

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Introductory music plays.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:13	Jesse Thorn	Host	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> I'm Jesse Thorn. It's <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:00:15	Music	Transition	"Huddle Formation" from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team.
00:00:22	Jesse	Host	If you have a computer or phone in front of you, do me a favor. Do a web search for the term "dairy restaurant". A dairy restaurant, for the record, is a kind of kosher restaurant that serves, well, dairy—for starters. Other stuff too, but no meat. Many observant Jews avoid mixing meat and milk to keep kosher, so a dairy restaurant serves a really useful purpose. But like I said, look up the term on the web. If you're looking for a history on those places—what kind of food they served—you won't find much. Instead, you'll see maybe a few listings for restaurants in your area, some travel guides, but no Wikipedia page, no dictionary definition. It's almost like they aren't really a thing. Or that they're lost to time.
			<i>[Music ends with a chorus of cheers.]</i>
			But they are a thing! Or were, at least. There used to be a bunch of them in New York City and in other places where first-generation Jewish immigrants came to the U.S. But cities change, people change, restaurants come, restaurants go. Ben Katchor, the cartoonist behind the wonderful, brilliant strip <i>Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer</i> remembers them. He misses them. And he talks about those places in his newest book, <i>The Dairy Restaurant</i> . It's an illustrated history of dairy restaurants: what they served, what role they played, and they mean to him. It's an expansive, lyrical, elegiac book with text and lots and lots and lots of graphics.
			And it hits on some of the themes that Katchor loves most: the ones that animated <i>Julius Knipl</i> and won Katchor a MacArthur Fellowship some time ago. The ways our lives are shaped by urban environments and the way that memories of places gone remain where those places are. All of the things that make cities magical. It's a beautiful book. I'm really thrilled to talk with Ben Katchor. He's truly a hero of mine.
			<i>[Music fades in.]</i>
00:02:20	Music	Transition	Let's get into our interview.
00:02:25	Jesse	Host	Upbeat transition music. Ben Katchor, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> ! I'm so happy to have you on the show. I'm such a fan of your work.
00:02:30	Ben Katchor	Guest	Wow, thanks for inviting me.
00:02:33	Jesse	Host	So, I wanna start with a pretty plain and simple question, which is: your book is a history of the dairy restaurant. It's also much more than that, but it's primarily concerned with the dairy restaurant and how it came to be. What is a dairy restaurant?
00:02:50	Ben	Guest	Well, the dairy restaurants that I knew as a young person growing up in New York were this kind of amalgam of the idea of a

restaurant crossed with Jewish dietary law. And so, they served a cuisine that was limited to nonmeat dishes but including fish. So, milk—all kinds of milk stuffs. Grains, vegetables. Fruits. Baked goods and all kinds of fish. Just not meat or chicken. And this is a particular—this was a particular Eastern European cuisine that they offered. And, you know, they were always there, and I assumed, as a child, you know, they had always existed. And then as I got older—I guess in my late 20s, early 30s, they all started disappearing. And now there're not too many of that particular kind left. But that's what they were. They were sort of the alternative place to go if you didn't want to eat delicatessen or meat—heavy meat.

00:04:10    Jesse            Host

We normally record our show at our office, which is across MacArthur Park from Langer's Delicatessen—maybe the best Jewish deli in Los Angeles. What's the difference between the food that they serve at a deli and the food there's—they serve at a dairy restaurant?

00:04:29    Ben                Guest

Well, a delicatessen is a meat-based cuisine. Pastrami or, you know, brisket. Corned beef. And, you know, very early on these were kind of—there's a kind of Jewish-style restaurant that came about in the sixties that served everything, all mixed together. They weren't observant Jews running those places. Not that the people who ran the dairy restaurants were. But they kind of stuck to this cuisine. You know, it would be like going into a—any ethnic restaurant and seeing things on the menu that just didn't belong. So—and I knew—there's also a bit of an overlap with the history of vegetarian restaurants. Because Jewish dietary law can be seen as a kind of modified vegetarianism. That's just because you're dealing with meat and slaughtering animals—there's much more elaborate kind of rituals you have to go through. If you eat a piece of lettuce it just should be clean. And it doesn't involve all of that. But yeah.

