On Immigration and Sandwiches

The Story of One Beloved Restaurant, One Central New Jersey Suburb, and One Child of Immigrants

POOJA MAKHIJANI

I

Tastee Sub Shop on Plainfield Avenue in Edison, New Jersey, is an unattractive Italian deli with blue clapboard siding, fluorescent lighting, and limited seating. Here, patrons order by number. The #7 is turkey breast, a choice of honey-roasted, oven-roasted, or smoked turkey. The #14 is all cheese (provolone, Swiss, and white American). The #5, the only sandwich that has a name (the "Super Sub"), combines pressed ham, boiled ham, capocollo, salami, prosciuttini, and a choice of provolone, Swiss, or white American cheese. The shop accepts credit cards, but diners receive 5 percent off their orders if they pay by cash. Tastee's unassuming appearance belies its iconic status in the region.

Tastee was founded in 1963 by George Thornton and Dave Caldwell and has changed hands only twice: in 1972, to David Thornton, George's son, and Carl Padovano and, in 2019, to Brian Thornton, David's son, and Steve Moraldi, who had worked in the shop since he was in high school. Although Tastee now has two other outlets in Central New Jersey, in Franklin Park and in Lawrenceville, the Edison location is the most well-known.

In July 2010, then-President Obama met with small-business owners, including David Thornton and Padovano, at Tastee's Edison shop and ordered a six-inch #5: "Super Sub with everything" (lettuce, tomatoes, onions, oil, vinegar, salt, and oregano) to go; at nearly forty-nine years old, Obama declared he could no longer eat the twelve-inch variety.

I had grown up in Edison and was visiting my parents that day. Our ranch house—which looked exactly like every other house on the street, down to the single tree in the same place in every yard—was my parents' first home in the United States. They had immigrated from India in the mid-1970s, lived in New York, and chose Edison to live their "American dream" because the township was affordable and offered easy access to New York City via New Jersey Transit.

Like many of our neighbors, my father and I walked to Tastee to catch a glimpse of President Obama. We saw road blockades, US Secret Service snipers, news vans, and both protesters—many waving the Gadsden flag, a favorite among Tea Party enthusiasts, an anti-Obama movement that gained prominence in government that November—and supporters, who were far more racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse by my observations. The president signed a paper bag upon his departure; the bag now sits under glass, in front of the shop's meat and cheese slicer.

II

The sub sandwich's origin story is murky and contested, but it's likely that what Americans know as "subs," or by any of their regional names, are a version of Italian sandwiches that came to New York through immigration at the turn of the twentieth century. Italian Americans have always been New Jersey's largest single ethnic group: upon their arrival in the late 1800s, they settled in urban centers like Jersey City and Newark and Paterson and Trenton and agricultural towns like Hammonton and Vineland.

Howard Robboy, professor emeritus at the College of New Jersey in Trenton, who wrote "The Socio-cultural Context of an Italian-American Dietary Item" as a sociology graduate student at Temple University, posits that southern Italian immigrants, nearly all of whom worked as laborers, from seamstresses to seasonal farm workers, folded Italian meats, cheeses, and seasonings into bread, creating a meal with familiar flavors that could be transported and eaten on the job. The sandwich grew in popularity with ethnic groups other than Italians, especially in the 1930s and '40s.

III

Outside New Jersey, Edison is best known for its most notable denizen—the scientist who invented the lightbulb here in 1876 in his Menlo Park lab—not for its sub shops. The township was, at that time, known as Raritan, but it eventually took the inventor's name. It was a quaint, rural town until the mid-twentieth century, when corporations such as Ford and Revlon, both within bike-riding distance of my childhood home, opened assembly plants. Workers flocked to jobs in Central New Jersey; they were mostly "ethnic" whites: Italians, Irish, Polish.

Edison's demographics dramatically changed from the 1970s to the 1990s. A wave of Asian immigrants arrived in New Jersey as a result of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended immigration-admissions policies based on race and ethnicity. Prior to this, restrictive immigration laws were designed to maintain a white majority in the United States and explicitly banned Asians. My father secured his visa to the United States after the passage of the 1965 law; my mother followed. A second surge followed after the passage of the Immigrant Control and Reform Act in 1986, which removed country quotas and educational and professional requirements for immigrants, allowing them to immigrate via lottery or family sponsorship. According to 2019 US Census Data, 48 percent of Edison's population is now Asian; only 36.8 percent is white.

