

# A Tale Told in Pickles and Pastrami: [Dining In, Dining Out / Style Desk]

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## FULL TEXT

LOS ANGELES -- The colors are fading, but the photograph of the Carnegie Deli from 2008 still calls up a world of heaping pastrami sandwiches, pungent smells of brine and smoke, and tourists lined out the door onto Seventh Avenue in New York.

A few steps away, a kosher carving knife, a pushcart, a pickle barrel and a battered traveling valise used by immigrants from Lithuania are lined up against a wall. They conjure the Lower East Side of a century ago, bustling with Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, in the midst of creating a cuisine and a new kind of restaurant. This attic's worth of artifacts sprawls through "'I'll Have What She's Having': The Jewish Deli," an exhibit chronicling the rise of that restaurant culture in America. It is by all indications the most sweeping survey of this culinary institution attempted by a major museum. (Why that name? Do you have to ask?)

The museum, though, is far from the tenements of Lower Manhattan: The Skirball Cultural Center, about 20 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles, created the show and over the next year will send it to three other venues around the country, including the New-York Historical Society.

The exhibition is an exploration of the food and culture that thrived in New York and later Los Angeles, with their large Jewish and show-business communities, along with cities like Chicago, Houston, Miami and Indianapolis. As such, it surveys the story of immigration as a force behind changing American tastes: The pushcarts, as the curators note, foreshadowed the food trucks now operated by a new generation of immigrants. A grainy film clip near the start of the exhibit shows police officers fanning out to clear carts from a New York street in the early 1900s, a scene reminiscent of the 2020 crackdowns in Los Angeles on unlicensed food vendors.

"This show is making the argument that the Jewish deli is an American construct," said Cate Thurston, one of the curators. "It's an American food and it's born of immigration."

But there is also something elegiac about the exhibit, a reminder that delis and the food they served are no longer as prevalent as they were 50 years ago, even in Jewish life. The show is an exercise not only in history, but in nostalgia. There were an estimated 3,000 Jewish delis in New York City in the 1930s; now there are just a few dozen, according to the New-York Historical Society.

The children of the immigrants who built their lives behind a deli counter did not, as a rule, follow their parents into the family business. Growing up, they showed more interest in Chinese and Italian food than in the smoked meat, bagels and knishes that filled their family tables. The demand for kosher food, prepared under rabbinical supervision, is nowhere near as strong as it was in those first decades after the immigrants arrived. There are now "deli counters" at most supermarkets. And many delicatessens were not able to survive the Covid-19 pandemic. "What does this mean when Jewish culture becomes part of a museum exhibit?" said Ted Merwin, the author of "Pastrami on Rye," a 2015 history of the Jewish delicatessen. "Is my experience already in the past, a fossil? Is it sort of a last gasp?"

There is no doubt that "'I'll Have"-- with its menus from the Stage Deli in New York (now closed, like the Carnegie Deli), and its celebration of matzo ball soup, chopped liver, knishes, kugel, salami and pickled herring -- draws people who want to relive the memory of a grandmother or uncle or neighborhood long changed. But Lara Rabinovitch, a food writer and historian who helped curate the exhibition, said this was not intended as a sentimental

journey.

"When I came on board I had two caveats: One is we had to treat the Jewish deli as part of the American landscape," she said. "And two, we could not succumb to kitsch and nostalgia. When it comes to Jewish food, deli or Jewish food can evoke a lot of conversations and a lot of kitsch and nostalgia."

Margaret K. Hofer, museum director of the New-York Historical Society, said the exhibition was designed to enliven admittedly dry history lessons -- on, say, the creation of the Bagel Bakers Local 338 in New York by Yiddish-speaking organizers -- with the dazzle of eye-catching menus from vintage delis and photographs of stumping politicians. (Here is President Barack Obama visiting Canter's Deli in Los Angeles in 2014; over there is Senator Ted Cruz at Shapiro's Delicatessen in Indianapolis.)

"We think it's the sort of perfect history exhibition," Ms. Hofer said, adding, "We can attract the visitors to an exhibition like this and then surprise them with all kinds of history."

There are few things more New York than the Jewish deli; sitting down for an overstuffed, and overpriced, pastrami sandwich at the Second Avenue Deli or Katz's Delicatessen has typically been on any tourist's must-do agenda. Yet this exhibition was conceived by two women who live in the San Fernando Valley and are curators at the Skirball, a center devoted to Jewish culture.