And so, the difference—in terms of atmosphere—is that, you know, that's a—it's an ancient idea that if meat-eating makes you more aggressive and more repetitive and more predatory and milk eaters were the more mild-mannered, ruminative kinds of people. And, you know, in Yiddish there are all these expressions. You know, “blaybn af der milkhiker bank,” and that means something—person who didn't really enter the world. They just stayed on the dairy bench or table. And, you know, and if you wanted to make a business deal with someone, that would be “makhn fleyshik.” You know, “Let's have a drink. Let's get down to meat-eating.”

*[Jesse chuckles.]*

So, these are ancient differentiations. You know, a delicatessen smelled of roasting meat and poultry and chicken fat. And a dairy smelled of frying butter and sweet fish. So.

00:07:07    Jesse            Host

These restaurants rose partly out of Jewish dietary law and, you know, relatively recent Jewish immigrants from Europe, who were looking for a place to eat that adhered to it. They also have a kind of a deep connection with end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ideas about food purity and health food. What was the relationship between those ideas and these restaurants?

00:07:41    Ben                Guest

Well, I didn't know anything about this worldwide history of dairy-based restaurants, when I started thinking about writing this history.

But it turns out that everywhere in the world that there were restaurants—or at least, these kind of semi-public eating places—there were restaurants oriented toward dairy and milk and milk products. And so, if you look back at history—in France there were the *crémérie*, that became a kind of restaurant. There were the *milchhallen* in Germany and Austria. There were these *mleczarnia* in Poland. These were places that—one of their specialties was fresh milk, and this is before—you know, electronic refrigeration and fast transport of milk. And so, these places claimed to have connection with dairy farmers. And so, they could provide a fresh glass of milk or cream and a few dairy-based dishes. Nothing, in terms of a menu, to do with the Jewish dairy restaurant, because they were not run by observant—they were not run by observant Jews or considering Jewish dietary law. They'd have ham sandwiches on the menu, also.

So, this... this interest in fresh milk and pure milk—I mean, it was a pure food movement in the... late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was a lot of food adulteration and some of these restaurants claimed to offer pure food or cleaner food or—but, I think the impulse that I sort of traced behind all of these places was something I just call the pastoral impulse: wanting to go back to this, kind of, pre-industrial world where you could get pure food. And, you know, in the book I trace it back to the garden of Eden and that impulse, at least in Western culture.

00:10:11    Jesse            Host

I mean, it makes a lot of sense. If you imagine the world of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as people were starting to live in cities, rather than on farms. On farms, people had direct access to their food, so they knew exactly what it was. In cities, there were intermediary steps. And, you know, like the rise of white bread, for example, is [*chuckling*] basically—as I understand it, I'm not a food historian—but is basically because people wanted to buy the whitest bread they could, because a lot of the bread was being made with sawdust mixed with the flour. And if your bread was white, it proved that there wasn't sawdust in it. You know what I mean?

[*Ben affirms.*]

And having a gleaming white restaurant that looks like a healthful dairy farm, that looks like a place where the milk is coming from the cows in a sanitary environment—which was so important, 'cause the milk—adulterated milk could make you very sick—was like a—you know, it was the same kind of impulse: that impulse to avoid [*laughs*—avoid the possibility of sawdust in your bread.

00:11:24    Ben                    Guest

Yeah. Milk is an interesting substance. It's a perfect medium to grow tuberculosis, bacilli, and other—you know—pathogens in. And, you know, you—it could be traced. Milk sickness and milk and these other diseases could be traced back to adulterated or diseased milk. But it was also part of a culture of the milk cure, where milk drinking—or, sort of, limiting your dietary intake to—just to milk, or this “first food”, you know, the first thing people eat as children—would have a curative effect. And, ideally, it should be milk from a certain place on the—in the Alps and Switzerland and that started the whole industry of these health resorts in—all over Europe. The milk cure. There were grape cures. There were all

00:12:47	Jesse	Host	kinds of cures where you try to fine-tune somebody's dietary intake so that you could cure them of whatever they were suffering from.
00:12:50	Ben	Guest	Are there still dairy restaurants in New York?
			Well, since it's a worldwide phenomenon, the definition is constantly changing. And now, in New York and other places where there are numbers of Jews, there are these things called kosher pizzerias, where they'll have basically an Italian menu—maybe they'll have a few remnants of eastern European food, like knishes or potato kugel. And then there's another kind of upscale dairy restaurant that you'll see in the orthodox neighborhoods, which offers world cuisine. I mean, sushi can be served in a dairy restaurant. So, you know, it can open up to other cuisines, not just the kind of food that I knew, in those—the dairy restaurants of the, you know, sixties, seventies, eighties.
00:13:53	Jesse	Host	You grew up with a dad who ran an apartment building which he eventually turned into a commune.
00:14:03	Ben	Guest	Well, he tried.

