

What's Not to Like?

By PATRIC KUH

As Seen In:

The City's Ten Best Delis

Los Angeles

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Los Angeles | BEST DELIS '07
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What's Not to Like?

L.A.'s delis are more than purveyors of towering pastrami sandwiches, house-brined pickles, and foaming egg creams. They are social temples where all are welcome to nosh

By **PATRIC KUH** | Photographs by **JAMES WOJCIK**



Los Angeles BEST DELIS '07
KIBITZ, SCHMEAR, NOSH, KVELL!



→ To walk into an L.A. deli is to enter a world where the steamer is going, the bottles of Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray are cooling, and the special request is an art form.

Cutting lox from the center of the fillet—that's nothing. For one person, the pickles should all be sour. For another, the brisket must be lean. For a third, it's imperative that the bagel chips arrive before the soup. "When you bring the sandwich, only bring half of it," says a lady at Junior's in Westwood. *When you bring the sandwich, only bring half of it* is not a Zen riddle. It's a request that anyone in a deli can understand. The other half is brought wrapped in tinfoil so that it doesn't lose its warmth.

The word *delicatessen* borrows twice. The Germans took *delicat*, "fine," from the French and appended their own verb, *essen*, "to eat." The word appeared on windows and awnings until it became the symbol of 19th-century German migration. *Delicatessens*, however, didn't gain their true identity until they became Jewish—and the more Jewish they became, the more universal their appeal. It was as if Maimonides himself had decreed that no one should resist a sandwich with two inches of stacked meat. Sipping a fizzy chocolate phosphate could be any child's early memory. Hearing a waiter inquire, "Who asked for the clean glass?" might be an individual's first experience of a Jewish joke.

For a style of eating that has such extensive roots in the East Coast—in neighborhoods where stoopball was played and the wash hung between tenement windows—Angelenos have made delis their own. A simple roll call of our most famous establishments amounts to a trajectory of the L.A. Jewish experience: from the Eastside to the Westside to the Valley. Canter's opened in Boyle Heights in 1931, Nate 'n Al debuted in Beverly Hills in 1945, and Art's welcomed nosers to Studio City in 1957. Art Ginsburg remembers the modest scale of his original establishment: "I had 15 feet of frontage on Ventura Boulevard, three-and-a-half booths, and 12 counter seats." Even as the L.A. deli got bigger, it defined itself by its opposite. The city was broad; the deli was cramped. The sprawl could be anonymous; the deli was intimate. Who could resist that? To put it another way, the Los Angeles deli put the old neighborhood under one roof and cooled it with AC.

Today, at 72, Ginsburg is one of our premier deli theorists. "What is a deli?" he asks. "It is supposed to be very plain, very plasticity, with Formica tabletops. It should have simple lighting and no tufting in the booths. There should be no high-backed booths at all. When you stand up in a deli, you should be able to see everyone there." Ginsburg belongs to the last generation of great deli men. To talk to Ron Peskin of Brent's, Alan Canter of Canter's, and Norm Langer of Langer's is to hear strong opinions and jokes that invariably lead to groans. Above all, it is to understand what goes into a classic deli sandwich.

For Norm Langer, it is the meat: "You react to a piece of meat. The grain is constantly changing. When places cut the meat very

thin, it's to hide the meat's toughness. It's tough because they don't want to lose volume by cooking it as long as they should." For Ron Peskin, it is the bread, which, with the pickle, provides the texture: "The loaf must be double baked shortly before serving, so the crust itself has its own crackling crust."

Although the quality of a deli depends on such principles, its claim is more fundamental. In a deli, we're not pampered. We're barely tolerated. We don't gab on cell phones. We look across the booth at friends. There is rarely background music because the music of delis is the human voice. It rises in a cloud over the tables and hums between the polished coffee urn and the pickle-laden jars. Just as important is the tone of these exchanges. Whatever the language spoken, all the sentences seem to rely on the interrogative. Did she leave him? Did she keep him? Could you split it? What the heck are *kasha varnishkes*? You might hear Spanish, Mandarin, Korean, or Tagalog in an L.A. deli, but everyone is essentially talking Yiddish.

Ruling over all is the deli waitress, granting requests, bestowing largesse, deploying when necessary that time-honored Yiddish rhetorical device, the flat statement. "What's in a chopped liver sandwich, honey? Chopped liver." There is a point to her gruffness. The deli meal—with its memories of briskets past, its visions of children now grown sliding into booths to wolf down blintzes—has such potential for stirring up emotions that every thing must be done to keep them in check.

