

2/15/12

Deli Delights

[home](#)[contact](#)[bio](#)[credits](#)[recent clips](#)[archives](#)[faves](#)

gail harrington

writer/editor

[Home > Archives](#)

Morning Calm (Korean Airlines), July 2004

Deli Delights

For a slice of New York Life, prepare . our stomach and head to the nearest delicatessen.

By Gail Harrington

Just as a sushi bar in Tokyo or a dim sum restaurant in Hong Kong provides a slide of local life, the traditional New York delicatessen provides a taste of a culture that you can't experience anywhere else in the world. Pastrami, corned beef or brisket sandwiches piled high, bagels filled with lox, chopped liver, matzo ball soup, chicken in the pot, cheese blintzes—these and many other deli specialties are New York traditions that date back to the late 19th century, when Eastern European immigration was booming and Manhattan's Lower East Side was a microcosm with dozens of ethnic groups.



Photo by Dan Heilman

A Russian immigrant family opened Katz's Delicatessen in 1888, bringing familiar foods redolent with memories of the homeland to the New World's new immigrants. By the early 20th century, waves of newcomers could choose from dozens of delis specializing in many Old World and Jewish delicacies.

When New York's first delicatessens emerged in the pre-refrigeration era, meat was preserved by slow pickling and smoking, and these methods are still used by authentic delis today. Corned beef is actually beef brisket that is soaked for weeks in brine with sugar and spices, although the commercially prepared variety is pressure injected and cured in 36 hours. Smoking and steaming corned beef with sweat and peppery spices results in a more flavorsome meat called pastrami, although it comes from a fattier cut of meat next to the brisket.

If you want to do things the right—meaning the New York—way, pastrami and corned beef should be served on rye bread with spicy mustard on the side. Don't even think of asking for mayonnaise if you want genuine deli fare. Bustling and noisy, new York delis have eccentricities, and table service can be abrupt, even grumpy. But deli aficionados hold that a crotchety, impatient server barking out orders is just part of the charm, though that would be unacceptable anywhere else. New Yorkers will argue about where to find the tastiest pastrami or corned beef, the finest cheesecake, and even the best pickles and mustard, but taste your way through these favorite Manhattan delis and decide for yourself.

When Meg Ryan faked an orgasm in *When Harry Met Sally*, she and Billy Crystal were dining at Katz's Delicatessen on East Houston at Ludlow Street—perhaps the beef brisket, a house specialty, was a factor. The no-frills décor hasn't changed for decades: walls are plastered with vintage signs and photos of famous guests, including movie stars, athletes, and four U.S. presidents. Enter this legendary Jewish deli through a turnstile and you'll be given a ticket that is coded when you order your food. But don't lose the ticket after you pay because they won't let you leave the restaurant without it.

Only tables along one wall get service, but it's more fun to join the regulars lined up at the cafeteria-style counter, beneath the hanging Katz salamis. Watch the counterman hand slice steaming hot meat, and if you're lucky you may even get a sample of pastrami, corned beef or brisket before you order. A one-pound sandwich will set you

back \$11.75, while a garlicky grilled kosher beef hot dog with mustard, sauerkraut, onions, and ketchup costs only \$2.50, accompanied by the customary free bowl of pickles. Finish it off with a slice of New York cheesecake for \$3.75, and you'll be raring to go for your shopping spree on Ludlow and Orchard streets.

Opened in the early 1930s, the original Stage Deli on Broadway and 48th Street was a 40-seat restaurant where actors and comedians ate between theater rehearsals and performances. But when its Russian immigrant owner Max Asnas lost his lease in 1943, he moved the Stage Deli to a new location on Seventh Avenue, where loyal customers such as Milton Berle came for house-cured corned beef, salamis, and hand-pickled smoked fish. Joe DiMaggio brought his dates for blintzes, and Mohammed Ali would order an open-faced chicken sandwich with sliced tomatoes and Muenster cheese, and argue with Max about who was the greatest.

These days the 134-seat deli with full bar attracts more tourists and theater-goers than stars, but do check out the Hall of Fame Polaroid shots of celebrity diners such as Jerry Seinfeld and Sarah Jessica Parker. The 12-ounce pastrami and corned beef sandwiches are \$11.95, but 16-ounce triple-decker sandwiches created by stars such as Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts range from \$15.95 to \$18.95—a tradition that dates back to 1937, when the owner would invite his famous clientele to the carving board to create their favorite combinations.

