

IN FLUSHING, WHERE

THE TAPESTRY OF ASIA



UNFOLDS ON

THE STREET

HOW IT EARNED
THE TITLE OF
THE MELTING POT'S
MELTING POT

The word of the day, everyday, in the neighborhood of Flushing, is energy. Hop off the 7 train, nicknamed the “International Express”, at its very last stop at the intersection of Main Street and Roosevelt Avenue in downtown Flushing, and you’ll see why this corner of Queens is the third busiest intersection in New York City, after Times Square and Herald Square. In all directions, the roads are lined with a cornucopia of Chinese markets, restaurants, bakeries, dessert cafes, and boba shops—many of which offer no English translations—which share sidewalk real estate with the fruit and vegetable street vendors, calling out to pedestrians to buy their wares. To the east around Northern Boulevard, you’ll find Queens’ own Koreatown, where you can partake in authentic cow head soup, blood sausage, or live octopus. South of downtown Flushing, you’ll find Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Afghan enclaves living side by side, creating staple small businesses to serve the unique needs of their local communities. One of the most religiously diverse communities in the United States, there are no fewer than ten different religious services happening within any given week; Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Christians of all denominations flock to their places of worship near Bowne Street. A melting pot within a melting pot within a melting pot, this is Flushing, Queens.

Before becoming a vibrant residential, shopping, and foodie mecca, Flushing was “Vlissingen,” established by the Dutch West India Company in its New Netherland colony. In 1645, English Quakers, persecuted in both England and New England, were allowed to settle and freely practice their religion in the fledgling town. These early English settlers anglicized the name into “Vlissing,” and finally, “Flushing.” The town would gain world renown a decade later when New Netherland’s director-general Peter Stuyvesant banned the practice of any religion outside of the official Dutch Reformed Church. Dutch settlers sympathetic to the Quakers’ plight penned the Flushing Remonstrance in protest, rebuking Stuyvesant’s oppressive policies. The Quakers successfully petitioned for freedom of religion to be re-established in the colony in 1663, one year before English troops took New Amsterdam. Flushing became a beacon of religious freedom—the Flushing Remonstrance a precursor to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution—and so began Flushing’s history as a haven for migrants in search of new beginnings.

In the early to mid-20th century, Flushing was primarily inhabited by middle-class Jewish, Italian, German, and Irish communities, attracted to the growing suburban neighborhoods which were recently developed following the 1939 and 1964 New York World’s Fairs, and conveniently accessible to Manhattan via the IRT Flushing Line. Flushing was over 97% white and highly segregated from other racial communities by choice; residents organized neighborhood action to prevent Chinese families from moving in. In the 1970s, white flight towards more attractive schools and business districts in Long Island caused Flushing to become deserted. Storefronts and apartments stood vacant. Housing and property prices plummeted. Locals who stayed behind began to worry that the once vibrant neighborhood would irreparably fall into crime and decay.

The emptying neighborhood, however, promised economic opportunity for others. Well-educated Taiwanese immigrants, who did not identify with the Cantonese culture of Manhattan’s Chinatown and had substantial financial resources, moved to establish their own enclave in Flushing in the 1970s. Flushing came to be known as “Little Taipei” as highly-skilled immigrants and entrepreneurs changed the economic landscape, with new retail developments and office construction dramatically increasing property values and decreasing vacancy rates. Within the same decade, a diverse group of immigrants from mainland

China, South Korea, and India followed in such large numbers that Asians constituted 41% of Flushing’s population by 1990. While the neighborhood does have its share of old pizzerias and newer Latin American bakeries, its modern landscape is very much reflective of the demographics of its 70,219 residents in 2020: 71.6% Asian, 14.6% Hispanic, 7.7% White, 3.8% Black, 2.3% other.

