

# L.A.'s deli lamas

From downtown to the San Fernando Valley, break babka with the masters

BY MATTHEW JAFFE

What sounds like some Zen parable told with a Yiddish accent is really the highest compliment that a Los Angeles deli can receive: After one bite of Langer's pastrami, New Yorkers swallow their pride and eat crow.

This is no small feat. You see, deli-goers are a serious lot, emotional in their attachments—and New Yorkers are the most passionately partisan of all. They would no sooner acknowledge the quality of Los Angeles delis than say, "Hey, it's okay about the Dodgers. You guys swiped them fair and square."

Truth is, Los Angeles is unlikely to challenge New York as deli central. Lacking deli density, the city will likely remain a notch worse for knockwurst.

But owner Al Langer tells the story about a herd of New Yorkers brought to his landmark MacArthur Park deli by their L.A. hosts. Don't be ridiculous, the out-of-towners declared. You can't get good pastrami outside New York.

"So when they got ready to leave, this guy comes up. Gives me a hug," says Al. "Okay," he tells me. "You win. There is no comparison."

Let that story be a lesson. From downtown to the San Fernando Valley, when it comes to delis, Los Angeles ain't exactly chopped liver. At its best, L.A. can play with those borough boys back East.

## Langer's: The culture of the counter

Newark native Al Langer began his rise to deli fame back in 1925, when he needed to earn \$35 for his bar mitzvah.



ZERO HOUR at Fort Pastrami: A Langer's waitress juggles sandwiches to die for.

## The deli maven's guide to Los Angeles

The following are the best delis in greater Los Angeles.

**ART'S DELICATESSEN:** 12224 Ventura Blvd., Studio City; (818) 762-1221.

**BARNEY GREENGRASS:** Great fish straight from Barney's in New York. 9570 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills; (310) 777-5877.

**BRENT'S DELI:** Worth the schlepp to Northridge for what other deli owners acknowledge as one of the best. 19565 Parthenia St., Northridge; (818) 886-5679.

**CANTER'S:** 24-hour landmark still worth a pilgrimage for its improbable mix of hipsters and old-timers. 419 N. Fairfax Ave., Los Angeles; (323) 651-2030.

**JERRY'S FAMOUS DELI:** Traded on Nasdaq as DELI; now has numerous Southern California locations, but the Studio City original with adjacent bowling alley is still the best. 12655 Ventura Blvd., Studio City; (818) 980-4245.

**JUNIOR'S RESTAURANT:** Westwood classic—terrific chicken soup with lots in it, and great chocolate chip rugalach. 2379 Westwood Blvd., West L.A.; (310) 475-5771.

**LANGER'S DELICATESSEN:** Easily reached from downtown via Red Line, or park at Langer's lot at Seventh St. and Westlake Ave. 704 S. Alvarado St., L.A.; (213) 483-8050.

**NATE 'N' AL:** Plain decor hides the fact that this is a power-breakfast spot for the film industry, and for political schmoozers and shakers. 414 N. Beverly Dr., L.A.; (310) 274-0101.

On his way West, he worked pushcarts, washed dishes, waited tables, and staffed the counter. His peripatetic career sounds like a Borscht Belt comedian's world tour: the Catskills, Miami Beach, out to Palm Springs, then Hollywood—even a stint at Fort Rucker, Alabama, serving 20,000 troops during World War II.

But for the last 51 years, Al has played just one room, his namesake deli at Seventh and Alvarado streets.

Pastrami is so central to the Langer's legend that the restaurant offers its own manifesto at the top of the menu: "Hot Pastrami Is a Select Cut of Beef, Sugar-Cured and Seasoned as Corned Beef, Then Slowly Smoked for Tenderness and Tantalizing Taste and Flavor, Then Covered with Choice and Costly Spices."

Al and his son, Norm, say their secret is simple. They use a top-quality cut and steam it for 3½ hours. The Langers say

that's considerably longer than at most delis, where owners won't deal with the resulting 25 percent shrinkage.

Norm pulls no punches when talking about some of the other guys' pastrami. "Like biting into a racquetball," he says. But at Langer's, the pastrami comes to you tender and moist on hot, twice-baked rye bread. Adds Norm, "You bite into that crispy crust and we've got you before you even taste the meat."

For a longtime lover of that pastrami, sitting in a big vinyl booth talking business with these two deli lamas is akin to a religious experience.

"There's so much that goes into it," says Al, arms outstretched, palms upward, as if imploring some deli deity for continued guidance. Norm, meanwhile, laments the lost art of the counter-man—"Like a pool player. You have it at birth or you don't."

The deli's neighborhood used to be glamorous; now it's scruffy, although fine for daytime visits. The Langers have



A VINYL BOOTH, a pastrami-on-rye, the sports section: Is Langer's heaven, or what?

held on here out of loyalty to the community and with hopes that downtown redevelopment will eventually come their way. In recent years, they endured disruption from subway construction;

business boomed again after the subway opened and Norm thanked the city for spending \$1.4 billion to rejuvenate the area. Then in 1992 the deli barely survived the riots.

In fact, the building next door was torched. With no desire for twice-smoked smoked fish, Norm and the staff hunkered down inside Langer's, thus earning a loving sobriquet from their thankful patrons: Fort Pastrami.

## Art's Deli: We are family

Riots? Those a New Yorker could relate to. But earthquakes? That's a whole different kettle of fish, gefilte or otherwise.

Although he was born on Staten Island, Art Ginsburg, owner of Art's Delicatessen in Studio City, grew up in Southern California. So he was no stranger to the occasional tremor. Still, nothing prepared him for the biblical events that the 1994 Northridge quake unleashed on the Ventura Boulevard deli he has owned since 1957.

The big quake took enough of a toll; seeing the damage, Art figured he was looking at a month of repair work. Then a 5.3 aftershock sparked a fire. The framed color photographs of triple-decker sandwiches ("Jewish erotica" in Art's words) survived. But much of the deli was in bad shape. Art's closed for nine months to repair and remodel.

"We were crying and laughing at the same time," says Art. "But right away we saw opportunity in the disaster. The quake was a blessing. And yet it wasn't."

In the ensuing months, Art and his family also learned just how important the deli had become to their patrons. He got letters asking when they would reopen. People told him that their lives had changed without Art's. It underscored a point that he had long suspected: he and his customers had become an extended family.

"Once I got invited to a customer's kid's wedding," he says. "I didn't know them that well, but the parents told me that I had been so much a part of their kid's life. I was a part of his growing up." On the flip side, when customers divorce, sometimes only one gets custody of Art's.

There's no underestimating the emotional component to the deli business, says Art. Perception is everything—what you like is what you remember, what you're used to. Your deli? That's always the best deli. It's nostalgia, he says.

Still, there are a few universals, according to Art. If nothing else, people want an open place with some bustle to it. They want to see and be seen, schmooze and be schmoozed. And at Art's, he's the host, so his customers want to see him sometimes behind the counter making sandwiches.

This he could do in his sleep. Or close to it. Art tells a story about a time when he was having outpatient surgery. He found out he had been talking while he was under. Turns out he was teaching the nurses how to wrap a sandwich and cut corned beef.

Art shrugs. "I grew up in this. This is what I know." ♦



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