Before we turn to the criminal career of Harry Solomon Dolowich, let’s pause for something cold and sweet. I know the perfect spot. A cheerful Brooklyn luncheonette called Tom’s has been selling egg creams from its soda fountain since 1936. Let’s observe the counterman’s technique: He fills a glass about a third of the way up with milk and then whisks it under the soda spout and pulls back the lever. It takes only a few seconds for the bubbling blend of seltzer and milk to reach the rim. Next, he moves the glass under the pump a few inches to the right and precisely squirts one and a half shots of Fox’s U-Bet Chocolate Syrup into the mixture. He briskly mixes it with a long-handled spoon and then finishes it with a floating halo of whipped cream. Since the pleasures of the egg cream are fleeting (the bubbles quickly disappear), you’re supposed to consume the drink within three minutes of manufacture. On the first gulp the richness of chocolate fills your mouth. On the second the slightly sour/metallic taste of the seltzer comes to the fore. Then all that’s left is the watery lees, a rime of chocolate syrup at the bottom, and a vague sense of disappointment. In truth, the egg cream tastes a little…thin.

Brooklynites have made egg creams the object of a local cult, with its own strict rules and rituals. (The whipped cream atop Tom’s egg creams caused their entry’s disqualification from the 2002 Brooklyn Egg Cream Extravaganza for “unnecessary decoration.”) For the keepers of this cult, egg creams have become the symbol of a lost past, vaguely located in the “good old days” of post–World War II Brooklyn. One sip of chocolate, milk, and seltzer and the memories flood back unchecked: the old neighborhood, the sweet-stale smell of the corner candy store, the thwack of stickball bats on Spaldeens, the squeal of trolley wheels, the taunts of Dodgers fans at Ebbets Field. In fact, so powerful are those memories that they even infect the egg cream experience of those who didn’t live through that supposedly simpler and more innocent era. The sweet, happy buzz you feel after imbibing one isn’t just from the chocolate and sugar overload. An air of uncertainty nevertheless lingers around the egg cream’s milk-foam head. Take away the memories, strip the drink of everything but its basic ingredients, and questions arise with the seltzer bubbles. Why does it contain neither eggs nor cream? Why does it leave you strangely unsatisfied, neither refreshing like a lime rickey (a tart, fizzy drink made from limes, seltzer, and cherry syrup) nor satiating like an ice cream soda? Because the origins of the egg cream reach beyond the 1940s to an earlier and more desperate time. And we can detect that era’s poverty, struggle, and even cruelty in the very particular mix of milk, seltzer, and chocolate syrup.

Egg creams were born on Manhattan’s Lower East Side in the first decades of the twentieth century. The neighborhood was then the classic American slum, rife with poverty, disease, and crime, where Old World rabbis shared the sidewalks with hardened young gangsters like Meyer Lansky and Bugsy Siegel. Although its immigrant residents looked for the quickest way to move up and out, they also embraced what amusements they could afford: picture shows, music hall dancing, and soda fountain drinks.

A passion for cold, sweet, and fizzy soda-water concoctions then gripped the city. The drinks were dispensed from soda fountains that could be found everywhere from Times Square office buildings to country stores in the farthest reaches of the outer boroughs. In Manhattan’s plusher districts customers at brass and marble fountains favored cream sodas (syrup, cream, seltzer) and ice cream sodas (syrup, ice cream, seltzer). The variation came from the flavored syrups, ranging from chocolate to any fruit under the sun to celery, pistachio, sarsaparilla, and on and on. For lunch many shunned solid food for something liquid and rich. A Twenty-third Street soda fountain served “creamed eggs” blended from raw egg, ice cream, syrup, and milk and the similar egg chocolate using egg, cream, chocolate syrup, seltzer, and ice. Depending on how many eggs and what the neighborhood could bear, these drinks cost fifteen, twenty, or even twenty-five cents.

Whereas the rich and middle class enjoyed their drinks in elegant comfort, down on the Lower East Side immigrants lined up at sidewalk soda-water stands where vendors...
squirted carbonated water into grimy, much-shared glasses. For a penny or two, anybody could afford a plain glass of seltzer. But who didn’t want something more, like a real ice cream soda or the almost unimaginable luxury of an ice cream sundae? If a neighborhood soda fountain owner could whip up something similar, but costing a lot less, he could build a trade.

