

pastrami land, the jewish deli in new york city

harry g. levine

My father used to loudly and proudly describe himself as a “gastronomical Jew.” Some people used that term as an insult, but not Sid Levine. As a kid, I heard him say it so often I thought gastronomical was a standard type of Judaism.

Sid grew up in Jewish Harlem, the youngest child of impoverished, secular, socialist, Yiddish-speaking immigrants. A thoroughly ethnic Jew, Sid worshiped only at delicatessens. His most sacred objects were pickled herring, belly lox, sable, white fish, matzo ball soup, borscht, dill pickles, potato pancakes, stuffed cabbage, chopped liver, salami, frankfurters (particularly the fat ones called “specials”), tongue, corned beef, and, of course, hot pastrami. Depending upon the meal, he accompanied these with onion and poppy seed bagels, bialys, rye bread, dark pumpernickel, and sharp mustard.

Sid was an accountant with a tiny office on Broadway and 55th Street. Within walking distance of his filing cabinets, he found several of his holiest temples. He also worshiped at the

learned to appreciate the absurd and sometimes brilliant performance of the wise-cracking, bossy, know-it-all waiters—as much a part of my personal deli experience as the Formica tables, the walls lined with pictures of celebrities I’d never heard of, the glass cases filled with enormous cheesecakes, and the multimeat sandwiches named after comedians.

Contexts’ editors didn’t know any of this when they asked me to write a piece on New York Jewish delis in time for the American Sociological Association meetings. They just wanted somebody to do it. More than 5,000 sociologists would be coming to the city, many of whom had occasionally enjoyed the blessings and spiritual uplift found in Sidney Levine’s form of gastronomical Judaism. The conference hotel sits one block from the Carnegie Deli and the Stage, and close to several other sit-down eateries selling this same sort of food in similarly styled and decorated restaurants.

Where did these restaurants and this culinary tradition come from? Nobody thinks that poor Jews in Eastern Europe ate like this, certainly not in restaurants serving huge sandwiches. In their current forms, some of these foods, including the sacred pastrami, didn’t exist in the old countries. This is a story of America and New York City.

Between 1880 and 1920, more than two million Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe came to New York. Although it is little understood today, the New York they came to was a heavily German city, part of a huge archipelago of German culture in the United States. Like several other American cities, in 1890 New York had more immigrants born in Germany than in any other country, by far.

The great wave of German immigration beginning in the 1840s thoroughly transformed American society and culture. German immigrants and their offspring contributed kindergartens, symphony orchestras, bilingual schools, successful businesses, book publishers, many newspapers, and loads of often progressive politicians and intellectuals. Germans also made, sold, popularized, and Americanized many foods, including a variety of sausages (or “wieners”), beef frankfurters, sauerkraut, hamburgers, meat loaf, liverwurst, many cold cuts, noodle dishes, dill pickles, herring in cream sauce, lager beer, seltzer water, pretzels (including the big, doughy New York-style pretzels), potato salad, muenster cheese, rolls (like the Kaiser), pastries, rye bread, and pumpernickel. Germans also established the American institution that sold most of these items: the “delicatessen.”

Delicatessen (or *Delikatessen*) is a German word that combines “delicious” or “delicacies” and eating. It means either “delicacies to eat,” or “to eat delicious things.” In Yiddish, a mostly Germanic language, it means the same thing. Yiddish Jews right off the boat knew what the word meant.

German delicatessens were small, humble, grocery stores



photo by James Jasper

Second Avenue Deli, the Pastrami King on Queens Boulevard, and Katz’s on Houston Street.

My mother Margaret, Irish and Scotch-Irish from Hibbing, Minnesota, and definitely not Jewish, loved going to the two great theater-district delis of the time, the Stage and Lindy’s, especially after a play. It was from her that my sister and I

that sold canned foods, pickled meats, smoked fish, and foods prepared on the premises. Some German Jews, scattered among the millions of German immigrants, kept kosher, and some of them created kosher German food businesses. When the Yiddish Jews first began appearing in large numbers in the 1880s, German Jews were already running kosher delicatessens. Yiddish Jews soon opened their own.

At first, the early Jewish (and usually kosher) delicatessens differed little from the German ones, except for the absence of dairy and pork. Instead, the Jewish places had beef, lots of beef. The great pastures and prairies of America made beef plentiful and relatively inexpensive. Beef was more available in America than in any place Jews had ever lived.

