Sometimes culture drives changes in food, but sometimes changes come from technology. Such was the case with the bagel.

Circular breads with a hole in the middle can be found in many cultures dating back to ancient Egypt. Italy has taralli. Syria has ka’ak. The bagel originated in Poland more than 400 years ago and was made by Jewish bakers there before really taking off in the 20th century when some of those bakers arrived in New York City. While the bagel is still loosely associated with Jewish culture, it’s not a part of Jewish religious practice. (That’s in contrast to, say, challah—see page 427—which plays a distinct role in Jewish ritual.) Actually, the bagel is believed to be a close cousin of a 14th-century Lenten bread favored by Christian Poles.

According to Maria Balinska, author of The Bagel: The Surprising History of a Modest Bread, the first printed reference to the bagel was in 1610, in a set of “sumptuary laws” drawn up by the Jewish elders of Kraków, Poland. The laws laid down rules for family expenditures, including provisions for buying bagels, cakes, and challah to celebrate a baby boy’s circumcision. Medieval Poland was seen as a welcoming place for Jews, who suffered discrimination elsewhere. Their fortunes in Poland, however, would rise and fall. At various points in time, rulers prohibited Jews from making bread. One theory links these laws with the development of the bagel—Jewish bakers could get around the baking law by boiling the dough. Medieval Christian Poles snacked on obwarzanek, a circular, unenriched wheaten bread; the Jews had their bagels. It was a different name for a very similar bread.

In the late 1800s, Jews began leaving Poland in droves, many of them settling in New York City. They brought with them their chewy circle of bread. Initially working in sweatshop conditions, the bagel bakers became part of a Jewish bakers union around the turn of the 20th century, and in 1937, they established their own (and powerful) local union. For decades, every bagel made in New York City was a union bagel.

Then, in the 1950s, a high school teacher named Daniel Thompson began working on an idea that would change all that. The son of a bagel baker, he devised a machine that could work with tough bagel dough and crank out three or four times as many bagels a day as a union man. This machine killed the union and eventually transformed the bagel from an ethnic oddity into an American cultural staple.

In the early 1960s, a 40-year-old bagel-making company in Connecticut called Lender’s leased one of the machines. The increased output eventually allowed Lender’s to sell bagged and frozen bagels in supermarkets. The thing was, these new machine-made bagels were different from their handmade predecessors. They were softer and paler, without the traditional tang and notable chew of their forebears. They also started getting bigger, with some bagels topping out at 200 g. / 7 oz, double the size of the original. To many, such bagels were and are nothing short of tragic.

Today, you can find these soft, fluffy bagels anywhere around the globe, but some enclaves still hew to their local traditions. Montreal, for example, is known for handmade bagels that are boiled in sweetened water and baked in wood-fired ovens. And traditional bagels can still be found in Manhattan, Long Island, London, and elsewhere. Bagels have made a comeback in Poland, too—in the 1990s, cafés there began advertising “New York-style” breakfasts, complete with a bagel. The meal, writes Balinska, was “the embodiment of an envied American way of life.”

In this 1968 photo, Daniel Thompson (far right) is shown next to his revolutionary bagel machine that manufactured 4,800 bagels per hour.