*[Jesse chuckles.]*

It wasn't, sort of, in his hands to do it. It was in the hands of the people he wanted to, sort of, give this to. And it was—that was not terribly successful. But he was one of the—these people involved in this—the Yiddish end of what's called communism. You know, with a small 'c', because the International Workers Order had a Yiddish language division. They published a newspaper, *The Freiheit*. They had all kinds of literary clubs and musical clubs. There was summer camps. It was kind of a whole, complete cultural world. And, you know, somewhere behind it all was this ideal of a classless society. You know? And maybe the end of private property.

But most of the people, at least according to some historians, who were in this IWO were not members of the American Communist Party. You know, they were small-business people. They were workers. They were all kinds of people. You know, when I hear stories about people joining the American Communist Party, it's not something I was familiar with, or my father, because it was more of an ideological... connection with this idea. It happened to be being played out in the Soviet Union, at that time. And so, there was a lot of interest in that experiment. When communists, and especially Jews—these Yiddish communists couldn't clearly differentiate in their minds between the bureaucracy of, you know, the Soviet Union and the economics of the Soviet Union. They were two different—you couldn't divide them in your mind, I guess, and say one is really something we should be aiming for, the other is becoming corrupt like any bureaucracy can become corrupt. We'll finish up my interview with Ben Katchor after a short break. When we return, Ben is a lifelong New Yorker who loves to walk around his great city. He'll tell us the first place he plans to go when his hometown opens up again. It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:16:34	Promo	Promo	<b>Music:</b> Relaxed, ambient music.
----------	-------	-------	---------------------------------------

**Guy Raz:** Hey! It's Guy Raz, from NPR's *How I Built This*. And each week on the show, during this unprecedented crisis, I'll be asking some of the top founders and builders how they're dealing with the

economic impact of the coronavirus and hear about some of the ways they're pivoting to fight it. Subscribe or listen now to *How I Built This*.

00:16:54    Promo            Promo

*[Music fades out.]*

*[Dramatic Star Wars-esque music playing in the background.]*

**Speaker 1:** *[In dramatic movie narrator voice]* You wept as we crafted the tragic tale of *Jar-Jar: A Star Wars Story*.

**Speaker 2:** Do you mean, like, he forgives Darth Vader—

**Speaker 3:** *[Laughs.]*

**Speaker 2:** “Meesa still love you, Ani!”

**Speakers 3 & 4:** *[Laughs boisterously.]*

**Speaker 1:** You gasped out loud at the shocking twists of *Face/Off 2: Faces Wild*.

**Speaker 5:** *[Dramatically]* He takes his kid's face.

**Speaker 6:** ... What? *[Laughs.]*

**Speaker 1:** Now, we're writing an entire screenplay week by week on *Story Break Season 2: Heaven Heist*.

*[Music climaxes, then ceases. Is replaced by mellow synth jazz.]*

**Freddie Wong:** Hey, folks. Freddie Wong here with some exciting news about *Story Break*, the writers' room podcast where three Hollywood professionals have one hour to spin cinematic gold! We're shaking up our format by turning *Heaven Heist*—one of our favorite ideas we've ever come up with on the show—into a full screenplay.

**Speaker:** *Heaven Heist* is an action-comedy about a crew of misfit gangsters robbing the Celestial Bank of Heaven. Think of *Coco* means *Point Break*.

**Freddie:** Join us as we write this crazy movie scene-by-scene and get an inside look at the screenwriting process on our podcast, *Story Break*, every Thursday on [MaximumFun.org](https://MaximumFun.org).

