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Second Avenue Deli Moves Pastrami, Corned Beef Uptown: Update 1

Dec. 18 (Bloomberg) -- Jack Lebewohl poked the gefilte fish, which he thought was pretty good. Actually, it was great, was the consensus at the table near the back of the Second Avenue Deli, which opened yesterday morning 22 blocks north and one block west of its previous location in New York's East Village.

Not that Lebewohl, 59, disagreed. He was just acknowledging the fact that some days are better than others, even when it comes to great gefilte fish.

``My mother used to say, ``Some days are good, some days are not so good,`` he said with a shrug in Yiddish, which made it sound learned and funny at the same time.

For the customers jammed into the restaurant, which is half the size of the original, it was unquestionably a very good day in a story that begins with a tragedy. On March 4, 1996, Abraham Lebewohl, known to an appreciative world as Abe, was murdered during an after-hours robbery at the institution he had founded in 1954 after fleeing Nazi Europe. (The case remains open; a sign outside the new location, with a photograph of Abe Lebewohl, offers a \$100,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of his killer.)

The Second Avenue Deli was home not only of the ``nickel schtikel,`` beef sausage links sold from the counter, but also Abe's pride, the world's first parve cheesecake (meaning it had no dairy and thus could be consumed in a kosher deli that serves meat dishes). Not to mention inarguably the world's best corned beef and pastrami. And chopped liver.

One could go on; I had eaten there regularly and exchanged embraces and greetings with Abe since 1972. The only thing he couldn't comprehend was my dislike of center-cut tongue.

Enter Scions

Jack, Abe's kid brother and a real-estate lawyer, made a go of running the deli but finally threw in the towel when rents in the hipper-than-hip East Village got ridiculous. The deli closed on Jan. 1, 2006. That's when the scions went to work, led by Jack's now-25-year-old son, Jeremy Lebewohl, also

much in evidence yesterday, prowling the aisles, shaking hands, checking orders.

They bought the building at 162 E. 33rd St., perhaps not coincidentally right up the block from Yeshiva University and a kidney-stone's throw from N.Y.U. Medical Center.

The menu is largely unchanged, including the ``Instant Heart Attack," one of Jack's creations: a sandwich composed of ``two large potato pancakes with your choice of Corned Beef, Pastrami, Turkey or Salami." Dramatically changed are the prices: When I asked Jack what the \$14.25 pastrami sandwich went for 30 years ago, he laughed and said: ``Who knows? Fifty cents?"

Still a Bargain

At \$14.25, it's still a bargain, a small mountain of perfectly tender salty slightly fatty meat on fresh rye slathered with grainy deli mustard.

After waiting on line an hour to get in, I ordered matzo- ball soup, the pastrami sandwich (anyone who orders extra-lean pastrami is an idiot) and kasha varnishkes. The couple sitting next to me, though regulars at the old place, didn't know what kasha varnishkes are. I explained.

Kasha is buckwheat groats; varnishkes are bow-tie noodles, all cooked with onions and schmaltz, which is rendered chicken fat, Jewish mayonnaise that goes on everything.

I demanded the woman's plate and spooned on a small amount. ``I warn you," I said. ``Taste this and you will never settle for grits or polenta again." After one bite, she reluctantly agreed.

Of course, I washed it all down with Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray, really the only drink right for such a feast.

The tab was \$33. Just like the street, oddly enough.

The Second Avenue Deli is at 162 E. 33rd St., near Third Avenue. Information: +1-212-689-9069.

(Jeremy Gerard is an editor for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.

To contact the writer on this story: Jeremy Gerard in New York at jgerard2@bloomberg.net.

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Manuela Hoelterhoff at mhoelterhoff@bloomberg.net.