
Old favourites, new faces

**Forget Times Square, New York City's iconic Jewish cuisine — and its new golden age — is the Big Apple's real attraction.
By Samantha Lee**

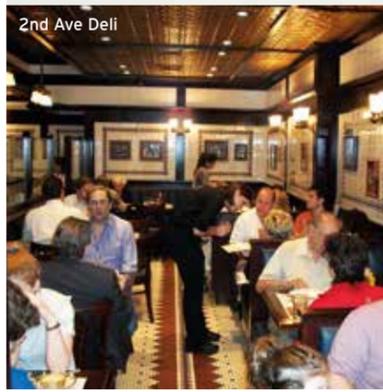
PHOTO OF SALAMI AND PICKLES AT KATZ'S DELICATESSEN DREAMSTIME
PHOTO OF RUSS AND DAUGHTERS COURTESY OF RUSS & DAUGHTERS



Salami and pickles at Katz's Delicatessen



Old Katz's



TASTE TO BELIEVE

For now, people are still pretty darn excited about Katz's, whose pastrami sandwich – the cornerstone of every Jewish deli worth its salt – drips with juice, history and rave reviews. Using a century-old recipe from the deli's first days, beef navel is cured in a salt bath, smoked with a spice rub, steamed, and hand-cut before being stuffed between two slices of rye bread. Everything takes place in-house. The result: a ridiculous pile of glistening meat, assertively salty, tinged with a sweet undercurrent of coriander seeds, and extremely Instagram-worthy. Each order comes with a whole pickle to cut through the richness.

"It's amazing," says Adi Sudigdo, an Indonesian tourist on a recent visit. It was his first time there. "But I'll have to take it to go."

Further uptown, 2nd Ave Deli provides a more genteel, but no less traditional, experience. Started in 1954 by an Ukrainian immigrant named Abe Lebewohl, the kosher-certified deli, says current owner Josh Lebewohl, serves up "classic Jewish soul food, just like Mom used to make". Josh, Abe's grandnephew, runs the deli with his brother, Jeremy. They oversee a wood-paneled, white-tiled space that's home to more than a hundred authentic dishes: bagels and *blintzes*, *knishes* and *kreplachs*, smoked lox and challah bread. Even the waitresses embody the very Jewish trait of well-meaning gruffness.

2nd Ave Deli's schtick, so to speak, is the classic neighbourhood joint. "We have regulars who are in their 90s; even 100s," says Josh, who left a career in law to take over the family business. "The same people have celebrated their 10th and 30th birthdays here. We've had weddings and family dinners."

THE NEW IS GOOD AS GOLD

While the old guard is busy hawking its history and memory, the new breed of Jewish eateries is tackling the task of translating that nostalgia for a different generation.

Take, for example, the venerable appetizing store Russ & Daughters, beloved by generations for its selection of smoked fish, herring and caviar. The store still stands at its original spot on East Houston Street. But at the spiffy Russ & Daughters Café just around the corner, opened in 2014, classics are updated with a modern twist: smoked whitefish is transmuted into a hearty chowder; tahini-based *balvab* is presented in ice-cream form and topped with oozing salted caramel.

"We have to grapple with what it means to grow and change while at the same time providing a sense of continuity," says Niki Russ Federman, fourth generation co-owner, in *The Sturgeon Queens*, a 2014 documentary of the Russ & Daughters business.

Niki and the other co-owner, her cousin Joshua Russ Tupper, are the great-grandchildren of the original Russ & Daughters founder, Joel Russ. With deep ties to the business and Jewish tradition, coupled with a keen understanding of today's social media-obsessed generation of 'foodies', they have successfully situated the 102-year-old company at the forefront of Jewish American cuisine. At the café, opulent portions of smoked fish – wild Western Nova salmon, premium stock sturgeon, creamy sable, tender trout and wild Alaskan salmon roe – are decorated with dill, capers and raw onions, then served on a hefty wooden board: the perfect Instagram set-up. To cater to the brunch set, latkes are served alongside omelettes, while the ubiquitous eggs Benedict is presented on traditional challah bread. The occasional Russ & Daughters gourmet herring pairing events, where buttery peak-of-the-season fish is partnered with wines and spirits, are always sell outs.

On the deli side of things, another contender muscling in on 'new Jewish' cuisine is Mile End Deli, a Montreal-style eatery in Brooklyn. "The old-school deli is endangered," says owner Noah Bermanoff. "The customer base in 10 years will be very different, without a deep-seated connection to Jewish cuisine."



Old Russ & Daughters store

Inside Katz's Delicatessen, on Manhattan's Lower East Side, history is draped in neon signs and the steam of cooking meat. Carvers hand out towering pastrami sandwiches to unending lines of customers. A sepia-toned mosaic of photos, each depicting a satisfied-looking celebrity, covers the walls. Even after 128 years, the deli's combination of well-preserved heritage and century-old recipes is what keeps people coming.