IV

Some New Jerseyans consider I-195, which runs west to east from Trenton to Belmar, the unofficial dividing line between North and South Jersey. In North Jersey, an Italian sandwich is called a "sub" or "hero," if in closer proximity to New York City; in South Jersey, with its Philadelphian influence, the same torpedo-shaped sandwich is called a "hoagie." I've heard both "sub" and "hoagie" in Central Jersey, which, by my definition, lies on the I-95 corridor, bisecting the state northeast to southwest and connecting New York City and Philadelphia.

New Jerseyans quibble whether Central Jersey is a distinctive region of the state. In a December 2019 tweet, Governor Phil Murphy was compelled to write, "As Governor of the Great State of New Jersey, I hereby

declare that CENTRAL JERSEY DOES EXIST," and he defined which counties constituted the region. Dan Nosowitz, in a widely shared essay in *Atlas Obscura*, declared, "In reality, there isn't anything especially different about Central Jersey," and disregarded its existence entirely. When a friend texted Nosowitz's piece to me, I shot back, "He's white. Otherwise, he'd know that Central Jersey is where people of color feel at home and in community." In 2015, NJ Advance Media mapped New Jersey's demographics using 2010 US Census data; what emerged was a pointillist painting of the state's diversity. The I-95 corridor shimmers orange, purple, and green, signifying "Black," "Hispanic or Latino," and "Asian," in stark contrast to the map's wide swaths of blue, marking "White," in the northwest and southeast. That white New Jerseyans don't, or can't, recognize Central Jersey's distinctive culture and that they continue to argue about it on talk radio and on internet forums is not surprising. Racism often makes the most obvious invisible.

V

As the only child of color in my classroom and communities through much of elementary school, I faced all sorts of racist microaggressions—mispronunciations of my name; assumptions about my parents' English-language abilities, despite the fact that they were college-educated in a country that was colonized by the English for two hundred years; teachers foisting Christmas celebrations on me. I desperately wanted to be white; then, it meant eating bologna on Wonder Bread or hosting birthday parties at the roller-skating rink. I lived a bifurcated life. At home, I spoke in my mother tongue, watched Bollywood movies, and

found kinship with other South Asian American children from nearby towns, our chosen family. At school, I exaggerated my Jersey accent, learned cultural references that were, and still are, foreign to my family, and hid all traces of my cultural heritage.

The microaggressions never faded, but as the town became less white, the macroaggressions began. Businesses were egged, places of worship were spray-painted with swastikas and hate speech, and homes, including mine, were vandalized. Someone threw a jagged rock through our living-room window when the house was dark, sending shards of glass everywhere. That night, the police lieutenant said, "It was just some high school kids having fun."

I held these conflicting feelings—the desire to be white and a fear of whiteness—as many children of immigrants do: by ignoring them or holding them in, until they exploded, on the page for me, years later.

VI

Tastee became central to my aspirational whiteness but also to my family's eventual assimilation. The shop was open until 11 p.m. daily, and on many Sundays, my parents would pick up sandwiches for my brother and me to take to school the following morning, at my pleading. I think they saw it as convenience, nothing more, and they, too, were foodies—willing to try anything tasty. Subs were always ordered with oil and vinegar "on the side," to keep the crusty, soft bread from becoming soggy overnight, although the plastic containers of oil and vinegar often popped open in my backpack, leaving streaks of sweet-smelling condiments all over my textbooks.

The sandwiches were inextricably linked to one annual family tradition: a late summer day at the US Open tennis tournament in Flushing Meadows Park. Every year, for two decades of my childhood, to avoid the event's exorbitantly high food prices, we brought along our favorite Tastee subs accompanied by cans of Coca-Cola, stored in a cooler in the trunk of our car. At lunchtime, we would return to the car, parked in the shadow of the tracks of the 7 train; outside food wasn't allowed inside the venue. It was always Tastee subs we packed, never any other picnic foods. I always ate a #7: a honey-roasted turkey with everything and honey mustard, which was available on request.