Debate has raged for years over who invented the egg cream: fountain owners Louis Auster or Hymie Weiss, a Parisian café proprietor, or some unknown soda jerk? Whoever it was, the actual innovation was nothing to write to the patent office about. They simply took the cream out of a cream soda and replaced it with milk. The real genius came in the marketing, in naming the drink an “egg cream.”

Somehow the lack of those two ingredients never bothered customers. Indeed, the name acknowledged their aspirations for something better, as if egg cream drinkers were saying, “We know it’s a phony, but we’ll take it until we can afford the real thing.” And it only cost a nickel! Over the next decades the taste for egg creams grew into a craze in Jewish neighborhoods from Lower Manhattan to Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Selling the drink brought a decent living not only to fountain owners but also to their suppliers, especially the manufacturers of seltzer water and soda fountain syrup. For some of them, however, that wasn’t enough.

Harry Solomon Dolowich grew up amid the poverty and striving of the Lower East Side. Born in 1899 to Russian Jewish immigrants, he made his first home in a tenement on a gritty block of Willett Street. His family found modest but honest success, his mother, Tillie, as a dressmaker and his father, Abraham, selling insurance. Eventually, they moved to an apartment on the bustling business artery of Delancey Street. Up the building’s air shaft rose sweet, chocolate- and fruit-scented fumes wafting from the first floor factory of I. Lefkowitz & Son, manufacturer of soda fountain syrups. Health authorities twice cited Isaac Lefkowitz for adulterating his syrups with saccharin and other dangerous chemicals. Nevertheless, he paid his fines and remained in business, with trucks, employees, and hundreds of customers. He was someone to look up to, a role model for the young and hungry.

The Dolowich family, living the immigrant dream, moved steadily upward. Their eldest son, Irving, graduated from college and became a successful lawyer. Young Harry was next, receiving a BD in civil engineering from NYU in 1919. His yearbook photo depicts a slim, callow youth dressed in a crisp suit and tie. Under the picture the editors call him “Andsome Arry” and laud his skills at bullshitting: “He talks a wonderful game of basketball and...also speaks baseball, pool, and chess fluently. We predict success for this remarkable youth for, given sufficient time, he will convince anybody of anything.” Despite their predictions, Harry clearly lacked direction in life. Engineering didn’t work out, so he eventually entered Brooklyn Law School and in 1926 received his law degree in the “forenoon” class. He left no mark on the legal profession, however, apparently never practicing. Then in 1929 Harry married Isaac Lefkowitz’s niece Charlotte and finally decided to get serious.

From Wall Street stocks to Brooklyn real estate, hungry young men could choose from scores of legitimate money-making opportunities in 1920s New York. For Harry Dolowich, however, the trick was not to work for it. Luckily for him, that wide-open era offered even more opportunities in the illicit occupations known as the racketeers. He could choose from old standbys like bootlegging, gambling, or peddling worthless securities, or he could try one of the newfangled industrial rackets. In 1930 investigators counted over fifty city industries that had been taken over by racketeers, including kosher chickens, artichokes, neckwear, fish, laundries, restaurants, funeral parlors, construction, movie theaters, tailors, bakeries, furriers, grapes, and miniature golf courses. The racketeers’ method was to take over an industry by threats and violence, then jack up prices and reap the spoils. Sure, they put a few people out of work just as the economy was plummeting downward, but those were the breaks.

Harry Dolowich’s plans crystallized when Larry Fay hit the headlines in mid-1929. A rich, dapper ex-bootlegger, Fay ran a fleet of taxis and greeted celebrities at his chic El Fey Club on West Forty-fourth Street. On the side he presided over the New York Milk Chain Association, which prosecutors charged was a racket that controlled the city’s milk sales. About one hundred independent milk dealers paid thousands apiece for membership in the Milk Chain; in return Fay guaranteed to keep the price of milk high. Those who couldn’t afford the dues, or attempted to sell for less, found that wholesalers wouldn’t supply them, health inspectors would harass them, and their customers would receive visits from the “dead wagons.” These were association trucks that undersold recalcitrant dealers, causing retailers to drop their regular suppliers. After a few weeks of dead wagons, the holdouts usually had to shut their doors. Larry Fay’s profit from his association was nine hundred dollars a day, enough to keep him in bespoke suits. For Harry Dolowich the news stories on Fay’s arrest served not as a warning sign but as a road map for his own future.

