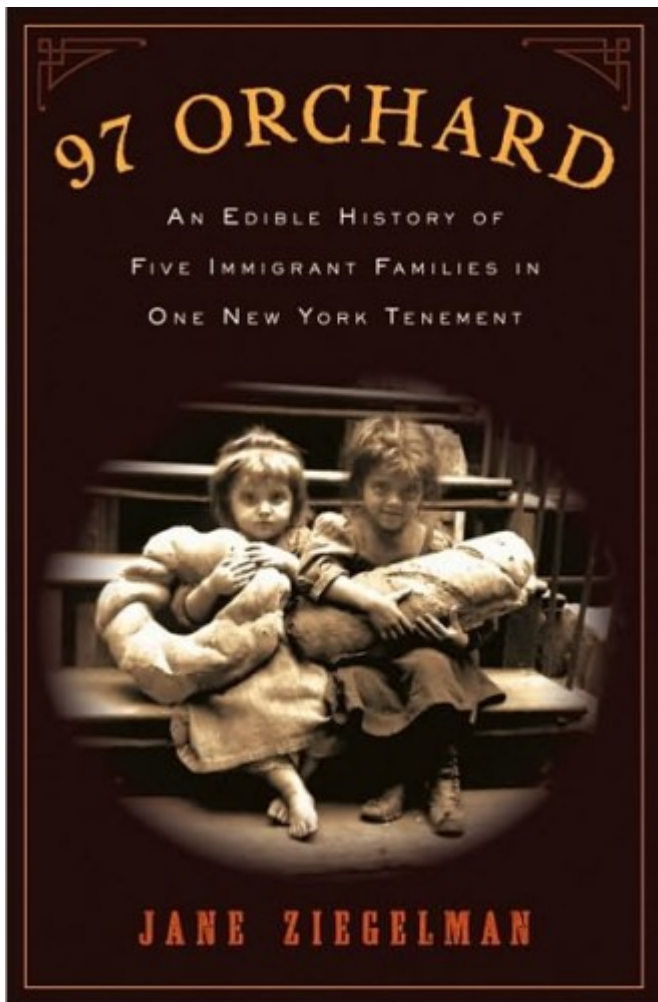


A review of 97 Orchard

reviewed by [Anne Blue Wills](#) in the [October 19, 2010](#) issue

In Review



97 Orchard

By Jane Ziegelman
Smithsonian

Jane Ziegelman writes in *97 Orchard* that gefilte fish, one of many immigrant food traditions she describes, came to New York City's tenements with German-speaking

Jews at the end of the 19th century. In its original form, the dish featured a chopped and seasoned fish mixture stuffed into the fish's skin before the fish was baked. The dish appeared, therefore, to be simply baked fish, but actually was something more complicated, more carefully constructed—it initially perhaps disappointed diners' expectations, but then delighted them.

Ziegelman's book resembles this early recipe. Its title promises an interesting collection: stories of five immigrant families and their foodways. Delving into its pages, however, the reader finds that these families function more as touchstones for Ziegelman than as fully explored biographical subjects. We learn very little about the families themselves, but what Ziegelman does serve up—a rangy survey of urban immigrants' foodways in the 19th and early 20th centuries—gives a pretty satisfying taste of their world.

The five families with which Ziegelman frames her story emblemize periods and provenances significant in U.S. immigration history. The Glockners, antebellum Germans, came to this country in the 1840s and, in the 1860s, built the impressive apartment building at 97 Orchard Street in Manhattan (it is now part of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum). The Moores were an Irish couple forced to migrate separately during the terrible potato blight of the 1840s; the Gumpertz family, German-speaking Jews who came in 1870; the Rogarshevsky family, Lithuanian Jews who entered at Ellis Island in 1901; and the Baldizzis, Italians who came to the U.S. in the 1920s.

Surprisingly, given her use of these immigrant types, Ziegelman weaves a narrative that corrects what novelist Chimamanda Adichie has called the "single story"—the inflexible, totalizing narrative of a place or a people. In Ziegelman's telling, 97 Orchard and places like it become sites of culinary tenacity and cultural creativity whose contributions to the American scene need to be remembered.

