscent of melting pot America – the America of migrant communities, of ordinary people striving, of bootstraps, of helping hands extended to neighbours.

It’s this symbolism that fascinates Beth – the bagel as an area of commonality, a bit of sustenance passed between people. It got her thinking. She looked into it, and realised that the bagel is not actually a circle, but a solid torus – the same shape as a life buoy, thrown to keep people afloat in the water.

From top: The Coney Island ferris wheel is as iconic as the NYC bagel and schmear; Beth chats about plans with her contractor



✕ Fly to New York