VII

I left Edison in 1996. I moved to Baltimore, for college, then New York City, then Singapore, with my then-husband. Edison continued to change—and not.

Existing ethnic tensions played out in politics and civic life. In 2006, the town elected its first and only Asian American mayor, Jun Choi, the son of Korean immigrants who owned an Edison dry-cleaning business. During his campaign, the talk-radio host Craig Carton, who along with Ray Rossi were known as the "Jersey Guys," proclaimed that he did not "care if the Chinese population in Edison [had] quadrupled. . . . Chinese should never dictate the outcome of an election. Americans should." Also that year, Indian immigrants accused an Edison police officer of brutality during a Fourth of July incident. The officer was cleared, but the local Police Benevolent Association called for Choi's resignation. Ugly protests erupted. The *New York Times* referred to the furor as "not unfamiliar

in towns with a fading industrial base and a disaffected, largely white, blue-collar population" and quoted Bill Stephens, a former councilman who ran against Mr. Choi in last year's mayoral race, who said that long-term white residents feared being forced from their own town: "I think there's a little thought of 'they're taking over and I'm being pushed out of my community.'"

The demographic changes continue. A Walmart superstore and an Amazon fulfillment center, now the town's largest employers, opened in 2008 and 2018 on Route 27, which bisects the township from north to south. The highway also serves as the route of the township's Lunar New Year parade. It's lined by Asian small businesses—restaurants, tax preparers, dentists—all with Mandarin or Gujarati or Vietnamese signage. The diner around the corner from my childhood home is now a hot pot restaurant, although its midcentury facade is still intact. An immigrant Uzbek family now lives in my childhood home.

My parents moved northwest, into bucolic Somerset County, in 2012. In 2016, after my decade-long marriage ended, my daughter and I chose to move in with my parents, as I leaned on them to help me raise her.

VIII

I still frequent Edison, although ironically, all these years later, I feel more at ease at Tastee and in Burger King, which is across Plainfield Avenue, or Sam Ash Music, across Route 27 and where I frequently bought music paraphernalia, than I do in Edison at large. At the sub shop, my New Jersey accent resurfaces when I order. It's at the wholesale Asian grocer in a former warehouse district where I feel out of place, even though the produce

and spices on its shelves are intimately familiar to me. I'm thankful for the diversity. My elementary school has many children of color now, and I imagine a little Brown girl not feeling so isolated by her race and culture—but I also realize that I'm not wholly part of these immigrant spaces. I've assimilated too much, found myself too proximate to whiteness, if there is such a thing.

Recently, I picked up a six-inch #14 for my mother and a foot-long #9 (tuna salad) for my father and me. Even though I'm mostly vegetarian, I can't resist Tastee's tuna salad, made in-house every morning with only tuna fish and mayonnaise. All the restaurant's ingredients are sourced locally and delivered every day. High school students, mostly, prepare vats of lettuce, tomatoes, and onions daily, and meat and cheese is sliced to order. Tastee's menu hasn't changed in almost fifty years, although there are some off-menu items, such as a salad sub (no meat, no cheese), for those in the know.

IX

The United States is a suburban nation, with a majority of Americans living and working in this landscape. But the suburb is more than a physical location; it is also a social production: the suburbs have always been a site for the consolidation of white identity. They were designed to be all white *on purpose*.

The American suburb seems at a crossroads: across the country, 61 percent of immigrants now migrate to the suburbs, bypassing cities. More ethnic neighborhoods are now found in the suburbs than were inside city limits four decades ago. In Edison and elsewhere, the reshaping of the

suburban landscape—often in very visible ways—has resulted in real struggles, which complicate questions of race, history, and identity.

It has been half a decade since I returned to Central New Jersey, and it's hard not to see the region as a microcosm for the rest of the nation. As of 2020, less than half of children in the US are white; by 2045, most people in the US will be nonwhite. Just like the suburb, the United States is also a site for the consolidation of white identity; it was designed to be white *on purpose*. This is the story of a beloved deli and a Central New Jersey town, but it's not a singular story.