



The Secret Ingredients

Mike Gershkovich of Mike's Bistro Shares His Culinary Journey

BY MALKIE SCHULMAN

Mike Gershkovich, chef and owner of Mike's Bistro on 54th Street in Manhattan, is a descendant of Eastern European Holocaust survivors. His parents were born after the war, but his grandparents had endured its horrors. After the war, they returned to the city of Munkatch (part of Hungary before World War II but later incorporated into Ukraine) to search for surviving relatives and rebuild their lives. Like many others, they ended up trapped in what had become Soviet Russia.

"In 1974, my parents finally got the opportunity to leave," Mike recounts. "My mother was seven and a half months pregnant with me when the family received their visas to the United States."

However, due to her condition, she wasn't allowed to board the plane to America, and the family was forced to remain in Rome until after Mike's birth.

"When I was three weeks old, we immigrated to Brooklyn," Mike continues. "My father had \$200 in his pocket, a wife, and two children. Although he was

a skilled tinsmith in Munkatch, he immediately took a construction job at Mir Yeshiva for a short while before landing a job in the electronics business." Eventually, years later, he opened his own electronics company.

"We weren't the only immigrants leaving Russia in the '70s – it was the era of the refuseniks," Mike shares. "Some of my classmates were also from Russian backgrounds, and I'm close with them to this day."

Mike attended Toras Emes in Boro Park – not because it was their speed religiously, he notes, but because, the yeshiva offered a "chessed" rate for parents of Russian children to get them to send their kids to yeshiva.

Growing up in communist Russia, Mike's parents experienced religion differently than American religious Jews.

"Basically, my parents knew that being Jewish is good – it didn't matter how religious you were or how you defined religious," he says. It was a challenge in Soviet Russia to be *frum*. Jewish people had to be discreet in their religious practices. Arriving in America and being able to observe Judaism openly was a

liberating experience.

Mike shares a heartwarming story about his grandfather.

"Shortly after he arrived in New York, my grandfather went looking for a job. He walked into Yeshiva of Brooklyn's school office and said to Rabbi Manis Mandel, the principal, 'I need a job. But I didn't come to America to work on Purim!'"

He was hired on the spot. His job? To make sure the children ate their lunches every day.

Like many of his Brooklyn friends in the '80s, even as a kid, Mike was a hustler.

"If it was snowing, we'd get out our shovels and go door to door earning money for shoveling out driveways."

At age 14, Mike worked as a waiter in the Rose Castle in Brooklyn.

"We wanted cash in our pockets, and we didn't like to ask our parents. It was a different world. In fifth grade, I was already taking the city bus to school."

As an immigrant Russian kid, Mike would wear his leather *koppel* (yarmulke).

Giving kids a tour of the restaurant



Mike's gnocchi



The original restaurant



"It was dangerous for me in two ways," he explains. "I'd walk in the street and get heckled by the non-Jews for wearing a yarmulke. Then I'd pass Tiferes Elimel-ech and get into trouble because my *koppel* was leather! You had to have thick skin back then, but that kind of stuff gives you grit, not like today's pampered kids. It built me into the person I became and has helped me so much in my industry."

The Language of Cooking

Mike admits that much of his love for cooking came from home. Family meals were rooted in tradition – Hungarian and Russian dishes, with hot breakfasts and dinners every day. But in school, he says with a laugh, "I was jealous of my American friends' cold lunches of pita and tehina because I wanted to be like them." It wasn't until Mike got older that he truly appreciated his background.

"My parents' immigrant mentality defined me," he admits.

Like language, cooking isn't something you just know; it's something you live. You can study French in school, but to really speak it, you must immerse yourself in it. Mike recalls asking a chef in culinary school how to make a turkey taste good. The answer? "Just cook it." No tricks, no shortcuts – either you know or you don't. And how do you know? By doing. The first time, you think you've got it all figured out. The thousandth time, you realize you had it all wrong.

Cooking, like language, develops over time. A child speaks simply at first, but as they grow, their speech becomes richer, more nuanced. Cooking works the same way – it's a way of life, not an isolated skill. For instance, he says, "if you gave a non-Jew the recipe for cholent, would he be able to do it? Of course not. How about if you told him to make potato kugel? How could you explain to him that it needs to be goeey-gloppy. He'd look at you like you're nuts."

The experienced cook realizes it's not about ac-

cessorizing; it's not about putting barbecue sauce on your steak and thinking it suddenly becomes exciting. That's the lowest level of pleasure. "What's important is that when a American red snapper comes in fresh and is then cooked properly, it's always incredible. There's no need to put flowers and polka dots on the plate – that's fake."