In late 1929 fast-talking Harry Dolowich began to organize a racket in the soda-syrup business, a trade somehow overlooked by all the gangsters and tough guys who...
had recently embraced racketeering. Through his Lefkowitz connection he had contacts with all the major syrup makers, many of whom were now located in Brooklyn neighborhoods like Williamsburg, Brownsville, and East New York. Inside their doors the air was a thick, sweet fug of boiling syrup, fruit, and chocolate. Harry laid out his proposition to the owners: Following Larry Fay’s example, he wanted to form a syrup association that would allow members to raise prices, divide up new customers, and beat back the competition. Those who refused to join his racket, well, they would pay for it. His gift for gab finally paid off, as one by one the big syrup manufacturers fell in line, including Isaac Lefkowitz, Weller Syrup’s Bernard Weller, and Herman Fox, the maker of Fox’s U-Bet Chocolate Syrup.

Why did they trust Harry Dolowich? Because he told them he was a lawyer and had worked out a scheme to make it all look up-and-up: He would disguise their racket behind the trappings of a legitimate syrup company. His fronts were actually three corporations, Kings County Syrup, Standard Syrup, and Syrup Service, respectively covering Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan. Harry rented offices in one of the Lower East Side’s fanciest buildings, hard by the EL at the corner of Grand Street and the Bowery. His three companies shared a delivery truck, a secretary/bookkeeper, and even a safe in which he kept the stock certificates bought by the shareholders. To drive the truck he hired two “salesmen” named Benny Troupp and Max Kaplan. The companies held regular meetings attended by the city’s largest syrup men. There they supposedly discussed the manufacturing, buying, and selling of syrups, just as it said on the papers of incorporation.

But when Joseph Bershader, owner of Williamsburg Syrup, came to his first meeting, he quickly discovered that not all members were treated equally. There were insiders and outsiders, and Bershader was definitely an outsider. That evening about fifteen syrup men sat around the office. When the discussion turned to the division of new customers, Bershader said that he hoped they would be shared evenly. On hearing this Harry yelled at him: “Mind your own business! If you don’t like it, get out of here!” Then Harry and a syrup maker named Yankowitz grabbed Bershader by the collar and threw him out the door. Bershader crept back into the office like a beaten dog despite the others’ mocking laughter. This humiliation he could bear. What he really feared was that, if he quit the association, the others would steal his customers and destroy his business.

Harry Dolowich gave all the mom-and-pop syrup operations a choice: either join or be ruined. After her husband died Rebecca Kaplan took over his little East New York–based Yankee Syrup company. She cooked the syrups and drove the truck on deliveries, earning just enough to support herself and her children. One day while she was still in mourning, Harry Dolowich arrived on her doorstep. He advised her to join Kings County Syrup, or else. Mrs. Kaplan told him she couldn’t afford the one-hundred-dollar initiation fee and the fifteen-dollar weekly dues.

“If you won’t join,” said Dolowich, “I feel sorry for you.” A day or two later a Health Department inspector visited and slapped her with a violation and a fine. Soon she lost 75 of her 125 customers, because Harry Dolowich’s dead wagon had followed her delivery route. Driven by Max Kaplan and Benny Troupp, the dead wagon visited each of Mrs. Kaplan’s customers and offered syrup for fifty cents a gallon, half of her wholesale price. (Bernard Weller had supplied the dead wagon’s syrup at below cost, knowing he would be able to take over some of the widow’s customers.) Her income cut by more than half, Mrs. Kaplan found herself nearly destitute, desperate from grief, and struggling to feed her children.

