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' swelling stomachs and their pride - can be forgiven. "No small feat. You see, deli-heroes are a serious lot, emotional in their attachments - and New Yorkers are the most passionately purists of all. They would no sooner acknowledge the quality of Los Angeles delis than they say, "Hey, it's okay about the Dodgers. You guys won them fair and square.""

Truth is, Los Angeles is unlikely to challenge New York as deli central. Lacking density, the city will likely remain a niche food for foodies. But owner Al Langer tells the story about a head of New Yorkers brought to his landmark MacArthur Park deli for their L.A. hosts. Don't be cocky, the out-of-towners declared. You can't get good pastrami outside New York.

When they got ready to leave, this guy came 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 isn't exactly chopped liver. At its best, L.A. can play with thoseborough boys back fast.

Langer's: The culture of the counter
Nowhere does Al Langer begin his rise to deli fame back in 1925, when he needed to earn $35 for his bar mitzvah.

On his way West, he worked push carts, washed dishes, waited tables, and staged the counter. His penultimate cafe sounds like a romantic, chic downtown world tour: the Cattails, Miami Beach, out to Palm Springs, then Hollywood - even a stint at Fort Bunker, Alabama, serving 20,000 troops during World War II.

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

Zero hour at Fort Pastrami: A Langer's waitress juggles sandwiches to die for.

The deli maven's guide to Los Angeles
This is a list of the best delis in Los Angeles.

* ART'S DANKER: 13221 Ventura Blvd., Studio City, (818) 762-1321.
  - GREEN'S DELI: Worth the trip to Northridge for what other delis offer. (818) 800-5079.
  - JAY'S FAMOUS DELI: Traded on Nasdaq as DELE; now has numerous SoCal locations, but the Studio City original is still the best. 12622 Ventura Blvd., Studio City, (818) 980-4245.
  - Langer's: Easiest reached from downtown via Red Line, or park at Langer's lot at Seventh and Westlake Ave. 704 S. Alvarado St., L.A. (213) 483-8500.

Who's at Al: Paul doctor hides the fact that this is a power-breakfast spot for the film industry, and the political schemers and dreamers. 414 N. Beverly Dr., L.A. (310) 274-0161.

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

And 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 don't deal with the resulting 25 percent shrinkage.

Norm pulls no punches when talking about some of the other guys' pastrami: "Like bible into a raucquelle." He says that at Langer's, the pastrami comes to you tender and moist on hot, twice-baked rye bread. "Aids Norm. You bite into it, and you know exactly what we've got you before you ever 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 up." As if to explain some deli derring-do for continued guidance. Norm, meanwhile, laments the lost art of the counterman - like a pool player. You have it at birth or you don't.

The deli neighborhood used to be glamorous: now it's scruffy, although fine for daytime visits. The Langers have business booming again after the subway opened and Norm thanked the city for spending $1.5 billion to rejuvenate the area. Then in 1992 the deli barely survived the fires.

In fact, the building next door was torn down. With no desire for twice- 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
Baino those New Yorkers who could relate. 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 a stranger to the occasional tremor. Still, nothing prepared him for the biblical events that the 1994 Northridge quake unleashed on the Northern Broomed deli he has owned since 1975.

The big quake took enough of a toll, seeing the damage, Art figured he was looking at a month of repair work. Then a 5.8 aftershock sparked a fire. The framed color photographs of triple-decker sandwiches ("Jessica creatica" in Art's woods) 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, not a curse."

In the ensuing months, Art and his family also learned just how important the deli had become to their patrons. The letters poured in when they heard they might have to close. People told him that their backs had changed without Art. It had become a point that he had to close. He had to report he and his customers had become an extended family. "Once I got invited to a customer'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 lives that I was a part of their wedding party."

On the flip side, when customers divorce, sometimes only one gets custody of the deli.

There's no understanding the emotional component to the deli business, says Art. Perception is everything - what you believe is what you remember. "But you're used to your deli. That's always the best deli. It's nostalgia, he says. Still there's a few universes, according to Art. If nothing else, people want an open place with some juice to it. They want to see and be seen, schmooze and be schmoozed. And 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 was being taken while he was under. Turns out he was teaching the nurses how to prepare a sandwich and a corn beef.

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