Which, of course, never quite happens. The tumult of delis allows for physical contact, without which delis could not exist. A pat on the forearm sets up everything from a punch line to a whispered tip. When a waitress touches our shoulder after she takes the order, it is an acknowledgment that our special requests don't faze her; we're still all right. With the sandwich finally before us, we feel a connection that reaches through time. I won't say it's Jacob placing his hands on the heads of his grandchildren, Ephraim and Manasseh, but it does link us to previous generations: *You come from people for whom a stoop was a playground. Now bite into your sandwich.* The rye has been baked twice, as it should be. The meat has been cut at the most judicious angle. It is a perfect deli sandwich. The flavor is as immediate as that of a half-sour pickle and as reassuring as the touch of a grandparent's hand. ■



RON PESKIN

RYE WISDOM

CHOICE TIDBITS FROM RON PESKIN, THE PROPRIETOR OF BRENT'S

“My uncles owned Linker’s in Sherman Oaks. I was working there as a teenager when a man comes in and asks for two pounds of lox. I said that my uncle would be back in a few minutes. The man said he couldn’t wait. So I looked at the lox and I thought, ‘How hard can it be?’ And I cut the lox and I felt damned proud about it, too.”

“I worked in lots of places before I got the money together to buy Brent’s in 1969. The reason I came out to Northridge is that the deli was \$1,800 down, which was all that I could afford. There were orange groves out here then. Even though my son, Brent, was born three years earlier, the name was pure coincidence. We did a 59¢ breakfast special. I did deliveries in a panel-sided Chevy with shelving inside.”

“The difference between a deli and a coffee shop is how you treat the meat, how you cut it, how you form it into a sandwich. You can cook the meat too much, so it falls apart and doesn’t look good. You have to time when to heat the cuts, or else it ends up dying on a steam table. You can’t cut a salami wrong, but you can totally screw up a piece of corned beef. Cutting the meat is the whole deal. I like a loosely formed sandwich. You want it to have a bit of sponge. I teach the new guys how to make a sandwich. The way I teach them is, I stand next to the guy until he can’t stand it.”

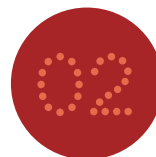
“I like the look of that sandwich you’re eating. It has spring, and I can hear the double crust. But I can tell you, if it had taken one minute longer getting here, I would have gotten up to see what was happening. I know how long it takes to make a sandwich.”



Brent's
NORTHRIDGE

➤➤ The strip mall doesn’t seem promising, but the fleet of trucks outside Brent’s, ready to deliver the deli’s provisions, proclaims it a favorite. From the moment you enter, you can’t help feeling the joyous abandon. Groups wait by the door, the to-go counter is humming, and in the galley kitchen a scrum of countermen slice, pile, and schmear as they work through the tickets on the order wheel. No deli so perfectly combines the quality of the food with that of the atmosphere. Family patriarch Ron Peskin, or his son Brent, or son-in-law Marc, bounce from booth to booth. On the walls, pride of place is reserved for a framed ceremonial fireman’s ax given to the Peskin family in recognition of the number of emergency workers it fed after the Northridge earthquake. All this amounts to an authenticity that the newer location in Westlake Village doesn’t share. The whitefish salad here has a wondrous texture: part flaky, part creamy, begging for a bagel. Reubens are a specialty, and while the turkey and grilled knockwurst varieties are intensely satisfying, the black pastrami Reuben with hot sauerkraut and Russian dressing on grilled rye is a definitive sandwich. The Ortega brisket melt, with roasted chiles, grilled onions, and juicy layered meat, offers the magnificence and heft of a Reuben in burnished tones.

➤➤ 19565 Parthenia St, Northridge, 818-886-5679 or brentsdeli.com.



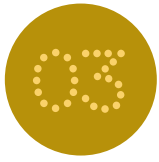
Langer's
LOS ANGELES

➤➤ Bite for bite, Langer’s serves the best pastrami sandwich in L.A., the spiced smokiness of the hand-cut meat participating with the bread to create perfection. The Reuben has a golden hue from being pressed into the griddle; the barley, mushroom, and gilet soup has been cooked with care. The deli’s interior—brown booths, large windows, crowded counter—seems both eternal and unique. Office workers, police brass, screenwriters, pensioners, and curious locals frequent this unchanging anchor of MacArthur Park. Although Al Langer recently died at 94, his son, Norm, and granddaughter, Trish, are daily presences who welcome all. To sit in a booth, looking out on the palms and ragtime movie palaces while eating a pastrami sandwich, is one of the great pleasures the city offers. The Fresser’s Special—pastrami, corned beef, turkey, cheese, and tongue—is a mere feather of a sandwich.