It's also vital, Mike insists, to understand your ingredients and how they interact with each other. For example, what does coagulation of protein mean? What's the difference between basmati rice and, say, short grain rice? What makes a lemon good for squeezing? At this point, Mike can tell just by looking at a lemon whether it's good for squeezing. But that's not something he learned overnight.

"When I crack an egg, I can tell by the color of the yolk whether it's fresh or old. What do most people look for when they crack an egg? To see if a piece of the shell went in the whites," he says. "It's these details that you collect over time that make you a master."

"Authentic parmesan cheese, for instance, tastes good because you know it's parmesan cheese. Otherwise, you might think it smells like feet. If someone stuck their feet in your face, would you enjoy it? No. But if you knew that after being skimmed from raw cow's milk, the cheese was heated in copper vats, mixed with rennet to form curds, broken up, cooked, and molded into large wheels, then brined in saltwater and aged in a barn in Italy for three years – suddenly, it's delicious.

"The same thing with chicken soup. When customers send back my pure golden chicken soup with only six fresh ingredients saying it's tasteless, I know it's people whose whole life is takeout. To them, chicken soup is MSG and consommé powders."

You have to know the story, especially with food. If it's just about making your mouth feel good, then it's not enough. It's about appreciating what you put in your mouth, how it got there, the story, the context.

Mike insists his upbringing gave him a unique win-

dow into different Jewish and non-Jewish communities – Russian, yeshivish, Chassidic, modern Orthodox and "goyish" – which all helped to inform his future cooking style. The school year was spent in a strictly religious environment, and summers were spent at a co-ed federation camp. Mike's neighbors were Irish, Italian, and Chinese immigrants.

"The smells of Brooklyn were different in those days. I'd pass an Italian restaurant and smell the meaty tomato sauce. It actually inspired one of the dishes on my menu," he says. "Every one of my dishes is, in fact, based on a specific reason or person. I never just find something online that looks good and put it on my menu. There's a story to every dish I create. We even had a drink called the 'L Train' because it came from a guest from Williamsburg whose last name was Levy!"

A Taste of Life

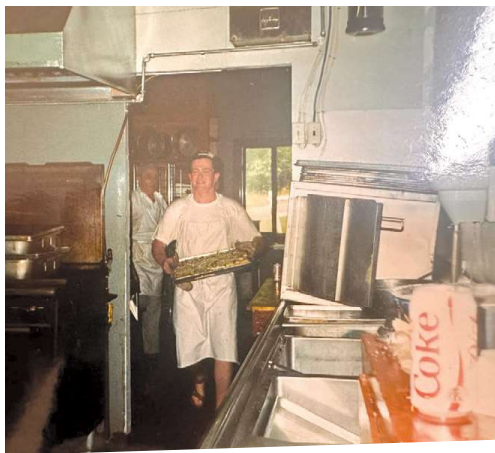
After graduating high school, Mike attended Brooklyn College for three years. "It wasn't for me," he says. So, in 1995, he enrolled at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America (CIA). After six months there, he took an externship at a country club in Westchester.

"It was a total disaster," recalls Mike. "I never realized how little I knew. My work was so bad that one day, the chef pulled me aside and said, 'Mike, I don't think this industry is for you.' Of course, that lit the fire in my belly. There's nothing like someone telling you you're really bad at something to make you want to prove him wrong. I'd invested \$50,000 in my schooling, and now this guy is telling me I'm not cut out for it. But I just said, 'I appreciate your telling me this.' Then I asked him what his favorite restaurant in Manhattan was, and he answered, 'Park Avenue Café.'"

So, Mike walked out and headed straight for Park Avenue Café, where he begged them to take him on.

"They gave me a shot and worked me like a dog. They broke me, but I got my discipline from them, and I owe them everything."

As assistant cook in Camp Lavi in 1995



Mike in Hawaii, learning a new food "language"



Mike addressing his staff during a meeting



When Mike returned to school for the second half of the term, he contends, "I was able to produce."

Some of the dishes he had prepared at Park Avenue Café all those years ago became the foundation for part of his menu at Mike's Bistro.

"For example, the cavatelli with portobello mushrooms was the impetus for the portobello mushroom flavor in my recipes today.

"The point is," shares Mike, "I don't see any of my experiences as random. All my life experiences have brought me to where I am today, especially in my field."