Leon Rakowsky of Victory Syrup also received a call from Max Kaplan and Benny Troupp, who handed him a slip of paper saying, “Keep out of 132 Clinton Street.” When Rakowsky persisted in selling to the Clinton Street soda fountain, somebody slashed his delivery truck’s tires. Kaplan and Troupp spread rumors among soda fountain owners that some small syrup makers were selling a poisoned product. Rakowsky lost customers to their poison scares, as did Joseph Bershader, who overheard one of them telling a storeowner: “You bought that man’s syrup? His wife cooks it in her wash basin.”

The pair told another fountain owner that a boy had died after drinking a soda made with Isidore Trachtenberg’s syrup. The cops had arrested the fountain owner, they said, and now were looking for Trachtenberg. Before this, Trachtenberg had actually joined the Kings County Syrup group, figuring they wouldn’t target one of their own members. But then he ran afoul of one of the ruling clique, who coveted the “Pure Fruit” brand name Trachtenberg was using. When Trachtenberg refused to surrender it, the Health Department hit him with fines, the dead wagon followed his route, and Kaplan and Troupp began with the poison rumors.

Harry Dolowich’s only real obstacles were the one or two big syrup men who refused to join his association. In late August of 1950, he called an accountant named Harry Merdinger and asked to meet him at the Williamsburg storefront of the syrup maker S. Snaider & Co. Merdinger assumed Harry wanted to talk about some kind of business deal with his client Samuel Snaider, who was out of town.
He was wrong. As Merdinger sat there dumbstruck, Harry unfolded his plan to take over the syrup industry in New York City. He wanted Harry Merdinger to help destroy Snaider’s business and then come to work for him—he needed a clever accountant to cook his books. Merdinger was told that he needn’t worry about the consequences, because Harry would shoulder the responsibility if there was any trouble. “If any one is going to take a rap,” he said, “I will take it.”

Merdinger refused, but Samuel Snaider finally caved in to the threats, paying a two-hundred-dollar initiation fee and six dollars per truck in weekly dues. The demands for money didn’t stop there. In addition to his one-hundred-dollar weekly salary, Harry assessed members sixty dollars apiece toward buying him a new Studebaker and another time asked for one hundred dollars apiece. When Snaider asked what it was for, Harry snapped, “None of your business!” Snaider quit in disgust, only to rejoin four months later after Harry threatened to ruin him. He saw what had happened to other syrup dealers who tried to fight. First, however, Harry fined him two hundred dollars for quitting and another one hundred dollars for the crime of soliciting a new customer. Harry then brought Snaider before a special meeting of the group’s board of directors and told him that more punishment was on its way. Within two weeks the dead wagons driven by Max Kaplan and Benny Troupp had caused Snaider to lose almost four hundred of his five hundred customers.

By the spring of 1931, Harry Dolowich had remade himself. No longer the rudderless, unformed youth, he was a big shot, someone who mattered. Through his association he controlled well over half the syrup sold in New York. A large map of the city hung in his office showing how he and his cronies divided the territory. Harry’s efforts gave him not only his salary and the Studebaker but whatever he could skim out of the Grand Street safe.
East Side were history; he and his wife now lived in a new elevator apartment building up in Washington Heights just steps from Riverside Drive. Best of all, his word was law, capable of inspiring respect and even fear. If anybody disobeyed him, he and his thugs would use threats, slashed tires, and the ability to ruin their businesses to bring them in line. His allies among the big syrup makers didn’t complain, because each had gained hundreds of new customers. And that was just a start.

For the city’s small syrup makers, however, Harry Dolowich’s success was nearly fatal. This was one of the darkest years of the Great Depression, so they faced the bread line if forced to shut down. They decided to fight back. In June of 1931, a group of Harry Dolowich’s victims asked for an interview at the offices of Manhattan district attorney Thomas C.T. Crain. Racketeering was big news during that era, and every politician right up to President Hoover promised swift and sure action to fight its evils. A distinguished-looking stalwart of the ruling Tammany Hall political machine, Crain was one of the loudest to beat this drum locally and had recently announced an all-out war on the rackets. An assistant district attorney took copious notes on the syrup makers’ complaint and passed it up to the desk of Crain himself. They appeared to have clear evidence of an association racket. A day or two later the file came back with the notation in Crain’s handwriting: “No cause for criminal action.”

