

Foodways of East W'Burg

Urban Oyster Tour Unearths Layers of Immigrant History

By Karl Benson

The name of the Brooklyn-based tour company, Urban Oyster, pretty much says it all: In the innermost recesses of city neighborhoods lie pearls of historical significance and a wealth of knowledge and appreciation for how things got to be the way they are.

Such is the case with the three-year old company's new tour, Immigrant Foodways,



Anibal Meats Market, where co-owner Angelo Santiago tells tour-goers how to make pernil.

which takes a close look at a several-block stretch of East Williamsburg near Graham Avenue and tells the story of its layered ethnic history through its food.

The two-and-a-half hour tour centers on the Moore Street Market, a microcosm for East Williamsburg's immigrant history in the 20th century. The market was built in 1941 to regulate the throngs of pushcart peddlers, mostly Jewish, who crowded the streets of the densely-populated neighborhood. Eastern European Jews were East Williamsburg's predominant ethnic group in the early part of the 20th Century, one of the many groups that fled across the Williamsburg Bridge from the overcrowded Lower East Side. (In "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," Betty Smith's classic novel about Williamsburg near the turn of the century, the main character goes to Moore Street to get a "Jew pickle" and is called a "goyem" by the peddler, a word she doesn't understand.)

But the ethnic flavor of the neighborhood – and flavors of the market – soon changed. The middle of the century brought the migration of Puerto Ricans, who gave the market its current moniker: "La Marqueta de Williamsburg." The southern stretch of Graham Avenue itself was co-named "The Avenue of Puerto Rico." Dominican immigration followed in the latter part of the century, followed by the current influx of Mexicans and Central Americans.

The tour traces these changes in a variety of ways: There's the traditional identifying of still-standing relics of an earlier time, like Katz Drugs on Graham near Moore. There's storytelling, like the copiously-researched

tale of the Cohen family, a turn of the century Jewish family who lived eleven-strong in a tenement apartment on Cook Street and Graham.

But what gives the tour its uniqueness is its use of food as a window into history and cultures. There's the trip to La Isla Cuchifritos, which turns into a discussion about the origins of Puerto Rican soul food. There's the trip to the venerable Anibal Meats Market, during which co-owner Angelo Santiago discusses his upbringing in Williamsburg and how he has had to tailor his products to some of the areas newer residents (Example: Rabbit is a popular meat in Ecuadorian cuisine.)

By eating the foods of Williamsburg's different cultures, tour goers are, in a sense, partaking in those cultures. And it doesn't stop with eating. Tour goers are given lessons on how to identify foods used in Latin cuisine – what are all those root vegetables, anyway? – and to cook with a Latin twist. Along the way, there are constant historical tie-backs – like the 500-woman cooking classes once



Tour Guide Cindy VandenBosch in front of a Groundswell Community Mural Project mural, entitled "Yesterday I Dared to Struggle. Today I Dared to Win."

held at the old Batterman's Department Store at the intersection of Broadway, Flushing and Graham, a nexus then known as "Batterman's Square."

"Food is really a meaningful way to learn about a culture and where people come from," said Urban Oyster co-founder Cindy VandenBosch, who guides the tour with Princess Yahmeela Aziza Serna, a Williamsburg native and food expert. "It's more fun to have a multisensory experience and really engage with a neighbor than just standing around and pointing at buildings."

To prepare the tour, organizers poured through old newspapers and primary source documents like census figures and real estate maps. For more recent history, they relied on extensive interviews with local merchants and residents, some of which will be archived by the Brooklyn Historical Society.

"It's not like tons of books have been written about this neighborhood, so this was challenging from a research prospective. But I love that," said VandenBosch,

She added, "For me, it's important to see the connections through history with these neighborhoods and to understand why they look the way they do, and how we've inherited the built environment of the city. The more you have a connection to a neighborhood's past, the more you care about it and where it goes in the future. We're not just doing this to take people on a nostalgic trip. We want to connect it to today and give people a deeper connection to place."

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Immigrant Foodways is offered every Saturday, at from 10:30 to 1. Tickets are \$39, and include a bottle of water, a recipe booklet, a guide to Moore Street Market, and several food and beverage tastings.

Tickets must be purchased in advance. To purchase tickets or for more information, go to www.urbanoyster.com.

School Sett Students Depict 'Hard Knock Life'

Production of 'Annie' Caps Year of Hard Work

By Karl Benson

A year of hard work for around 50 mostly middle school students culminated last month with an impressive theater production of Annie, the 1977 Broadway musical about the "hard-knock" life of Annie and her fellow orphans.

School Settlement Association, the venerable local youth organization, teamed up with St. Nicks Alliance and organized the production as part of the Young Artist Program at MS 577, a full-year afterschool program in which students worked with teaching artists in different disciplines. The professional-caliber production clearly benefitted from the hands-on experience with those working professionals, which included a drama teacher, a music teacher, a movement teacher and a media arts teacher.

The SSA/MS 577 students have made spring musicals an annual tradition. This year the production was truly a community collaboration. Students at St. Nicks Alliance's Greenpoint Beacon Center created the sets and handled the show's production aspects.

Pene McCourty, Director of Programs at School Settlement Association, said the teaching staff chose "Annie" because they felt the experience during the Great Depression was relatable for many students.

"The students saw the connection between that time and now, and how the times impacts their lives," McCourty said.

The production was a positive experience, but there was a bittersweet note to it as well: Next year, funding for School Settlement Programs will be severely reduced because of city budget cuts.



St. Nicks and School Settlement Association teamed up on a professional caliber production of 'Annie.'

"We had this really great program and we formed a community around it, but next year we'll have to shrink it," McCourty said.