

Brooklyn Bialys Are a Hit In the Land of the Rising Sun

By John Rizio-Hamilton

While big-ticket items like cars and stereo systems have created a large trade deficit between the U.S. and Japan, Warren Bell, a second-generation Brooklyn merchant, is helping remedy that situation one bialy at a

time.

Believe it or not, Bell has found quite a niche for his bialys in Japan, a country known more for its sushi than its love of things Brooklyn.

"It's not the same type of bialy that we eat," said Bell,

whose father started the legendary Bell's Bagels and Bialys, located at 10013 Foster Avenue, 54 years ago in Canarsie. "The consistency of the dough is the same, but it's a sweet product."

The Japanese do not like their bialys the same way

New Yorkers do, said Bell. Bell's Japanese buyer, Kanji Kitamura, was looking for a sweet, flavored product that would appeal to the Japanese as a midday snack instead of a breakfast food.

"So we went and developed ten flavors for him,"

Japan Has a Yen For Brooklyn Bagels



Warren Bell's bialys have been a big hit in Japan, of all places.

said Bell. The flavors include blueberry, chocolate chip, cinnamon raisin, apple cinnamon walnut, maple french, scallion and sesame and scallion, carrot, corn, onion and sugar.

Bell said that at first some people thought the flavored bialy was a "shonda"—the Yiddish word for disgrace—but in light of the fact that Bell has shipped 20,000 dozen bialys in the past six months, that *shonda* is looking like a pretty sweet deal.

Bell was able to navigate the maze of international export with the help of Brooklyn Goes Global (BGG), the international trade service of the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce.

BGG is an organization that looks at a wide variety of Brooklyn products and helps the manufacturers tap into markets as far-flung as Europe, Asia, the Middle East and South America.

Drawing mostly from the grassroots support of small, local manufacturers and chamber members, BGG represents Brooklyn manufacturers in trade shows, connects them with state and federal support, and convenes international distributors to sample food and consumer goods.

"Brooklyn is the best brand name the world has ever heard," said Jen O'Connor, BGG's director. "The tiniest buyer outpost knows Brooklyn."

Last year, when O'Connor was at an Italian trade show, she discovered that Italy's top selling gum is called "Brooklyn."

Next week, O'Connor is flying to Argentina to introduce their buyers to a range of Brooklyn's kosher food products—something that a local manufacturer like Bell could not normally do, even if they knew that Argentina has an extremely large Jewish population.

BGG and its domestic partner, Brooklyn's Kitchen, receive state and federal funds because their efforts help expand local industry, widen U.S. exports and create jobs.

"We use export as an economic development tool," said O'Connor.



Warren Bell is sandwiched between his two children, Jennifer, left, and Jared, right, who are holding some of their father's handiwork.

Photos by Steve Solomonsen

BGG conducts a free, three-month evaluation of a manufacturer's international potential, and then the manufacturer can decide whether to pay BGG to represent them in the global market. The organization has roughly 1,700 overseas buyers and handles up to 90 different Brooklyn products a month.

For Bell, the deal seems well worth it. Aside from his success in Japan, he's been in a number of international food shows, and is now looking to export his products to Israel.

But don't expect to buy a maple french bialy in Brooklyn. Bell does not produce the flavors domestically — it's strictly a Japanese thing. He's also working on a cinnamon bun for the Japanese market, but Kitamura has asked that it not be sweet.

"Different ethnic background, I guess," said Bell.

The government cannot reach out to foreign markets and lobby on behalf of individual manufacturers because that would smack of favoritism. But that's BGG's mission — to place local goods in markets that were previously inaccessible.

"We want everyone to have a taste of Brooklyn," said O'Connor.