One block north of Stage Deli, you can't miss the 1937 landmark Carnegie Deli, with its flashy red and yellow exterior, and windows filled with cheesecakes and salamis. Inside, the walls are plastered with celebrity photos, but you're much more likely to see tour groups than superstars. Take plenty of cash to Carnegie, which has the steepest deli prices and doesn't accept credit or debit cards. New Yorkers may scoff at the price of oversized combos such as the Carnegie Haul, a triple-decker sandwich of pastrami, tongue, and salami, and the Brisketball sandwich with white turkey meat and brisket of beef, which both cost \$19.95. But remember that even the \$11.95 one-meat sandwiches are large enough to share. Call before you go—an institution it may be, but Carnegie Deli has been closed three times this year for health violations.

Not far from Katz's in the East Village, the Second Avenue Deli has just celebrated its 50th anniversary minus the restaurant's beloved founder Abe Lebewohl, who died in 1996. His brother and daughter took over the deli to continue the tradition, serving boiled beef in the pot, chicken matzo ball soup, Hungarian beef goulash, and the dishes Abe served for decades. The 135-seat deli was redesigned in 1967 by world-renowned designer Adam Tihany, mixing a contemporary décor of dark wood and etched-glass partitions with traditional Jewish home cooking.

For \$16.95 you can have an Instant Heart Attack, your choice of corned beef, pastrami, turkey, or salami between two potato pancakes. Try the 8-ounce pastrami or corned beef sandwich on a rye or white bread for \$10.75, or pay \$12.50 for a half sandwich and bowl of soup—Abe's hearty mushroom and barley soup flavored with dried Italian porcini is a favorite with regulars. This kosher-style deli serves no dairy, but still offers deli classics like cheesecake and cheese blintzes. How does it pull this off? Instead of cheese, these favorites are made with tofu.

In the heart of the garment district, the marquee entrance of Ben's Kosher Delicatessen proclaims, "We cure our own corned beef and our chicken soup cures the rest." The offspring of a Long Island deli chain, Ben's Manhattan opened in 1996 after the \$2 million transformation of a space occupied since 1926 by Lou G. Siegle, the neighborhood's former kosher king. Known for delectable corned beef and tongue cured on the premises, and coleslaw and French fries made from scratch, the jumbo-sized Ben's offers a quirky take on deli dining, with an Art Deco décor that includes colorful ceiling murals backlit to resemble stained glass, towering metal-detailed columns, harp-shaped booths, an old copper ceiling over the deli counter, a 242-seat dining room, and a full bar with television.

Choose from menu favorites such as Ronnie's Tastemaster, a combination of meats piled high on rye with Russian dressing and coleslaw for \$12.95, the \$5.95 cabbage stuffed with meat and rice, a broiled Romanian tenderloin steak priced at \$16.95, and the seven-layer chocolate cake for \$3.25 per slice.

Established in 1999, Artie's Delicatessen on Broadway may be the newcomer to the New York pastrami pack, but this Upper West Side deli with black-and-white 1930s retro décor has the real thing—hundreds of heirloom recipes, house-cured corned beef, and tasty Romanian-style pastrami made from a secret recipe bought from Bernstein's on Essex, a much-loved Lower East Side deli that is no longer around.

It's as if Artie's has been serving well-steamed pastrami, brisket, potato knishes, bagels and lox, and chopped liver for decades. The \$11.95 corned beef and pastrami Reuben combo, stuffed cabbage, chicken matzo ball soup, and 8-ounce pastrami sandwich for \$18.95 are among the star favorites of the restaurant's late nameake

Deli Delights

sandwich for \$10.99 are among blue-star favorites of the restaurant's late namesake Artie Cutler, whose partners in seven other West Side eateries built Artie's as a tribute to the legendary restaurateur who always wanted his own deli. Save room for dessert: Artie's does excellent New York cheesecake and sliced birthday cake...no birthday required. A recent expansion onto the sidewalk gave Artie's 60 more seats and large windows that open for fresh air. Artie would be proud. .

FILLING . TATIONS

No visitor to New York should forget to stop off for a deli experience—try any one of these Big Apple favorites:

Katz's Delicatessen, 204 East Houston at Ludlow Street; 212-254-2246
Stage Deli, 834 Seventh Avenue at 54th Street; 212-245-7850
Carnegie Deli, 854 Seventh Avenue at 55th Street; 212-757-2245
Second Avenue Deli, 156 Second Avenue at 10th Street; 212-677-0606
Ben's Kosher Delicatessen, 209 West 38th Street; 212-398-2367
Artie's Delicatessen, 2290 Broadway at 83rd Street; 212-579-595