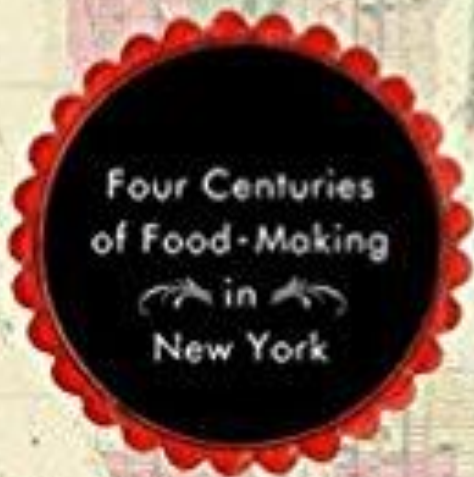




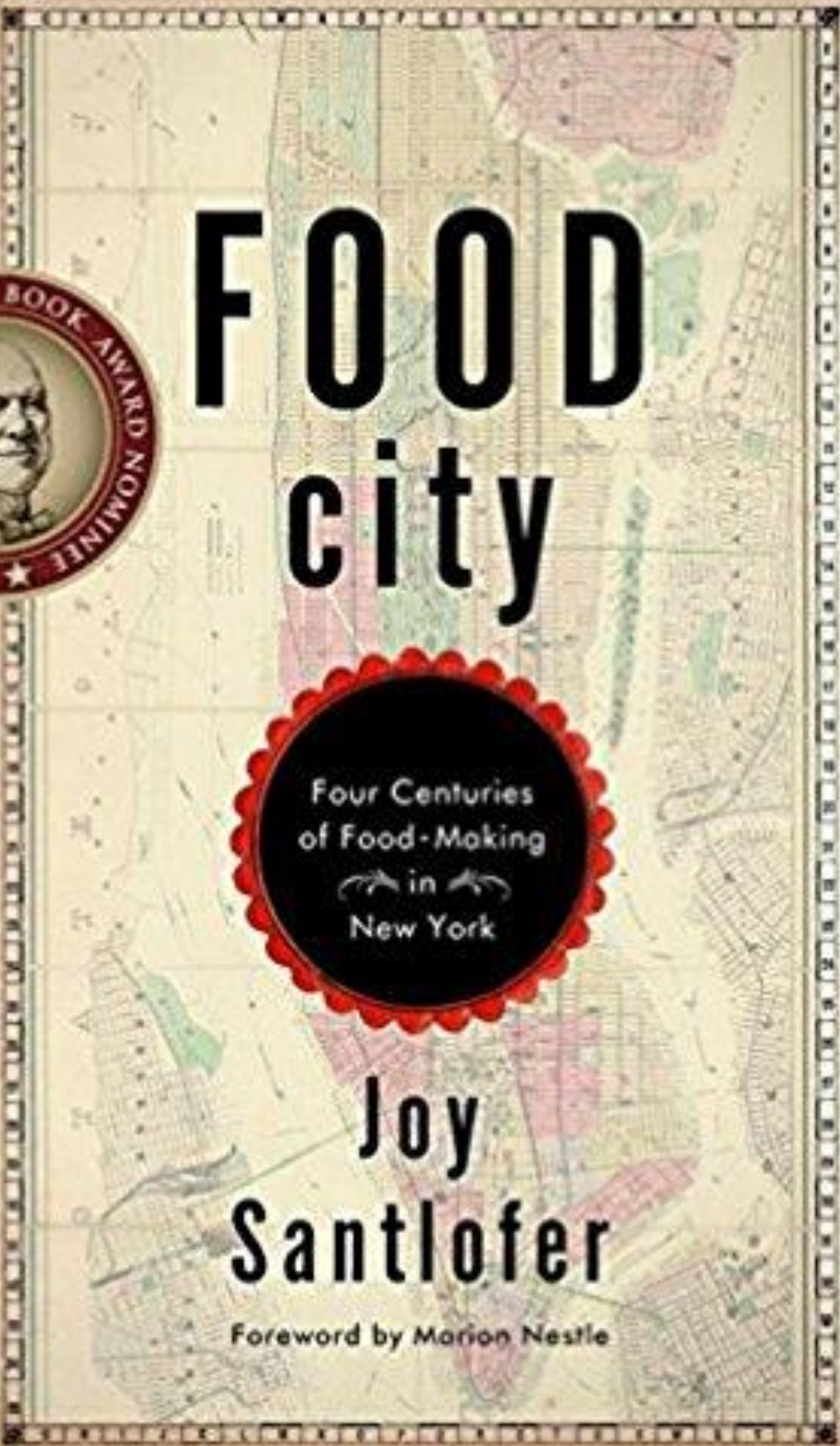
FOOD city



Four Centuries
of Food-Making
in
New York

Joy
Santlofer

Foreword by Marion Nestle



JEWISH MOONSHINE

In the early years of the twentieth century, plebian New Yorkers were making money from making booze. While beer drinking continued to grow at the expense of hard liquor, there was still a market for the cheap, illegal version. Moonshiners are often pictured as rifle-toting, bearded mountain men, but distilling illegal beverages was more widespread and profitable in the canyons of New York than in the hills of West Virginia. Most city raids were completed without gunshots or bloodshed, and the pragmatic city distiller, who knew he would soon be back in business, paid his fine or did his (short) time. Even though New York had a large contingent of revenue officers, they were the first to concede that "there was little hope of suppressing the illicit distilling in New York" as long as it turned a dollar.

In poorer neighborhoods, stills were often found in tenements, usually near a saloon where the product (and evidence) could quickly be quaffed. One ingenious Lower East Side setup impressed even the jaded revenue agents who had long searched for it. A trapdoor behind the bar in a saloon led to a ladder into an underground passageway. Deep beneath the streets was a block-long labyrinth of rooms full of stored liquor casks, and 100 feet down the path was the still . . . under a synagogue. The congregants of First United Podhaycer, which had opened in 1903 at 126 Rivington Street, worshipped right over this underground still. On the building's ground floor was Sam Schapiro's legal winery.

Schapiro had arrived from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the late 1800s and by 1899 began producing kosher wine as a sideline for his restaurant on Attorney Street, where diners were served a free glass of mead, or honey wine. On the days before the Jewish holidays, people lined up to buy the wine, which his ads described as "so thick you can cut it with a knife." Concord grapes from upstate were crushed in the shop and fermented under the supervision of a rabbi. Belowground, either Schapiro or someone with his blessing was making well-crafted whiskey. The moonshiner was probably a Russian Jewish immigrant, since Jews had operated about 89 percent of Russia's distilleries in the 1870s, drink being one of the few areas where they could legally work. In the 1920s Schapiro's family reminisced that he sold "the good stuff" out of his back room.