00:17:44    Jesse            Host

*[Music ceases.]*

You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Ben Katchor. He's a cartoonist and a MacArthur Fellow. He's got a great new book out called *The Dairy Restaurant*. It's a visual history of kosher dairy restaurants. Katchor also created one of my favorite comics of all time: *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer*. Here's a clip from the audio version of the strip, which aired on NPR in the 1990s. Ben provides the narration. Actor Jerry Stiller plays the titular character. In this clip, Knipl and his new friend, Samson Kohler, are spending the day delighting in their favorite pastime: riding New York City department store escalators.

00:18:22	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:18:23	Clip	Clip	<i>[The rumbling sound of escalators moving.]</i>
			<b>Knipl:</b> A wooden traipse-mill in the rear of the Lee Ackerman Hotel.
			<b>Samson:</b> Uuuh, they don't build 'em like this anymore! Smooth. Smooth as butter! <i>[Sighs happily.]</i>
			<b>Ben:</b> To walk ahead and feel the combined force of one's foot meeting the rising tread.
			<b>Knipl:</b> The highspeed Ophir in the lobby of 527 Mycia Avenue.
			<b>Samson:</b> Ooh! Hold on to your hats! We must be doing 15 miles an hour!
			<b>Ben:</b> Or to induce a moment of giddy stasis by walking up a down escalator.
			<i>[A long, mechanical squeak. Samson giggles.]</i>
			<b>Samson:</b> Ooh! <i>[Laughs in delight.]</i>
			<b>Ben:</b> While a few imagined that they might, someday, win the sponsorship of a famous manufacturer and continue riding on a professional basis.
00:19:14	Sound Effect	Transition	<b>Knipl:</b> I could do six months of the year in New York. Music swells and fades.
00:19:16	Jesse	Host	<i>Julius Knipl</i> is—which was your very long-running comic strip that was collected into a number of books—is concerned with this, kind of, underlayer of, like, the ephemeral world of cities and buildings. Businesses with weird names that may or may not have gone out of business 20 years ago, things like that. And I wonder what it's like to be in New York now, in 2020, out—maybe outside of the context of the current, not-going-outside-rules—but to be in New York in, let's say, 2019 and be in an environment where so much of the city—especially Manhattan—is so... shiny, compared to what it was like even just 20 years ago.
00:20:17	Ben	Host	Well, it's incredibly boring if you knew another version of the city. I mean, it's a bank—basically a bank, a drugstore chain, a chain coffeeshop. I mean, it's the mall-ing of the city. It's—you may as well be in a shopping mall, in a lot of Manhattan. You know, you have to sort of head pretty far uptown to get the semblance of a neighborhood that's not completely changed on us. So, yeah, it's incredibly boring. I mean, there are more interest—you know, the boroughs! Things still go on in the boroughs. So, I'll have to go out to Brooklyn. And I grew up in Brooklyn. So, I would go out there or parts of Queens. That would... yeah. This impulse that I'm talking about to, you know, endlessly move yourself up economically and socially is kind of—yeah, it's ruined large parts of the city.
00:21:32	Jesse	Host	I have a fashion website. And sometimes people will ask me why I like buying thrift store clothes so much. And it's something that I had never examined, for myself. Because I had just done it since,

you know—my mom used to work at a store in a fancy neighborhood where there were fancy thrift stores and that's where most of my clothes came from. So, it was just sort of my whole life. But I thought about it—'cause, you know, sometimes people will say, like, "Well, how can you wear—how can you wear—Whatever. Someone else's shoes, that's gross."

And it is gross. So, I grant them that. *[Laughs.]* However! There is something to—and it's something that I recognize in *Julius Knipl*—the idea that when something has had a life before it came into your life, whether it's a storefront that you're walking past or—you know—a pair of trousers that you buy at a thrift store, you maybe can infer some things about that life, but you also are telling yourself a story about it and there is a sense of—there's a sense of possibility and magic in creating that story. Or guessing at what it might be.

00:22:52 Ben Guest

Right. Yeah. I mean, the other thing you'd notice if you read this gigantic list of 200, you know, vanished dairy restaurants is that there was a moment when you could open up a very eccentric kind of restaurant and nobody would say, "Why are you doing it like that?"