➤➤ 704 S. Alvarado St., L.A., 213-483-8050 or langersdeli.com.

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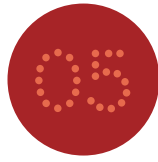




Nate 'n Al

BEVERLY HILLS

➔ Those waiting for tables at Nate 'n Al don't stare daggers—they kibitz: "Those two reading the paper could ignore each other at the same table and it would free one up." "Is your party complete?" is not a question the hostess asks here. The answer might be, "Is it complete? They're rearranging your restaurant!" The blintzes have a phenomenal airiness, and the crisp *matzo brei* with applesauce is deservedly legendary. At breakfast Larry King drifts between tables talking on a cell phone. At lunch it's Beverly Hills merchants and shoppers. When a woman tells her companion the price of a new jacket, he comes back with the old Myron Cohen retort, "What's it lined with, sturgeon?" with a speed that would have made the comic proud. ➔ 414 N. Beverly Dr., Beverly Hills, 310-274-0101 or natenal.com.



Pico Kosher

LOS ANGELES

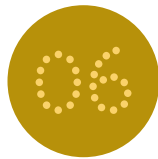
➔ Behind a faded sign on a stretch of Pico where Farsi script adorns many an awning stands L.A.'s only fully kosher deli: The double-handled pitcher for ritual hand washing sits in the sink; the injunction against serving meat and dairy in the same establishment is strictly observed. "So I can't give you cream cheese with a bagel," shrugs Jacob Hecht, who owns the snug establishment with his brother, David, and father, Max. The dining room is compact, and if you hit the place at lunchtime, the line snaking along the counter is one long phalanx of *kippah*-wearing regulars exchanging news. The meat is cut in front of customers. It's pliant, warm, and generous, a corned and steamed extension of Pico Kosher's pervasive cheer. ➔ 8826 W. Pico Blvd., L.A., 310-273-9381.



Art's

STUDIO CITY

➔ A glossary of basic Yiddish on the menu defines *mishpocheh* (family) as "trouble makers." Such good-natured cornball can be traced to owner Art Ginsburg, a mensch of the L.A. deli business. Clean, uncluttered, and cool, Art's represents a kind of deli nirvana. A well-tended cold meats section stands by the door, and walls hung with pictures of sandwiches envelop happy diners. Generations congregate over long breakfasts here. Art's serves the city's best chopped liver, resplendent when combined with corned beef in one of the deli's classic sandwiches. Frothy egg creams and milk shakes are superior; nothing widens a child's eyes more than a ribbon of chocolate syrup dissolving in the soda water of a classic phosphate. ➔ 12224 Ventura Blvd., Studio City, 818-762-1221 or artsdeli.com.



Marv's

NORTH HOLLYWOOD

➔ There are delis that seem unchanged from the day they opened. Marv's is one of them. The window is painted with old-time deli lettering; a plastic fern and a fly zapper provide adornment. Unprepossessing? Yes. Disappointing? Never. Herman "the German" Belkin listens to country and western while he pivots between the meat counter, the steamer, and the slicer. "You're a deli man when your hand is a scale," he says. His is a loosely formed sandwich, a meat purist's dream. The tongue and corned beef combination is especially fine, but habitués also come for Belkin's banter. When it ceases, all that's heard is the drone of a Miller sign and the caps of Dr. Brown's bottles, snapped off on the wall-mounted opener, falling to the floor. ➔ 12512 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood, 818-763-0616.



