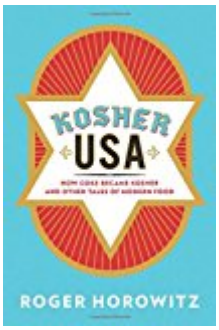
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roger Horowitz. *Kosher USA: How Coke Became Kosher and Other Tales of Modern Food.* Arts and Traditions of the Table: Perspectives on Culinary History Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 303 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-15832-9.



Reviewed by Jordan Rosenblum

Published on H-Judaic (November, 2016)

Commissioned by Katja Vehlow (University of South Carolina)

To tell the history of the kosher industry in the United States, one needs to balance narratives of rise and fall. For example, the Orthodox Union (OU) placed its first OU symbol on Heinz Vegetarian Baked Beans in 1923, and today numerous kosher agencies (led by the Big Four of OU, OK, Kof-K, and Star-K) certify as "kosher" hundreds of thousands of processed foodstuffs. This meteoric rise is balanced against the fact that "in the 1920s approximately 25 percent of the steers slaughtered in American [slaughterhouses] were killed in accordance with kosher rules. A half-century later, no more than 6 percent of American beef underwent ***shechita***, the intricate ritual process necessary to create kosher beef" (p. 164).

While the story of the American kosher industry has recently been told either by journalists or unabashed apologists for the industry, Roger Horowitz approaches the subject from a different perspective: as a historian trained in business, technology, and labor. As a result, Horowitz takes his readers in unexpected directions, such as in his discussion of how Sammy Davis Jr. came to advertise for Manischewitz (chapter 6). Further, even when he tells familiar stories, such as how the Oreo cookie became certified as kosher (chapter 5), he tells them in ways that offer readers new insights. Finally, the depth of his archival research and critical eye is on display when he rewrites standard historical narratives, either returning complex and obscured figures to their rightful place (as in his discussion in chapters 2-3 of Abraham Goldstein, an Orthodox Jewish chemist who, before founding OK, negotiated OU's first kosher certification agreement with Heinz Foods and "oversaw the creation of the famous *U* within a circle symbol for its use" [p. 26]) or introducing understudied figures to the narrative (as in his discussion of Harry Kassel in chapter 7).

Horowitz's training as a historian is what truly distinguishes this book from its peers. At numerous points in the book I was pleasantly surprised at how he found important archival material that recast clichéd narratives. He used conversations about glycerin and Jell-O, for example, to talk about the evolution of religious and—not

to be discounted—business competition in Orthodox Judaism in America. Yet, unlike some authors, Horowitz is attempting neither to critique nor to apologize for the kosher industry. Rather, he is trying to understand and contextualize the twists and turns it has taken over the past one hundred years.

In each chapter, Horowitz uses a food or food production process around which to center his discussion. In chapter 1, "My Family's Sturgeon," Horowitz discusses various rabbinic viewpoints on whether sturgeon is, indeed, kosher (it depends on what one counts as "scales") in order to set the stage for different debates about acceptable kosher standards. My one small quibble here, and throughout the book, is that his definitions of rabbinic categories are not always as precise and nuanced as they could be. However, his brief discussion of sturgeon prepares the reader for the issues they are about to encounter. Chapter 2, "Kosher Coke, Kosher Science," details the growing impact of chemical science on the kosher industry, especially with the rise of processed and pre-packaged foods. Though this is an oft-told story, his archival research brings previously neglected elements to the story. Chapter 3, "The Great Jell-O Controversy," continues this discussion, as it moves us forward in time to the 1950s and 1960s, when different social, religious, and economic factors—all intimately intertwined—affected the kosher industry. Chapter 4, "Who Says It's Kosher," turns our attention to an issue that we have already seen throughout this book: namely, competition over control of the kosher industry. Building on these insights, chapter 5, "Industrial Kashrus," explores the various successes and controversies encountered in the kosher industry as it seeks to regulate heavily processed foods. From successes like the popular perception of "kosher" certification as a value-add for many non-Jewish manufacturers to failures like the infamous vinegar scandal of the mid-1980s (see pp. 109-110), Horowitz balances a clear narrative with several specific and easily understandable examples. Chapter 6, "Man-O-Manischewitz," continues the discussion of industrial certification of kosher products, but introduces the fascinating history of African American interest in Manischewitz, and how the company sought to advertise beyond the Jewish community. In doing so, Horowitz is able to explore the well-trodden issue of kosher wine in America in a fresh and lively manner. It is well worth the read. In chapter 7, "Harry Kassel's Meat," we meet Harry Kassel, a Jew from Wisconsin who became a major player in the kosher meat industry in New York City and beyond. Horowitz smartly uses Kassel and the twists and turns of his meat business to discuss the various ways that technology affected the kosher meat business, from ***begissing*** (washing) meat in refrigerated trucks to implementation of Cryovac technology (in which fresh meat is chilled and then sealed in airtight plastic). Explaining Kassel's exit from the kosher meat business in 1980 allows Horowitz to illuminate the often discussed issues relating to the intersection between business constraints and changing kosher regulations in the past few decades. Once again, a familiar narrative is rendered in a novel way. Chapter 8, "Shechita," explores the issues of ethics, kosher slaughter, and the modern kosher slaughterhouse. As one would expect from a scholar who has previously written about the meat business in America, Horowitz does an excellent job discussing Temple Grandin, Agriprocessors, and the various messy issues that such a conversation inherently raises. I particularly appreciated how he navigated the complex—and contentious—manner in which "ethics" is strategically deployed by various people on all sides of this debate. In his "Conclusion: Kosher Ethics/Ethical Kosher?" Horowitz continues this discussion, paying special attention to contemporary debates surrounding kosher slaughter, ethics, and business. Finally, in his "Epilogue: Remembering, Discovering, Thanking," Horowitz combines acknowledgments with a summary of his deep archival work.

Kosher USA is the single best book that I have ever read on the American kosher industry. It will entertain and educate both general readers and serious scholars.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic

Citation: Jordan Rosenblum. Review of Horowitz, Roger. *Kosher USA: How Coke Became Kosher and Other Tales of Modern Food.* H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2016.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48043