The rules of kosher permit only certain cuts of meat. "Brisket," a kosher beef cut from the breast, is a long strip marbled with fat. The poor immigrant Jews, whether kosher or not, regarded brisket as a great luxury and therefore a holiday food. Flavorful (because of the fat), but tough and stringy, brisket requires long, slow cooking. The famous Jewish pot roast is always made from brisket, as are Jewish corned beef and pastrami. In America, the Jews became the people of the brisket.

Corned beef is brisket preserved by soaking in brine (and nowadays often injecting it with brine). Americans of all kinds had made corned beef long before the Yiddish Jews showed up. But in the 1870s or 1880s, immigrant Jews in New York really did create pastrami—by flavoring and smoking corned beef. The basic recipe came from parts of Southeastern Europe (Romania, Bessarabia, Moldavia) that had been ruled by the Turks. In the old countries, many people had used the technique to preserve and flavor sheep meat and pork, their most common livestock. In America, immigrant Jews applied the method wholesale to beef brisket.

The writer Patricia Volk says her grandfather always claimed he obtained the original pastrami recipe in trade from an itinerant Rumanian. "Here's what Reb Sussman learned," she says: "To make pastrami, you take a corned beef one step further. You hot-smoke it at 320 degrees for six or seven hours. But what separates a good pastrami from an unforgettable pastrami is what's added to the rub: ginger, red-pepper flakes, cinnamon, paprika, bay leaves, cloves, peppercorns, allspice, red-wine vinegar, onion, more garlic, coriander. The meat gets massaged with this secret seasoning before it's smoked." Other recipes mention mustard seed, juniper berries, cardamom, and mace.

A smoking technique for brisket that applies these spices in unknown combinations allows for secret recipes, mysterious methods, and arcane lore—which the history of pastrami has in abundance. Yiddish Jews in America probably coined the word pastrami, inspired by the word salami, adapting it from closely related Romanian, Russian, Turkish,

and Armenian words (*pastram*, *pastromá*, *pastirma*, and *bas-turma*).

In the first half of the 20th century, Jewish delis sprouted and spread. Almost always modest shops, delis were often narrow storefronts with a counter along one side and perhaps a few small tables. They became part of the taken-for-granted backdrop of Jewish neighborhood life in New York and other cities with many Jews. In January 1945, the *New York Times* reported that more than a thousand kosher and "kosher-style" delicatessens, organized into a trade organization, were complaining about a meat shortage, no doubt of brisket. From the 1950s on, these little delis were overwhelmed by competition from larger markets and supermarkets, and by the rise of competing foods, particularly pizza—including kosher pizza. Very few of these small Jewish delis still survive in New York.

And yet, today, there is Zabar's, at Broadway and 81st—a take-out deli utopia and fantasyland, the truly existing but still beyond-belief incarnation of all those small, immigrant German and Jewish take-out shops. And scattered around the city and suburbs, sometimes in supermarkets, one can also find serious deli counters stocked with Jewish treats. In addition, the uniquely New York Jewish phenomenon of appetizing stores, never numerous, and less changed today than many other businesses, have continued to serve mainly smoked fish and bagels to happy customers for nearly a century.

Jewish delis in New York are famous because of the growth of delis that were real restaurants, and the emergence of some of them as celebrated and beloved—as the great temples of American Jewish gastronomy. Several generations have fiercely argued about them even as they spoke the names with awe: Katz's, Ratner's, Reuben's, Lindy's, the Enduro, Junior's, Eisenberg's, Lou G. Seigel's, Barney Greengrass, the Pastrami King, Kaplan's, Ben's, the Stage, the Second Avenue, the Carnegie, Pastrami N' Things, Wolf's, Sarge's, and (most recently) Artie's. Other cities have their own: Attman's of Baltimore, the Famous 4th Street Deli of Philadelphia, Corky & Lenny's in Cleveland, Izzy Kadetz in Cincinnati, Boesky's in Detroit, Zingerman's of Ann Arbor. Southern California supported a bunch: Langer's, Canter's, Factor's Famous, Art's. Contrary to what some believe, the Jewish deli restaurant is not a dying breed. Some are gone, but others prosper, and new ones popped up in the 1980s and 1990s.

For owners and staff, delis were always demanding workplaces. They spent long hours in the store and, when things went well, many years together. A number of proprietors have been fabulous characters famed for their one-liners. Delis are still frequently family businesses. Right now, both the Carnegie and the Stage are run by men who married the

boss's daughter.