New Yorkers knew that under Tammany’s corrupt reign most cops, prosecutors, and even judges were on the take, so maybe Crain was too. After all, Harry Dolowich himself had boasted about his political connections. (Months later a New York State investigation decided that Crain wasn’t crooked, just incompetent and probably scared.) Realizing they would find no help from city authorities, the victimized syrup makers brought their case to the office of New York state’s attorney general, long the scourge of urban corruption. Deputy Attorney General Joseph Flynn heard their story and immediately went before a judge, obtaining an order that empowered him to investigate the syrup racket. An assistant district attorney took copious notes on the syrup makers’ complaint and passed it up to the desk of Crain himself. They appeared to have clear evidence of an association racket. A day or two later the file came back with the notation in Crain’s handwriting: “No cause for criminal action.”

Flynn turned to his brother Irving’s law firm, For advice Harry Dolowich’s victims asked for an interview at the offices of Manhattan district attorney Thomas C.T. Crain. Racketeering was big news during that era, and every politician right up to President Hoover promised swift and sure action to fight its evils. A distinguished-looking stalwart of the ruling Tammany Hall political machine, Crain was one of the loudest to beat this drum locally and had recently announced an all-out war on the rackets. An assistant district attorney took copious notes on the syrup makers’ complaint and passed it up to the desk of Crain himself. They appeared to have clear evidence of an association racket. A day or two later the file came back with the notation in Crain’s handwriting: “No cause for criminal action.”

New Yorkers knew that under Tammany’s corrupt reign most cops, prosecutors, and even judges were on the take, so maybe Crain was too. After all, Harry Dolowich himself had boasted about his political connections. (Months later a New York State investigation decided that Crain wasn’t crooked, just incompetent and probably scared.) Realizing they would find no help from city authorities, the victimized syrup makers brought their case to the office of New York state’s attorney general, long the scourge of urban corruption. Deputy Attorney General Joseph Flynn heard their story and immediately went before a judge, obtaining an order that empowered him to investigate the syrup racket. An assistant district attorney took copious notes on the syrup makers’ complaint and passed it up to the desk of Crain himself. They appeared to have clear evidence of an association racket. A day or two later the file came back with the notation in Crain’s handwriting: “No cause for criminal action.”

For advice Harry turned to his brother Irving’s law firm, which had previously filed the papers incorporating the three companies. (The association was something of a family business: Harry’s sister-in-law Bella helped keep the books.) On August 3 Irving Dolowich convened a special meeting of the syrup association in his law offices at 148 Delancey Street, two doors down from their old building. In just three days Joseph Flynn would open public hearings into the syrup racket, with at least a dozen victims slated to testify. The meeting lasted late into the evening as the syrup makers worked out their strategy. To guard against any wavering who might consider ratting, Irving made all participants sign affidavits swearing that they had joined the companies voluntarily. He also advised them that with the attorney general on their tail, they had better think about dissolving the three corporations. However, that didn’t mean that they would have to stop the activities of their lucrative little racket.

Harry Dolowich and his cronies were cocky as the hearings started. They sat smirking in the audience as one by one Samuel Snaider, Harry Merdinger, Rebecca Kaplan, Isidore Trachtenberg, Leon Rakowsky, and a troop of others recounted tales of threats and ruin at the hands of Harry Dolowich, Max Kaplan, Benny Troupp, and their syrup-maker allies. After Joseph Bershader told of how they had laughed after giving him the bum’s rush from the meeting, he pointed to the men in the audience and shouted: “And they are laughing at me now!”

“Well, they won’t be laughing long,” Flynn assured him.

Three days into the hearings, Samuel Snaider returned to the witness stand to give the news that Herman Fox and Isaac Leffowitz had repainted their trucks with the names of fictitious companies. Although the association truck had been impounded, their dead wagons would still roll through the streets of New York.