Students of U.S. Protestant history usually survey this terrain when reading about the urban mission movement. Tenement missionaries, inspired by the likes of revivalist Lyman Beecher or urban evangelist Phoebe Palmer, expressed anxieties about waves of immigrants living in squalor, deprived of sound religion, sound housing and hygiene, and most alarmingly, sound morals. For these urban Christian workers, the tenement lacked logic and integrity. Ziegelman brushes by these concerns in brief and humorous discussions—for instance, describing tenement visitors' indictments of pickles as ruinous to health. Worried reformers likened

children's love of the spicy treat to alcoholics' love of drink.

Ziegelman's book may offer yet another corrective, this one to the single story of the self-sufficient American. While she is not as clear as she could be when referring to native or ordinary Americans, Ziegelman shows how immigrants contributed to the U.S. diet not only as home cooks and cookbook writers but also as bakers, brewers, butchers and restaurateurs. Immigrants, Ziegelman writes, "have played a vital part in feeding America. Working in jobs traditionally rejected by the native-born, they have peddled fruit, vegetables, fish, and thousands of other edible goods."

Immigrants invented or popularized many food products that are common on today's grocery shelves—Fleischmann's yeast, German lager beer, Breakstone dairy products and Crisco shortening (beloved by Jewish homemakers for its versatility under kosher law). Life in many U.S. cities would be inconceivable without the neighborhood delicatessen, a food innovation devised by early waves of German-speaking immigrants and elevated to another level by eastern European Jews in the late 19th century.

As engaging as *97 Orchard* is, readers should be on the lookout for a few off flavors. The history here is breezy rather than rigorous; as noted, the families whose names title each chapter make only cameo appearances. The loose ties between these figures and the stories recounted in *97 Orchard*—and some of the images featured in its pages—produce a work with only loosely defined chronological and geographical boundaries. How does immigrant food culture become not just a thing of New York City and the urban Northeast, but a force that Americans elsewhere must reckon with? How can fictional portrayals of tenement life by authors such as Anzia Yezierska and Henry Harland (aka Sidney Luska) serve as evidence in a historical argument? And who are the native Americans contrasted to the residents of the Lower East Side? Are they rebellious sots or puritanical abstainers—Ziegelman characterizes them both ways—or a little bit of both? A stronger historical sensibility would free an otherwise entertaining book from unexamined assumptions and stereotypes.

Ziegelman consistently uses the word *assimilation* to describe the process through which immigrants move as they learn to speak, work, live and eat as Americans. But folks who study these processes favor terms other than *assimilation*, which suggests a nearly total renunciation of one culture for another. Ziegelman wants to demonstrate that immigrants brought certain food identities with them and adjusted them rather than surrendering them altogether. Her language should, therefore,

make evident the kind of mixing or cultural exchange that Donna R. Gabaccia, for instance, details in her book *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*. The stories in *97 Orchard* give the lie to the myth of the assimilationist melting pot. The tenement played host to ingredients that never dissolved but rather maintained their integrity in new combinations.

Ziegelman might also have explained more carefully how gender relates to food's production, preparation and distribution. Most of the home cooks one encounters in these tenements are women, and except for her discussion of Jewish women who exercised their power in preparing the Sabbath meal, Ziegelman seems to assume that all cooking women reflect the created order of things. Yet like foodways, these gendered arrangements have a history. The public food spaces for men, such as German lunch restaurants and Jewish taverns, had few analogous public food spaces for women. Why was that? How were these gendered food customs determined and maintained? If Judaism dictated separate duties for men and women—Torah study for the former, cooking for the latter—did Roman Catholicism among German-speaking or Irish or Italian immigrants demand similar separations on religious grounds? Did German-speaking Protestants in the U.S. use religion to rationalize women's kitchen labors?

In spite of these flaws, readers will find much to savor in *97 Orchard*. Complete with recipes, the book opens onto a place in U.S. history that has nourished many.