Some of the most distinctive characteristics of Jewish delis are functional—they are good for business. The ever-growing, large, then huge, and now monstrous pastrami and corned beef sandwiches attracted fame and customers. The wisecracking, bossy, insulting, and often accented staff certified that these places were “really Jewish,” meaning Yiddish-culture Jewish. In accommodating to a polite, gentile society, Yiddish Jews may have suffered an “ordeal of civility” (as one scholar put it), but not in Jewish delicatessens.

It was above all at Lindy's (which made New York cheesecake famous), Reuben's, and the Stage—all of them ten or twelve blocks north of Times Square—where, from the 1920s through the 1950s, deli food established itself as New York show business food. Jews and non-Jews in theater, radio, and then television—especially the “borscht belt” comedians and their friends—loved the theater-district places and were delighted when delis hung their pictures and named sandwiches after them. Deli owners understood that customers followed the celebrities.

Pastrami gradually became the most sacred, argued about, and beloved substance, but its total gourmetization began on March 2, 1979. Mimi Sheraton, the intrepid food writer for the *New York Times*, and a “real” New York Jew, wrote a 3,000-word article after sampling just about all the pastrami in New York City. She collected 104 pastrami and corned beef sandwiches in one day to evaluate the meat and the architecture of the sandwiches. The winner? A long-standing but not-yet famous place, two years into new ownership, called the Carnegie Delicatessen. Many tastings and reviews have followed. Nowadays, and probably for ever more, Jewish delis are, above all, pastrami palaces. An owner of the Stage told me that he sells twice as much pastrami as corned beef. Everything else is far behind.

What places do I like? Nearly all of them, but especially Katz's because it's so archaic, so huge, so busy, and because some of the old German influences remain visible. I like it that frankfurters and salami are still a big deal at Katz's. My standard fare has become matzo ball soup or borscht, potato pancakes, and (for research purposes for this article) half a humongous sandwich. I like pastrami almost everywhere, but recently it has seemed to me quite wonderful at Artie's on Broadway and 83rd, which opened in 1999. Serving mostly locals, it's a genuine Jewish deli, as the *New York Times* put it, “with weeks of tradition.” I think I saw the spirits of Sid and Margaret there, eating off each other's plates.

Harry G. Levine, a professor at Queens College, CUNY, is currently studying why during the last ten years New York City has arrested and jailed more people for possessing small amounts of marijuana than any other city in the world.

10 great new york jewish delis

listed from uptown to downtown in manhattan

Barney Greengrass 541 Amsterdam Ave. (87th). 212-724-4707. The historic, eat-in, take-out, appetizing store for smoked fish and omelets.

Artie's Delicatessen 2290 Broadway (83rd). 212-579-5959. <http://arties.com>. A young deli with an old soul, it does most things well and some brilliantly.

Zabar's 2245 Broadway (81st). 212-787-2000. <http://www.zabars.com>. Way beyond take-out deli paradise.

Carnegie Delicatessen 854 7th Ave. (55th). 212-757-2245. <http://www.carnegiedeli.com>. Impossible not to love, with ridiculously large sandwiches.

Stage Delicatessen 834 7th Ave. (54th). 212-245-7850. <http://www.stagedeli.com>. Stretching the borscht belt since 1937.

Ben's Kosher Delicatessen 209 W 38th St. (7th Ave.). 212-398-2367. <http://www.bensdeli.net>. Real kosher in a grand, old, deli emporium.

Sarge's Delicatessen Restaurant 548 3rd Ave. (36th). 212-679-0442. <http://www.sargesdeli.com>. Very good deli food, almost no tourists, open 24/7.

Eisenberg's Sandwich Shop 174 5th Ave. (22nd). 212-675-5096. <http://www.eisenbergsnyc.com>. A sliver of a diner that still looks like it did in 1929. Regulars adore it.

Katz's Delicatessen 205 E. Houston St. (1st Ave). 212-254-2246. <http://www.katzdeli.com>. The great mother of all sit-down delis. Ancient and fabulous.

Russ and Daughters 179 E. Houston St (1st Ave). 212-475-4880. <http://www.russanddaughters.com>. Since 1914, four generations have devoted themselves to serving perfect smoked fish. It's recognized by the Smithsonian.