

Mrs Elswood pickles an exceedingly good cucumber

When you think of pickled cucumbers (and who doesn't), your mind unerringly goes to Mrs Elswood. Ever present at simchas, seders, kiddushim, WIZO lunches, and even shivas, her products are enjoyed by all shades of Judaism. They are easily the best on the shelf.

So what is the story behind the happy smiling face that gleams out at us from the supermarket shelf?

To begin, pickling has been a part of Jewish cuisine, whether Ashkenazi or Sephardi since forever. In particular in Europe, families pickled vegetables as a method of preserving them, and, having acquired a 'reverence for brine', immigrants then bought their pickled cucumbers from barrels in delis, grocers, and street traders. I well remember the barrels in my local deli, where cucumbers floated in some unnameable liquor to be fished out on demand by the proprietor.

A family business called Marela Pickles began took advantage of this addiction. With a factory in the Isle of Dogs. It manufactured pickles of many varieties producing pickles of many varieties, initially selling to the local Jewish community with a horse and cart with the whole family regularly marshalled into sticking labels on to the jars of pickles, but later expanding its business to sell at Tescos and Lyons Corner House, and moving to Brick Lane.

As happens to many family businesses, it was sold off, and after going through a few owners, by 1986 the brand had disappeared, the factory became a shell , and was later demolished to make way for housing.



Saunder's Ness Road, circa 1970, with Marela's Pickles on the left.

Mrs Elswood pickles an exceedingly good cucumber



There were three employees of Marela, Sam Goldman

Ex-employees, Sam Goldman, Joe Rubin , and Dennis Mendel saw an opportunity and started a new company which Donna Nathan, Joe's daughter told me they called Elswood because Joe and Dennis came from Elstree, and Sam from St Johns Wood (and not Boreham Wood, by the way).

Joe had the bright idea of creating a person for customers to identify with. They had a photoshoot, a very pretty girl came along from an agency and Mrs Elswood was born.

As well as manufacturing products they imported goods such as Elite Chocolate and Telma products; indeed, Elswood was never just a pickled cucumber brand. There were herrings, horseradish and other lines. It is also a myth that the cucumbers are prepared in East London - the products were and are manufactured by specialists in the countries with the expertise – cucumbers in Holland and herrings in Sweden.

Incidentally, the woman on today's jars is not the girl in the photoshoot. Matthew Moyes of Empire Foods told me that it is believed that the model passed away, obviously quite young, and her family asked for a change of face. It was upsetting to see her every time they went to the supermarket. The company made the change "in line with the values of the brand".

Mrs Elswood has gone from strength to strength. Not confined to the boundaries of Golders Green, she is found from Waitrose to Ocado, from Sainsbury's to Asda, and not just on the Kosher shelves. She is even seen in South Asian greengrocers in Surbiton.

Mazel tov!

Tony Zendle. "The Definitive Guide to Jewish Miscellany and Trivia" Amazon.

<https://isleofdogsdiary.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.londonersathome.org/jewish.html>