

Why the bagel economy is on a roll

Warm-up question: Would you wait 45 minutes in line for a food that is supposed to be “the best”? Why or why not?

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Kai Ryssdal: **To each his own**, of course, but my go-to bagel is sesame, definitely not toasted, a healthy but not overdone schmear, tomato if it’s a good one, lox, capers, and just a hint of thinly sliced red onion. If it’s a genuine New York City bagel, all the better, but the reality is the popularity of and the desire for good bagels is picking up across the country, especially out here on the West Coast. As Oregon Public Broadcasting’s Crystal Ligori reports, the bagel economy is on a roll.

Crystal Ligori: It’s 8:30 on a Sunday morning and there’s already a line around the block outside PipSqueak Bagels in Southeast Portland.

Regan Manzig: The bagels looked really good online, so we thought we’d come give it a try.

Crystal Ligori: That’s Regan Manzig, who along with her mom is one of the 40 or so folks in line for a bagel.

Regan Manzig: We didn’t mind standing outside 'cause, you know, it’s warm out. But we did not know it was going to be 45 minutes.

Crystal Ligori: A wait this long may seem unheard of for a bagel, but Sam Silverman says the simple formula of flour, water, and yeast is much more than its ingredients.

Sam Silverman: Even though the cost of the goods is relatively low, the amount of time and effort that goes into it is much higher than a lot of other foods.

Crystal Ligori: Silverman is New York’s self-proclaimed bagel ambassador, president of BagelUp, an organization he says is dedicated to promoting bagels and the people, culture, and community behind them. And these **artisan** bagels go way beyond your grocery store-bagged **variety**.

Sam Silverman: It’s a minimum two-day process where you make and shape the dough by hand, and then the following day, after the dough has been allowed to cold **ferment**, it’s then boiled, seeded, and baked.

Crystal Ligori: And one of the reasons he says there's been a rise in popularity outside the city:

Sam Silverman: The **exodus** of New Yorkers and Northeasterners who went to other places in the country and brought their standards for bagels with them was the perfect match for local entrepreneurs to fill that hole in the market.

Crystal Ligori: Entrepreneurs like Andrew Rubinstein.

Andrew Rubinstein: I'd already been thinking about bagels around 2016, the fact that they just weren't what I thought were great bagels in the Seattle area.

Crystal Ligori: Rubinstein is the owner of Hey Bagel and before he went **brick-and-mortar** last year, he was meeting people in parking lots to give them bagels.

Andrew Rubinstein: I was baking out of a commissary kitchen and I was loading up my Ford Explorer with bags of bagels and I would poach in grocery store parking lots, transit centers, and people would come and have their **clandestine** pickups.

Crystal Ligori: By then, there was already a **buzz** around bagels, potentially sparked by the viral baking frenzy that seemed to be everyone's pandemic hobby. That's how Connecticut's PopUp Bagels started and now the company's expanded to 29 locations, growth largely funded by a \$35 million investment by **private equity** firm Stripes.

Crystal Ligori: It's something many artisanal bagel makers like Madeleine Gibbons are taking note of.

Madeleine Gibbons: You know, I have mixed feelings about it 'cause I'm like, you know, when you start getting **venture capital** involved, I have an assumption that that will change things.

Crystal Ligori: Gibbons is the owner of Portland's PipSqueak Bagels, who chatted with me while slicing off long strips of dough, deftly twisting them into perfectly round bagels.

Madeleine Gibbons: Bread has always been a part of my life. I come from a long line of bakers in my family and I would always give baked goods away to my neighbors, um like challah or cakes, **etcetera**, and it wasn't really until I started sharing bagels with people that they were like, "Man, those are really amazing, like are you selling those?"

Crystal Ligori: PipSqueak opened its doors about a month ago, after years of Gibbons doing **farmers markets** and bagel pop-ups. She's grown her staff to about 10 employees and business is going well.

Madeleine Gibbons: I mean, on average, we're prepping around 1,500, but on Mother's Day we did 2,000 and we're selling through everything every day. Ever since the day we opened, it's been like, every single day has been lines around the block. It's been amazing. It's been incredible.

Crystal Ligori: And with high-profile features on the bagel business popping up in the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, plus the first West Coast Bagel Fest last month, the bagel boom shows no signs of slowing down. In Portland, I'm Crystal Ligori for Marketplace.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **To each their own:** everyone has different tastes or preferences, and that is okay
2. **artisan:** made with skill, care, and traditional methods, often by hand
3. **variety:** a type or kind of something
4. **ferment:** to change chemically over time, often through yeast or bacteria, as in bread, beer, or yogurt
5. **exodus:** a large number of people leaving one place for another
6. **brick-and-mortar:** a physical store or business location, not just an online or temporary business
7. **clandestine:** secret or hidden, often because something is informal or not officially allowed
8. **buzz:** excitement, attention, or talk around something popular
9. **private equity:** investment money from firms that buy or invest in private companies, often to help them grow or become more profitable
10. **venture capital:** investment money given to young or fast-growing companies with high growth potential
11. **etcetera:** and other similar things; used when continuing a list is unnecessary
12. **farmers markets:** local markets where farmers, bakers, and small producers sell food or goods directly to customers

Fill in the Blank Use the correct word or phrase from the vocabulary list.

1. The bakery is known for its _____ bread made by hand every morning.
2. I prefer plain bagels, but my friend loves everything bagels. _____.
3. Many startups rely on _____ before they become profitable.
4. Before opening a store, the baker sold bread at local _____.
5. The dough needs time to _____ before it is shaped and baked.
6. The city experienced an _____ of young workers after housing became too expensive.
7. After years of selling online, the company opened its first _____ location.
8. There is a lot of _____ around the new restaurant downtown.
9. The company expanded quickly after receiving funding from a _____ firm.
10. This shop sells a wide _____ of pastries, from croissants to muffins.
11. Customers used to meet the baker for _____ pickups in parking lots.

Comprehension Questions:

1. Why are people waiting in long lines for artisan bagels in Portland?
2. What makes artisan bagels different from grocery store bagels?
3. Why does Sam Silverman think bagels have become more popular outside New York?
4. How did Andrew Rubinstein sell bagels before opening a brick-and-mortar shop?
5. Why does Madeleine Gibbons have mixed feelings about venture capital entering the bagel business?

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do people sometimes value handmade food more than mass-produced food?
2. Can a food business grow quickly while still keeping its original quality and culture?
3. What kinds of foods in your country have become trendy or “artisan”?
4. Do you think long lines make a restaurant seem more attractive? Why or why not?
5. What are the risks and benefits of private equity or venture capital investing in small food businesses?