

Waxing Nosh-talgic at Ansley Eatery With The Bagel Bunch

By Jack Wilkinson
Staff Writer

Behold The Bagel Bunch. As always, they're holding court in the promenade at Ansley Mall. As on every Sunday morning, they're glorying in the warmth of each other's company, another cinnamon raisin bagel with a shmeer of cream cheese, yet another cup of hot coffee and even an occasional sip of something decaffeinated.

And as always, Walter Huebner is rhapsodizing philosophically, and passionately, about everything: from the economy to the Super Bowl to the lamentable fact that, at times, it's a sad, sad, sad, sad world.

"This," Mr. Huebner declared, "is a world of incompetence! I mean ... Vidal! When are you going to bring the fourth table?"

Vida Goldgar is seated at the far end of the three folding picnic tables with the little seats that flip out, the tables Mr. Huebner lugs to Ansley each Sunday morning and upon which rests the foundation, and posteriors, of The Bagel Bunch. Ms. Goldgar is the editor of The Atlanta Jewish

NEIGHBORS

Times. She is also a staple of this hardy group of perennials, some two dozen predominantly middle-aged Jewish professionals who convene on Sunday mornings to break bread and rekindle the best kind of friendship: longtime, stimulating and caring.

When Mr. Huebner, 57, helped found the bunch in 1974, it met inside The Royal Bagel, newly opened and owned by New York transplants Ken and Rose Yoss and their son, Michael. But the store's seating capacity was limited. Besides, the founding fathers didn't want to monopolize the Yosses' tables and chairs while they munched lox and talked shop, drank coffee and debated politics, exchanged ideas and periodicals, argued and laughed, occasionally cried and always came back for more.

So Mr. Huebner bought the first folding table (on sale at JC Penney, he recalled, marked down from \$69 to \$44.95) and they



Royal Bagel regulars gather for their Sunday coffee. They are, from left, Ted Vigodsky, Virginia Wilder, Julian Jacobs and Walter Huebner.

NICK ARROYO/Staff

moved outdoors. They've been al fresco ever since. "The only time they came inside was once when it was snowy and sleety," said Mrs. Yoss. "Then I made them come inside."

Otherwise, it's a great outdoor meeting of the minds. "It's an eclectic group," said

Dr. Julian Jacobs, an oncologist sporting his traditional Sunday morning black beret. "People all the way from entrepreneurs to communists to out of work to being part of the Establishment to being

NEIGHBORS Continued on SE

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The Royal Bagel regulars meet every Sunday outside the Ansley Mall shop at tables they bought themselves.



Neighbors

From Page 1E

retired to being journalists to being part of the APPLE Corps [Atlanta Parents and Public Linked for Education]."

All have an abiding appetite for good bagels, good conversation, good-natured kibitzing and camaraderie. And all have a common denominator in Mr. Huebner.

"Walter likes to discuss things," said Dr. Jacobs. "Walter is the catalyst for the group. Most of the group will come with specific issues. Walter is unique. Whichever side of the issue you take, Walter will take the other side. For Walter, it's the resolution of the issue."

It's also the continuation of a grand tradition, a confluence of the Old World and the New South. "This," said Dr. Jacobs, gesturing toward the three tables filled with people, "is a direct descendant of Viennese cafe society."

Mr. Huebner was 6 when his family was forced to leave Vienna and flee the Nazis. They spent two years in Belgium, living in an Antwerp basement also inhabited by rats, before immigrating to Atlanta in 1940. In 1945, Mr. Huebner met a kid named Julian Jacobs. Two years later, they were classmates at Grady High School. "I was a southside serf and you were a northside noble," a grinning Mr. Huebner told Dr. Jacobs. "And a left fielder, too."

In the early '70s, Mr. Huebner and Dr. Benjamin Saffan decided to meet regularly for breakfast, intellectual stimulation and a few laughs. When The Royal Bagel opened, Mr.

Huebner said, "Well, you know, we might go there and have a bagel breakfast." Dr. Saffan suggested the formation of The Bagel Buddies of America.

"We thought we'd be an international organization," Mr. Huebner said. "And it would furnish a thousand points of light for the entire world."

"And make it a kinder, gentler world," said Dr. Jacobs, one of the original Bagel Buddies boys.

"It could be instituted in bagel shops across America," said Mr. Huebner. "But no! They'd rather be *inanimus* on Sunday mornings."

Not The Bagel Bunch. They'd rather be in each other's midsts, discussing a smorgasbord of topics. Sunday's buffet included:

Ted Bundy. Rankin Smith. Socialism versus capitalism ("Capitalism," decided Mr. Huebne.; an entrepreneur, "is not very good without money."). Pornography. The advisability of investments ("[Aviation pioneer Thomas] Sopwith's investments from 1936-39 built the R.A.F.," Mr. Huebner said. "The result? Fascism didn't win.")

There was a discussion of the difference between pain and suffering, between Drs. Jacobs and Joanne Rouleau, a Canadian psychologist now living here. Talk of tenors, too; Mr. Huebner, an aficionado of Luciano Pavarotti and Placido Domingo, wondered what exactly is an Irish tenor. Said Joe Glazer, "An Irish whiskey tenor."

At one point, The Bagel Bunch was something of a poetry group, too. Dr. Glazer, a retired dentist and Sunday regular with his wife, Rachel, is still an avid poet. On Sunday, he distributed copies and gave a reading of

his poem titled "Intensive Care." He grew uninterested when Mr. Huebner mentioned John Wooden, the legendary UCLA basketball coach who, at one point in the mid-'60s, compiled a record of 48-2.

"That's inconceivable!" said Mr. Huebner, who reveres Mr. Wooden. "It's like clearing the deficit!"

Mr. Huebner also found it inconceivable that he might be wrong about the date of a landmark UCLA defeat. He said it was in 1966. No, it was 1968. Mr. Huebner insisted he was correct and made a wager.

"Sometimes," Dr. Jacobs said, smiling, "Walter gets carried away with his opinion. The job of everyone at this table is to remind him of the loveliness of reality."

Many members of The Bagel Bunch have grown up together. Some have grown older together. So have some of their children; Dan and Marsha Klenbort started taking their daughter, Sarah, with them on Sundays when she was 5 months old. Now 13, Sarah came on Sunday. So, alas, did the news of the death of a friend's mother. Dr. Jacobs proposed a toast:

"May we all live till the 80s in reasonable health. And may George Bush live to 120. Or at least until his term is up."

And may The Bagel Bunch live forever. "It's a good bagel and a good drink," Mr. Huebner said, trying to define the Bunch simply. "And life after breakfast goes on."

And yet couldn't life in this great big, troublesome world be better for everyone? Mr. Huebner thinks so. He knows so. He even has the solution. "Buy a \$40 folding table, buy a bagel and have a Sunday morning worship service."