



Dave Aldrich

At Marblehead JCC, this non-Jew finagles the best bagels

BY STEVE MARANTZ([HTTPS://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/](https://jewishjournal.org/author/steve-marantz/))

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Nobody doesn't like bagels, and everybody has a bagel story. In my youth, I lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Omaha known as Bagel, which was spoken and heard as a term of endearment. To me, a bagel is a place in my heart.

Dave Aldrich runs the non-profit bakery, Grab the Bagel, out of the North Shore Jewish Community Center kitchen in Marblehead. Aldrich had a come-to-bagel awakening as a 1970s teen in Rhode Island.



(<https://gloucesterstage.com/>)

“I worked in a bagel shop on the east side of Providence,” recalled Aldrich, 68. “Our customers were 98 percent Jewish – that was my introduction to the unique meaning of bagels to the Jewish community. Mrs. Goldberg, who was 4 feet, 11 inches, a Jewish grandmother, would come in every day for her bagels, and was very nice to me.”

One day, Aldrich was operating the dough mixer in the back of the shop.

“It was huge – the size of a mini-Cooper,” he said. “You had to climb up three steps, pour bags of flour in, add salt and yeast and water, and mix it around. Once it was mixed you jogged the machine, cut out a hunk of dough, put it in a bagel former where it would cut and form and go onto a belt and come out a bagel.

“So, I was jogging the machine and hit the button too long. The entire batch of dough came flying out of the machine and pinned me to the floor. Aaargh! I couldn’t get up because it was on my legs, so I’m calling to my friend Kevin to come and help me – he’s working the counter – and he comes flying around the corner. Luckily, I didn’t break my legs.

“Just then Mrs. Goldberg appears in the door from the retail area, and she sees us, and she sees the mess. First her arm comes up, then her finger points at me, then she wags it, and she says, ‘David, don’t you dare use that bagel dough on my bagels.’

“That’s when I knew bagels were a big deal.”



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Fast forward to July 2024, almost a year since Grab the Bagel launched. Aldrich, raised a Protestant Episcopalian, is something of a bagel mensch, known for gifting bagels to locals through ‘Random Acts of Bagelness.’ He sells at the Swampscott Farmers Market on Sundays, and out front of the Dockside Pub on Saturdays. His kitchen at the JCC turns out about 1,500 bagels a week, aided by one full-time employee, three volunteers, and an occasional high schooler doing community service. Customers can order for pickup at the JCC, or order for delivery.

On a midweek morning at a tall table in the JCC lobby, Aldrich was being interviewed when a customer greeted him.

“I’m 92 and I’ve eaten bagels my whole life,” said Erma Zarinsky of Swampscott. “I always ate Stop & Shop bagels, cinnamon raisin. Then one day I came by David’s table, and he said, ‘Here, try this.’ One bite and I knew, this was for me. So that’s what I eat now. Half a bagel for breakfast, with a little cream cheese.”

Aldrich’s wide grin tells of his journey from East Providence to Marblehead, from Mrs. Goldberg to Erma Zarinsky, and of the saving grace and redemptive power of bagels.

Just four years ago, Aldrich was at a low point. The Covid pandemic had derailed his non-profit Grab The Torch, a summer program to teach high school students “leadership, ethics, philanthropy, and purpose.” Founded in 2009,

Grab the Torch's weeklong sessions in New York City and Colorado went dormant. Aldrich was marooned at his Nahant home.

"I was in a deep darkness," he recalled. "My whole world came to an end, financially, and then a couple of personal things. My whole purpose was gone. Getting out of bed was a daily challenge."

Aldrich reexamined himself through the mantra he had taught his students, 'Give to give, not to get.' Slowly, he pulled out of his malaise, baking cobblers, growing a community tomato garden, and gifting friends with jars of Beach Plum sauce.

Then his favorite bagel shop closed in Bethel, Maine, where he summered. As Aldrich mourned the loss of its multi-seed, he had an epiphany. His life would have new meaning and purpose: bagels.

Though his baking experience was limited, and he knew nothing about yeast, he immersed himself in bagel research and test baking. Throughout 2022 he sought feedback from a wide circle of friends who sampled his efforts.

By the end of that year, Aldrich was ready to launch, and he needed a kitchen. He got a call from Temple Sinai in Marblehead, which had heard of his kitchen search. Turned out Sinai's kitchen wasn't feasible due to town building codes. Kitchens at Shirat Hayam in Swampscott and Temple Emanu-El weren't feasible, either. Then Aldrich met with JCC

executive director Marty Schneer, who told him the JCC board had recently voted to expand community engagement. Aldrich heard Schneer say, “Your timing is good.”

Aldrich signed a two-year contract with the JCC, spent about \$40,000 to retrofit the kitchen, accommodated town codes, and began baking in August 2023. His bagels have since won over a wide audience, with what he touts as a distinctive chew and density.

Working at the JCC, Aldrich writes in a personal essay titled “The JCC, Jews and Me,” has provided him “a doctorate in Jewish culture and the amazing goodness of Jews.”

“I have no problem saying that the JCC saved my life,” Aldrich said. “They might not know it; I hid the darkness as best I could. And so I feel absolutely blessed to be within the four walls of the J.”

Aldrich hopes to shmear his bagel gratitude far and wide. He envisions underutilized JCC kitchens across America baking bagels and offering Grab the Torch curriculum for student volunteers. The bagel, he suggests, could be a tool to defuse antisemitism.

“Who doesn’t welcome a bagel?” said Aldrich. “Who can’t identify the goodness of a bagel? It’s a Jewish thing, a good Jewish thing.” ☹

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