For a while after graduating culinary school, Mike worked in Napa, California, which in those years was the place to be for anyone who wanted to be steeped in food and drink.

"It was the yeshiva for learning food," Mike quips.

Although the CIA and Napa were based on French cooking culture, Mike was privileged to work with an Italian chef as well and learn how to see food through his passion for Italian cooking.

"Italian cooking became another 'language' I picked up."

One of Mike's Bistro's signature dishes, duck gnocchi with mushrooms, was created based on his experience watching this Italian cook who made gnocchi every day.

"I'd have visions of my mother and my great-aunt painstakingly working over their *shlishkas*, a traditional Jewish Hungarian and Romanian dish consisting of small, rolled dumplings made from a simple dough and served with stews or roasted meats. *Shlishkas* was my favorite dish growing up. My gnocchi came out of that combination of watching my Yiddish-speaking bubblies and their *shlishkas* and this Italian guy in Napa working on his gnocchi."

After Napa, Mike relocated to Hawaii for a year, which was an incredible way to absorb Asian cooking styles.

"I was able to submerge myself in the world of woks, steaming fish, sashimi, tuna, and rice. I was picking up

'languages.' I grew up with Hungarian, picked up the Brooklyn language, moved on to French and Italian, and now I was getting the Asian culture."

When Mike returned to the "mainland," he took a job at a Manhattan restaurant that had a skilled Japanese chef.

"He was doing this thing with corn, making intricate moves with his knife, making sure to get every bit

"My work was so bad that one day, the chef pulled me aside and said, 'Mike, I don't think this industry is for you.'"

of corn out of each kernel," shares Mike. "I love corn, and I was intrigued."

Mike says his corn soup today is an example of another innovation from his life experience.

"In fact," he admits, "it's one of my most popular summer dishes. I serve it daily to customers in the summer months."

A Table for Everyone

After years of traveling, learning, and refining his craft, Mike opened Mike's Bistro in 2004. Over time, his restaurant has become more than just a place to eat; it's a gathering space for people from all walks of life.

"Yesterday, I had members of the Mossad at the back of the restaurant. Mike Pence once came in with a big party. I've had famous basketball players. But I don't post it – that's cheap. I want people to come in and feel like it's a safe space. Politicians, governors, they all come. Certain well-known actors were regulars here at one time."

Hosting high-profile events has become a regular occurrence at Mike's restaurant, attracting guests from Mike Pence to Trump's kids, real estate billionaires, everybody with "*gelt*," Mike says with a laugh.

"George Rohr, for example, has been here. What an honor to talk to him when you think about what he does. He once called and asked to speak with me. 'This is George Rohr, maybe you remember me?'. Of course, I remember you, I was thinking – you don't have to say who you are. I was humbled."

The financial crash of 2008 was a moment Mike will never forget, when every CEO of every major bank seemed to be talking to every Yid in the room. "There was nervous laughter, real concern. I kept getting introduced – 'Mike, this is the president of Wells Fargo, the president of Signature Bank.' 'Good to see you, Mike.' And I'm thinking, who am I? Just the cook."

Mike chuckles, remembering an encounter with comedian Jackie Mason.

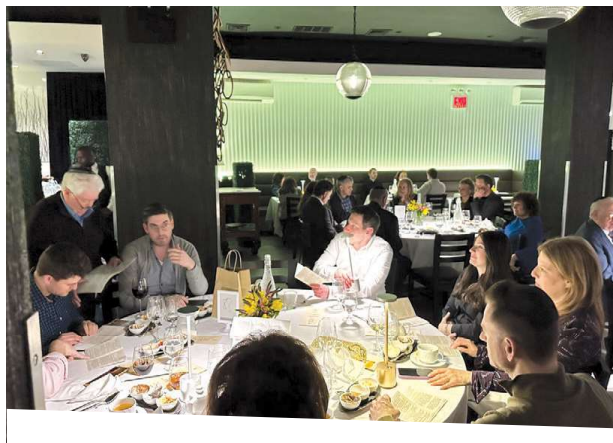
"He walked into my restaurant on the West Side. I was wearing jeans with my chef coat, trying to navigate the chaos – it was a zoo. I was at the front desk when I felt someone tapping me on the back. 'You the owner here?' I turned around – it was Jackie Mason. In his inimitable voice, he says, 'You're the owner, and you can't get a nice pair of pants?'"

Not every guest is entertaining. Some are controversial.