And coming. "We see up to 4,000 customers each day," says Jake Dell, Katz's lanky 28-year-old owner. That volume of people charges through about 13,000 kg of deli classics such as pastrami, corned beef and beef brisket sandwiches each week.

Along with the Statue of Liberty and Times Square, Jewish cuisine is one of New York City's most iconic institutions. Ferried in by the waves of observant Jews from Eastern Europe in the 1880s, the cuisine flourished both as a dietary necessity – most Jewish immigrants adhered to kosher laws – and a poignant reminder of home.

One kosher law – among many – forbade the mixing of meat and dairy dishes, and birthed two very different Jewish eateries: the meat sandwich-slinging deli, like Katz's, and the appetizing store, which serves fish and dairy products. (It's

here where the much-loved smoked lox and cream cheese bagel was birthed.) As the Jews assimilated into their adopted home, so did their cuisine, gradually melding into the cultural fabric of the city. It became 'Jewish American', rather than merely Jewish. Today, however, around only 40 old-school delis, and even fewer appetizing stores, still stand in the city, the result of a declining Jewish population and increasing rent.

While tourists and locals alike still throng the stalwarts for their stubborn adherence to history, a new spate of Jewish eateries is challenging it. Started by plugged-in young chefs, who aren't afraid to tweak tradition and update techniques, these places are proving worthy destinations in their own right.

The old guard, however, isn't worried about the competition. "I'm all for the new delis," says Dell, whose grandfather took over the business from the Katz family more than 30 years ago. "Anything that gets people excited about Jewish cuisine is a good thing."



Mile End Deli

DESTINATION HITS

❖ 2nd Ave Deli

162 E 33rd Street, New York, NY 10016
Tel: +1 212 689 0000
www.2ndavedeli.com

New York, NY 10002
Tel: +1 212 254 2246
katzsdelicatessen.com

❖ Black Seed Bagels

176 1st Avenue,
New York, NY 10009
Tel: +1 646 484 5718
www.blackseedbagels.com

❖ Mile End Deli

97 Hoyt Street, Brooklyn, NY 11217
Tel: +1 718 852 7510
www.mileenddeli.com

❖ Harry and Ida's

189 Avenue A,
New York, NY 10009
Tel: +1 646 864 0967
www.meatandsupplyco.com

❖ Russ & Daughters store

179 E Houston Street,
New York, NY 10002
Tel: +1 212 475 4880
www.russanddaughters.com

❖ Russ & Daughters Café

127 Orchard Street,
New York, NY 10002
Tel: +1 212 475 4880
www.russanddaughterscafe.com



To that end, he is cooking up deli food that appeals to a young, savvy audience. The strategy is simple: “We use the best ingredients, so our food can stand on its own.” It doesn’t hurt, too, that Mile End is the epitome of hipster cool – Fleet Foxes songs pipe from speakers, service is friendly, and the prevailing aesthetic is industrial-chic.

The smoked meat sandwich – the Quebecois version of pastrami – at the six-year-old deli is made from all natural brisket. Chopped chicken liver is trussed up with bits of chicken skin crackling and freshly toasted rye bread. At Black Seed Bagels, Bermanoff’s other popular enterprise, the bagels are hand-rolled and boiled, Montreal-style, in a honey-water mixture, which imparts a gorgeous, caramelised crust and a sweet aftertaste. Generous sprinklings of sesame and poppy seeds give these bagels a satisfying crunch.

But the logical apotheosis of all this tinkering with the past seems to point at Harry and Ida’s, a tiny storefront in Alphabet City started by brother-and-sister team Will and Julie Horowitz. Named for their great-grandparents, who ran a deli in East Harlem way back when, the place is, unsurprisingly, best known for its gonzo, category-defying pastrami sandwich.

Beef deckle – a fattier, marbled cut of brisket – is given the utmost TLC: in-house brining, smoking over oak wood and maple logs, and finally, steaming. The result is a melt-in-the-mouth, intensely flavourful slab of meat that’s sliced to order, tucked into a hamburger long bun, and festooned with buttermilk-fermented cucumber and wisps of dill. Even the mustard is special: it’s a century-old local brand, A. Bauer’s,

that’s blended with preserved Meyer lemon and anchovies.

Will’s convention-bending orchestrations don’t stop there. The smoked bluefish sandwich – a riff on traditional smoked whitefish – combines the locally sourced fish with pickled ramps and celery. Under Will’s careful smoking, the humble fish realises its oily, almost tuna-like potential.

“To me, tradition lies not in the ingredients used, but the techniques,” says Will, whose varied resume includes ski-bum, permaculture expert and forager. “We’re traditional in that sense: we’re preserving the original techniques and doing them as well as we can. But we’re trying to do it in a way that’s the most relatable to us now.”

That said, some rules still stand. When it was suggested to Mile End’s owner, Bermanoff, that the pickle should be served inside a pastrami sandwich, instead of alongside it, he said: “Absolutely not. You’re not allowed to do that.” e