By the end of the week, however, the association’s future looked a lot bleaker. Flynn had piled up evidence of both civil and criminal violations, including extortion, conspiracy, and running an illegal monopoly. He not only sent the hearing minutes to the city’s district attorneys to pursue the criminal cases but also filed suit to dissolve the three companies and stop its officers from continuing any illegal practices. Harry Dolowich’s syrup racket was effectively dead.

But this was still Tammany-run New York. Despite piles of evidence and the ample publicity the hearings received, prosecutors in Brooklyn and Manhattan refused to file charges. Even if the DAs weren’t corrupt, they still sensed something about this case that made it too hot to handle.

Harry and his pals remained free, until the transcripts reached the desk of Charles B. McLaughlin, the district attorney of the Bronx and an enemy of Tammany Hall. A story told by Bronx syrup maker Philip Hertz, who had testified almost unnoticed in the hearings, became the basis of McLaughlin’s criminal case against Harry Dolowich and Max Kaplan. The pair had visited Hertz at his Bronx syrup
factory and told him he had better join their association or be put out of business. Hertz asked for a little time to think it over. Two days later he looked out the rearview mirror of his truck and saw Max Kaplan following him in the Studebaker. Hertz yanked the wheel of his truck toward the curb, cutting the car off. Here’s what he later told the court about his confrontation with Kaplan:

“What’s the reason you are following me?” yelled Hertz, in his Yiddish-inflected English.

“Don’t get excited,” said Max. “We only want you to join the association.”

“Give me a little chance yet,” Hertz responded, “and maybe I will.”

A few weeks later Hertz wrote a check and went down to Grand Street for his first meeting of the association.

Harry and Max’s lawyers staged a lengthy defense at the trial in February of 1932. The prosecution had first called Harry Merdinger and Samuel Snaider to testify about the operation of the syrup racket and then presented Philip Hertz as the star witness. For the defense eight of the principals in the syrup association took the stand, including Max Kaplan. Unfortunately, their testimony, mainly impugning Philip Hertz, was evasive, contradictory, and riddled with sudden memory losses. They failed to show that the syrup companies had any legitimate business, and most importantly, Max Kaplan failed to refute Hertz’s testimony that he had followed Hertz’s truck on its delivery route. The three judges hearing the case found Max and Harry guilty and sentenced them to a three-month to three-year term at the city’s Welfare Island penitentiary.

Harry Dolowich did not enjoy prison. A few months earlier a gangster named Joey Rao had been sent to Welfare Island for running a Bronx seltzer-water racket. A murderer and narcotics dealer with a Mafia death warrant on his head, Rao preferred prison to the perils of the streets. He suborned the warden with bribes and threats and turned the penitentiary into his personal playground. Tended by valets and using the warden’s office as his own, Rao lived like a king; to pass the time he ran gambling games and sold heroin that had been flown in by his flock of pigeons. He and his gang dined on steaks and chops, while ordinary prisoners, like Harry Dolowich, ate watery stew. To receive any sort of better treatment, they had to pay hefty bribes to Rao and his boys. Rao even sold the clothes the prisoners had worn into prison, so Harry reentered the world wearing Rao and his boys. Rao even sold the clothes the prisoners

the drink came with eggs and cream, and never was heard from again. Back in New York, meanwhile, the sons and daughters of the Lower East Side moved to new neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx, carrying with them the egg cream habit. On streets with actual trees and playgrounds and good schools, the drink was transformed into something full of innocence and hope—the kind of treat a guy bought a girl on their first date. They drank them at soda fountains, which from the 1930s through the late 1950s enjoyed their last golden age. Freed from the baleful influence of Harry Dolowich, even the syrup manufacturers prospered and multiplied.

Limits remained, however, on the egg cream’s acceptance. Its sales were largely confined to white lower-middle-class neighborhoods in the boroughs, the kind dotted with candy stores, lunch counters, and soda fountains. In Manhattan the big cafeteria chains and fancy ice cream parlors kept nickel egg creams off their menus; they could make more money selling the more expensive ice cream sodas and sundaes. In order to gulp an egg cream, you had to belly up to down-market fountains in the Garment district or head down to raffish areas like Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side. And outside the New York City area the drink was unknown. No recipes for the drink exist in either the soda fountain formularies or Soda Fountain magazine or its successors. Even a 1944 Soda Fountain article on Krum’s soda parlor in the Bronx, a center of egg cream consumption, makes no mention of the drink. A tinge of shame still seemed to follow this drink born in poverty.