"I get unsavory people, too, especially politically. People ask, 'How could you let Ilhan Omar dine in your restaurant?' I answered back, 'I had no idea who she was. All I saw was a lady in a *tichel*.'"

Mike has seen kids grow up in his restaurant.

A busy night in the restaurant. Mike's father is standing on the left



With some famous guests



"With some customers, we've become family," he says.

One customer, renowned artist and sculptor Tobi Kahn, has been coming to Mike's Bistro for years. His daughter was a little girl when she first started coming. She subsequently attended Harvard and now is an award-winning writer and editor for *Vogue* and other well-known publications. There are other guests who have been coming with their parents since they were little, and now they're working for President Trump in the White House.

"It's nachas."

Mike often sits down at the tables and *kibbitzes* with his customers, young and old, famous and not famous.

"I'm talking to bobbies, to powerful people, to young couples. But it's all the same *shprach*."

Hospitality, the Secret Ingredient

"I remember when I first opened the restaurant, it was rough. One of my brothers advised me to close up shop. But I'd worked in failing restaurants, and I could tell, even though we were hemorrhaging money at that point, this was not a failing business. I could feel the energy of our clientele. Despite what it looked like externally, we were growing."

The miracle was, Mike continues, that on the night his first child was born, the business doubled their customers.

"Ironically, I wasn't even there to greet my guests because I was with my wife in the hospital, but from then on, we took off."

For Mike, being chef and restaurant owner is like playing a video game – problem, solution, problem, solution.

"It's satisfying for my ADHD brain. For example, let's say the ice machine is beeping. I have to figure out: *do we have enough ice for today? When is the latest I can call the ice guy? Or how many reservations do we*

have for today? Am I cutting someone? Is something wrong with the duck? Is it too feathery? It's constant rapid fire. And then at 5:30, everything has to stop, we have to wind down and be ready to serve our guests."

But running a restaurant isn't just about managing chaos; it's about creating an experience that makes people feel at home. Mike explains, "Over time, I came to understand that hospitality was at the core of it all. It's not just about the food – it's about the hand giving it."

"Hospitality was at the core of it all. It's not just about the food - it's about the hand giving it."

"The root of the word 'restaurant' is restore. People don't go to restaurants just for the food. They walk in and are made to feel like a person. They're greeted at the door with 'good evening.' The owner says hello, asks about their family. They are walked to their table, the lighting is just right, the chairs are placed with care, the glasses are polished. They sit like a mensch. And whether they have it in them or not, their humanity comes forth."

"My bar mitzvah parsha is *Vayeira*," Mike shares, "Avraham took three hours to prepare a meal for angels. Why? What was the goal? To rest, eat, and rejuvenate. It was also for Avraham to say, 'I believe in one G-d,' for a discussion of ideas. Around food, people drop their guard and talk about things they don't talk about anywhere else."

One of Mike's waiters once came to him, amazed.

"My eyes are now open," he said. "I'm privy to conversations I never imagined." Billion-dollar discussions were happening right in front of him.

Mike trains his staff to elevate the dining experience.

"Every day at 5:00 p.m., I meet with my waiters. What do I want people to walk away with? People walk in, order a Diet Coke, rib steak medium, and fries. They're just *fressing*. They're not interested in the amazing selection of the freshest vegetables. 'Make them order the mushrooms,' I tell my waiters. 'Make them try our interpretation of kasha varnishkes. Give them an experience they can talk about. Make them order the chicken—this chicken is the last word. Meat is just meat, but the chicken is fresh and juicy.'"

Because it's all about the total experience, attention to detail is everything. Every aspect of the menu matters, from the way the food is prepared to how it's served. Dishes that call for herbs get fresh chopped chives, rosemary, oregano, or olives.

"We have a carefully curated selection of oils. When a customer is done eating, their utensils go into soak, then they're washed upright in hot water, rinsed to remove chemicals, checked, and polished by hand. Nobody gets sick from our utensils. Glassware is never washed with plates. If someone is drinking a \$300 bottle of wine, they deserve a glass that doesn't smell like bleach or have fingerprints on it."

One night, a customer walked in looking worn out. Mike could tell he'd had a hard week. "Anything special for me?" he asked. Mike told him, "Yes, we have an amazing duck. Give me 30 minutes, and you'll have something fresh and perfectly prepared that will make you feel great."

And that's what it's all about.

Running a restaurant isn't just about food, it's about people, passion, and commitment. Every plate tells a story, every detail matters, and every guest should leave feeling like they belong. That's what keeps Mike coming back to the kitchen, day after day. 