By the turn of the millennium, Flushing had once again transformed into a bustling commercial center. Flushing’s Chinatown is now the largest and fastest growing Chinatown in the world. Mom-and-pop businesses and familiar Chinese chains line the major thoroughfares of Flushing, which now also sport mega-malls reminiscent of those in Asia and offer culinary variety at both higher and lower price points. Gone are the days of a monolithic American Chinese menu found in any state; the residents of Flushing relish the opportunity to specialize in the foods of their native regions. Ordinarily found thousands of miles from one another, here regional specialties like delicate Jiangnan-style softshell turtle soup, hearty Xinjiang 大盘鸡 [dà pán jī] chicken-potato-pepper trays, and Yunnanese 过桥米线 [guò qiáo mǐ xiàn, crossing-the-bridge rice noodles] served with personal accompaniments rich in pickles and herbs, are found in restaurants and food court stalls within walking distance of each other. A veritable microcosm of Greater China, Flushing proudly claims Chinese residents from several different regions, speaking many different dialects, and coming from different walks of life.

Whereas Chinese immigrants had mostly settled around downtown Flushing, the Korean community established itself farther east. Eager to start their own businesses and become financially stable, early Korean residents in Flushing, many of whom immigrated as students or medical professionals, created makeshift 계 [kye, agreement or bond] credit unions where members would regularly contribute to a communal pot of money and take turns withdrawing the entire sum. The kye served as a social glue for newly-immigrated Koreans; gatherings to discuss financial matters were also socialization opportunities. Nail salons, laundromats, grocery stores, banks, and music schools are among the many kinds of businesses that flourished as a result of these covenants in Flushing Koreatown’s 한인상가 [haninsanga], or Korean business district, centered along Union Street between 35th and 41st Avenues. Here, Hangul signs dot the landscape, extending eastward along Northern Boulevard towards the Murray Hill station, where Koreatown’s 먹자골목 [meokjagolmok], or Restaurant Street, is situated. Korean BBQ restaurants, cafes, bakeries, and the requisite 노래방 [noraebang, karaoke rooms] are the major fixtures on Restaurant Street, where one would be forgiven for thinking that they’d been dropped off in a suburb outside of Seoul.

Farther south is a major community of South and Central Asian immigrants hailing from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was enacted, a large South Asian population began to grow in Flushing. Halfway between Franklin Avenue and Kissena Park, Indian residents erected one of North America’s greatest Hindu landmarks in 1977: the Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam temple dedicated to the elephant-headed Hindu deity Ganesha. The temple hosts festivities and classes for locals, both Hindu and non-Hindu alike. But the most obvious source of its role as an all-faith gathering place lies in its basement. The scent of cardamom, turmeric, cumin, and pepper wafts onto Holly Avenue from Temple Canteen, the temple’s immensely popular kitchen where नैवेद्यम् [naivedyam] food offerings are prepared for religious rituals and where anyone can grab affordable vegetarian south Indian fare. Many of the canteen’s regulars actually pray at the nearby Muslim Center of New

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York, which serves a diasporic community in English—a lingua franca for congregants who natively speak Urdu, Arabic, Bengali, Dari, or other languages. This includes the Afghan community in Flushing—the largest in New York City—many of whom fled the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s only to be misunderstood and surveilled decades later. Ever since the Sept 11, 2001 attacks on the very city that they call home, the Muslim Center of New York hosts “open mosque” days designed not just to support Muslim Americans struggling with their identity in the face of national suspicion and exclusion, but also to educate and bring together people of all faiths.

Flushing has proven time and time again to be a sanctuary for those seeking new life in the United States. Dating back to the pattern first laid by its founding Quakers and Dutchmen, Flushing is an international haven with a rich tapestry of diverse beliefs, practices, and flavors. Once “Vlissingen,” Flushing now goes by several other monikers including “國語埠法拉盛 [guó yǔ bù fǎ lā shèng, Mandarin Town Flushing],” “롱 아일랜드 코리아타운 [rong aillaendeu koriataun, Long Island Koreatown],” and “Little Asia.” Walk down its streets, past its snack stalls, fabric stores, language schools, hair salons, churches, shrines, and mosques. What you will hear is English interspersed with Korean, several dialects of Chinese, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, and hundreds of other fibers that make up Flushing's complex ethnolinguistic fabric. Stop by and discover this energetic intersection of New York City; its story is still being woven.

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