*[Jesse chuckles.]*

You know, everyone was different. It was somebody's whim. "This is how I wanna set up my counter." They'd have a restaurant supply company build it to their specifications. And so, I mean, the idea of a chain coffeeshop, like Starbucks, I mean—it's just the death of invention. I mean, how could somebody with that much money not want to reinvent every store he opens? It's just the utter—it's this... so, yeah. That's the argument. The upper-middle class—well, and the very wealthy—become somehow, uh... very unambitious in their thought patterns. I mean, you could say it just makes them stupid! They don't wanna think about this. They think, "That's the solution. That's what every Starbucks should look like." And, you know. Nothing could be more boring.

I go—I'll walk miles to avoid going into one of those places. Or any chain store. That just came to mind, 'cause they're sort of all over New York. Yeah. The idea of individually invented businesses—I mean, they need to have a certain kind of rent. The whole, you know, economy has to collapse for that to happen. And, you know, maybe it will. I doubt it, in this moment, because... the wealthiest corporations were just given this gigantic bailout. And I don't—I think a lot of small businesses that's still around are just gonna—they won't be able to endure, in a couple of months, being closed. Not doing business. But anyway. But, you know, in the fifties, there were whole neighborhoods in Manhattan. The garment district and the—where you could run these strange restaurants. Run them the way you, you know, your idea of a restaurant. So... yeah. That's something that I miss.

00:25:39 Jesse Host

When we're going outside again, what are the places that you think you would most like to spend some time?

00:25:46 Ben Guest

Um, restaurants. I love restaurant culture. You know. It—to me, it's this perfect kind of social purpose to gather together in a place. It's not a party. Nobody's, you know, footing the bill. Everybody's

paying for their own meal. Nobody can be excluded from the party. You come and go as you like. You eat what you want. You know, the invention of the menu lets you choose what you wanna eat.

Yeah, so I'll be—I have a—I'm dreaming about restaurants! Invented restaurants.

[Jesse chuckles.]

00:26:31	Jesse	Host	It's really strange. I'm telling you; I really miss—yeah, that's something I miss. Well, Ben, I'm so grateful to you for taking this time. I love the book and I am really a huge fan of your work, for many, many, many years. And I really appreciate it.
----------	-------	------	--

[Ben thanks him.]

00:26:43	Ben	Guest	It's nice to get to talk to you. I was wondering who was buying all my books.
----------	-----	-------	--

[Jesse laughs.]

00:26:51	Jesse	Host	No, I always wonder who these people are. Ben Katchor. His new book, <i>The Dairy Restaurant</i> , is available for purchase now. It's absolutely beautiful: an expansive, meandering story that starts in the garden of Eden—literally in the garden of Eden—and proceeds from there. You can also find new and secondhand compilations of his other comic, <i>Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer</i> —which is one of the most beautiful things I have ever read. I've got them all, and I love them absolutely to death. They capture what is beautiful and amazing about living in a city: the sort of ghosts that we live with and the stories, imagined and otherwise. They're really wonderful.
----------	-------	------	---

00:27:33	Music	Transition	Jazzy transition music.
00:27:36	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is currently being produced out of the homes of myself and the other employees of Maximum Fun Incorporated in and around the Los Angeles area. Here at my house, the most exciting thing that happened this past week was a delivery of hams from Father's Country Hams. Always exciting, but particularly exciting when you're not leaving the house very much. Thanks to Father's Country Hams of Brennan, Kentucky! They didn't give them to me for free. I bought them. I just—you know, I got all of the cracklins and ham and bacon and... biscuits and, aw man, I gotta go eat.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio is our associate producer. We had help from Casey O'Brien and Jordan Kauwling at Maximum Fun. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, aka DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

And we have so many interviews in our back catalogs. I talked with Zach Galifianakis about his part in *The Hangover*. He had a very different perspective on how the movie changed his life. You can listen to that conversation at our website, [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org). If



you're a fan of comics, we've interviewed many, many comics creators. Many of the best, on *Bullseye*, over the years. From Art Spiegelman to Dan Klowes, Lisa Hanawalt, the great Lynda Barry. Adrian Tomine. All kinds of cool people. You can find all those also on our website, [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org), or in your favorite podcast app.

We're also on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. We're [@Bullseye](https://twitter.com/Bullseye) on Twitter, so go follow us there. You can search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* on Facebook. And all the interviews on this show are on our YouTube channel, so you can go grab them, share them there, subscribe there if that's how you prefer to enjoy radio interviews. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

00:29:44    Promo                      Promo

**Speaker:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*[Music fades out.]*