After World War II a series of social and economic changes knocked the underpinnings from the New York City soda fountain business. Suburbia opened up, drawing the sons and daughters of Jewish, Italian, Irish, and German immigrants. In Brooklyn and the Bronx they were replaced by new arrivals who hadn’t learned the soda fountain habit. At the same time supermarkets sprang up, selling bottled soft drinks that consumers could enjoy at home; New Yorkers didn’t have to go down to the corner candy store anymore to enjoy a cold soda. Business dropped off, and soda fountains and candy stores began closing down at a rapid rate. The downturn rippled through all the related industries, from seltzer delivery to syrup manufacture. Dozens of suppliers shut their doors for good. By the 1960s the egg cream was disappearing fast, available at only a few dozen places scattered across the five boroughs.

Over the following decade, during which New York suffered one of its worst fiscal crises, young people began moving into some of the city’s poorer neighborhoods looking for cheap places to live. These included neighborhoods...
like the East Village and the Lower East Side, which in places resembled bombed-out districts, pockmarked with abandoned buildings and piles of junk nobody wanted. In this rubble the new arrivals found, among other things, scrapped soda fountains and piles of old seltzer bottles. They also discovered a few vestiges of the district’s long-gone Jewish population: little restaurants selling knishes and cheese blintzes and a newspaper stand called the Gem Spa offering something sweet and cold called the chocolate egg cream. This drink was cheap and different and “authentic”; it became a cult favorite of the artists, writers, and musicians who hung out in the East Village. Just when it was on its last legs, the egg cream had been reborn.

The egg cream revival was spurred by the resurgence of one of its principal ingredients: seltzer water. The counterculture grandchildren of the original immigrants bought up all those old seltzer bottles, located soda companies that could fill them, and began delivering seltzer to a new generation of consumers. Media savvy, they promoted seltzer water’s many uses to local newspapers and television shows. The vast majority of the public were seltzer water novices, so reporters also gave instructions on how to use the fizzy water, including, for the first time, recipes for egg creams.

This campaign touched a chord in people of the older generation, those who had come of age during the egg cream’s glory days. A whole stream of egg cream memories spilled into print, as people like Mimi Sheraton, Mel Brooks, and Avery Corman looked back on their childhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx. (Interestingly, they remembered only Fox’s U-Bet being squirted into their glasses, even though dozens of local companies sold chocolate syrup.) These stories inevitably led to arguments about the drink’s invention and the proper way to mix an egg cream. The disputants agreed only that the days of their youth, replete with egg creams, were truly the “good old days,” an idyllic period of safety and happiness. This spate of memories has overwhelmed all other meanings of the egg cream, including its origins in the crime and desperation of the slums.

For these purists, if the drink contains anything but milk, seltzer, and U-Bet chocolate syrup, it is not an egg cream. Nevertheless, the drink has resisted their efforts to lock it into a kind of culinary time capsule. While the Gem Spa still sells traditional egg creams, Ray’s Candy Shop two blocks away offers the drink in sixteen flavors, including cherry, tamarind, papaya, and licorice. For the last decade a native Brooklynite named Jeff Glotzer has been selling bottled, premixed egg creams nationwide (blasphemy to anyone who believes the drink’s joys are strictly evanescent). A West Village soda fountain called the Bespeckled Trout sells classic egg creams but also the drink mixed with a homemade syrup blended from high-end Venezuelan and Belgian chocolates—for the first time you can enjoy the oxymoronic luxury egg cream. And Artie’s, a nostalgia-heavy Upper West Side delicatessen, sells its own invention, a “frozen egg cream.” Made with syrup, seltzer, and ice cream, it is, in fact, exactly the same as an ice cream soda.

Nearly a century after the egg cream’s birth, the owners of Artie’s have unconsciously returned the drink to its origins in the soda fountains of New York.

SOURCES
Moyrnan, Vin. “6,000 Fountain Services A Day.” Soda Fountain Service, April 1944.