"We are both Valley Girls," Laura Mart said of her and her colleague, Ms. Thurston. "We like to eat. And we were having one of our 4 p.m. snack breaks and kind of spitballing different ideas. We often go pretty wacky with the ideas, and then break it down from there."

The Los Angeles metropolitan area has the second-largest Jewish population in the United States, and more than its share of classic Jewish delis. Jessie Kornberg, the Skirball's chief executive, said she thought there were advantages to telling the story from outside New York.

"Much of the history of the deli has been told by New Yorkers, or with a focus on New York delis," Ms. Kornberg said. "This exhibition is intentionally national in scope, which no doubt reflects our perspective as a West Coast institution."

Though the Jewish deli was born in New York, as Jews started moving to other places, so did the restaurants.

"Jews have migrated across the country," said Ziggy Gruber, the star of "Deli Man," a 2014 documentary on Jewish food, who now runs a delicatessen in Houston. "The reason you find a lot of delicatessens in L.A. is because of all the Jews, with the invention of motion pictures, who migrated to Los Angeles."

New York, a city that has never walked away from a fight, could be forgiven for feeling a little put off by this West Coast interloper. But Ms. Hofer of the New-York Historical Society said she was drawn to the Skirball idea the moment she heard it.

"It's not just a New York story, it's an American story," she said. "So there's no competition over who gets to tell it."

The exhibition will also head to Houston and to Skokie, Ill.: At each stop, it will be tweaked to include local lore.

The New York show, which opens on Nov. 11, will survey Jewish delis in Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx as well as Manhattan. It features photographs of Mayor Edward I. Koch and Representative Bella S. Abzug in New York delis, and revisits the 1979 quest by Mimi Sheraton, a New York Times restaurant critic, to find the city's best pastrami sandwich. (The winner: Pastrami King in Kew Gardens, Queens; it moved to the Upper East Side, and a sign from that location will be displayed at the historical society.)

Museum exhibits are usually based on sights -- a painting, a sculpture, a looping video -- and sounds. This one had the challenge of conveying tastes and smells, not an easy task in a gallery where food is not allowed.

An attempt by food stylists to recreate a facsimile of a deli sandwich out of nonfood ingredients turned into an unappealing mess. "We had a minor panic attack about this corned beef sandwich," Ms. Mart said during a recent walk-through of the exhibition.

Ms. Thurston picked up the story. "We asked for a corned beef with mustard, and the mustard looked like thick, thick American cheese, like a fiesta of treyf" -- it mixed meat and dairy, in violation of kosher law. "We couldn't have it out on the gallery floor."

The food fabricators went to work, pulling the plastic cheese off the sandwich before deeming it ready for the

exhibition.

The exhibition has plenty of striking artifacts that do work in a museum, like the original neon sign recovered from Drexler's Deli, which was opened by Holocaust survivors in North Hollywood in the early 1950s and is now closed. It bears a yellow star and the word kosher in Hebrew.

The curators retrieved the cigarette machine that stood against a wall at the Kibitz Room at Canter's Deli, once a late-night hangout for rock stars and actors. And there are matchbooks collected from restaurants across the country, as well as menus from theater-district delis in New York, many with sandwiches named after performers -- like the Ginger Rogers Special and the Dean Martin-Jerry Lewis.

There is also, appropriately enough, a screen at the end of the exhibit, replaying the classic deli scene with Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan, from the 1989 film "When Harry Met Sally," that inspired the exhibition's name.

The exhibit's Los Angeles run was supposed to end on Sept. 4, but attendance has been so strong that museum administrators have extended it through Sept. 18. "I'll Have What She's Having" will no doubt draw much interest when it arrives in New York.

"But I wonder what people will take from it," said Mr. Merwin, the author. "There's often a question: 'Can we bring the deli back?' I want to say no. How do you turn back the clock? The place that delis occupied in Jewish culture doesn't exist anymore."

"'I'll Have What She's Having': The Jewish Deli" is at the Skirball Cultural Center through Sept. 18. It will be at the New-York Historical Society from Nov. 11 through April 2, 2023; the Holocaust Museum Houston from May 4, 2023 through Aug. 13, 2023; and the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center in Skokie, Ill., from Oct. 22, 2023 through April 14, 2024.

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### Photograph

Top, Cate Thurston, left, and Laura Mart, curators at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. Center, from left: Jessie Kornberg, the Skirball's chief executive; a vintage menu from the Stage Deli in Manhattan; top, items from Canter's Deli in Los Angeles; and Levy's rye bread advertisements. Above, two mock-up dishes created for the exhibition. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOEL BARHAMAND FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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