BROOKLYN BAGEL

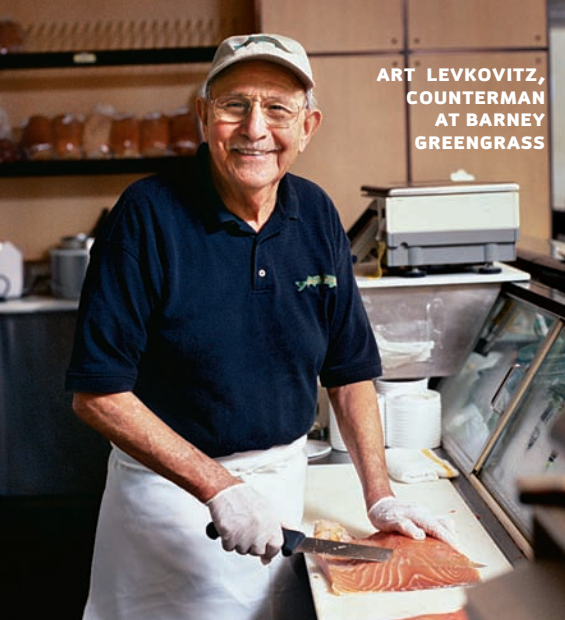
CIRCLE OF LIFE

A BAGEL (BOILED, OF COURSE) TRANSCENDS THE SUM OF ITS INGREDIENTS

Richard Friedman drew the line at spinach and cheese. "I wasn't interested in what a bagel like that might taste like," says the owner of Brooklyn Bagel Bakery, which his father, Seymour, founded in 1953. Originally in the West Adams

neighborhood, the bakery is now on Beverly Boulevard just west of downtown. The supplier to many L.A. delis, it sells bagels in 25 flavors, but Friedman uses plain bagels to judge quality. "A plain bagel has a richness that is unique," he says. Without that richness it would just be bread. Plain and salt bagels—the ones threaded on sticks or heaped in baskets and sold by peddlers in Germany, Poland, and on the Lower East Side—were at first the only versions made by the company. The ingredients—flour, water, yeast, salt, and little else—may be spartan, but Brooklyn Bagel still finds room for nuance. The bakery prepares plain bagels two ways. After the circles of dough are boiled, burlap-covered paddles can be used to slide them directly onto the hearth, or the bagels can be placed on sheet trays for a slightly softer result. Although the best way to enjoy a bagel is within a few hours of baking, Friedman understands that this is not always possible. "If you can't have it fresh, warm it in the oven," he says. "The purist does not toast a bagel. The flavor is changed. A bagel baker should not even have a toaster."

➔ 2217 Beverly Blvd., L.A., 213-413-4114.



ART LEVKOVITZ,
COUNTERMAN
AT BARNEY
GREENGRASS

HEADS & TAILS

DON'T KNOW YOUR LOX FROM YOUR NOVA FROM YOUR SABLE? TAKE NOTE

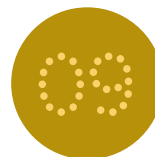
Shops that specialize in smoked and cured fish are sometimes known as “appetizing stores.” Their long, glistening fillets are laid out in cold cases, waiting for the order to be sliced. Although the two are often mistaken for each other, Nova and lox are prepared differently. Lox, the traditional deli salmon, has a saltiness that is the result of long curing. Many people ordering lox (the word is a derivation of *lachs*, Yiddish for salmon) may actually prefer the much milder but more expensive Nova; perhaps they’re only kept from asking for the pricier fish for fear of being on the receiving end of the “Look who’s eating Nova” gibe. Initially from Nova Scotia, Nova has come to signify preparation rather than provenance. The fillets are slightly cured, then smoked at a low temperature, which yields moist slices. Kippered salmon is smoked at a higher temperature, which renders a flaky consistency. Whitefish, a smoked freshwater fish, offers an ideal counterpoint to the richness of Nova when the two are combined in a toasted bialy with cream cheese. The flavors of the premium deli fish—sable and sturgeon—are also accentuated by simple contrast: Sable is sublime on pumpernickel, sturgeon on buttered rye with a thin slice of onion.

In Jewish homes, a deli fish platter allows one to host any occasion, from a *b’rit milah*, or circumcision, to a shivah, a period of mourning. “I get them when they’re coming and when they’re going,” says Gary Greengrass, owner of Barney Greengrass in Beverly Hills. ➤ 9570 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills, 310-777-5877.



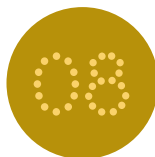
Canter's LOS ANGELES

➤➤ On Fairfax, stores that once might have run specials on Riga sprats now sport indoor skateboarding ramps. Canter’s remains L.A.’s quintessential deli. It offers everything to everyone, from suburbanites buying *rugelach* at the bakery to hipsters holding court in the Kibitz Room. “What commotion?” it seems to say of the neighborhood changes. “You should have seen Janis Joplin in here after a concert.” Breakfast has its own pace. The waffles are superb, and the corned beef with eggs sliced warm at the counter is best. When the bread mixer upstairs is rumbling, everything in the dining room, from babies’ cheeks to Jell-O, seems to jiggle. No one looks up. That’s the beauty. It sounds like an earthquake, but it’s only the challah. ➤ 419 N. Fairfax Ave., L.A., 323-651-2030 or canterdeli.com.



Billy's GLENDALE

➤➤ Evelyn “Evy” Rondino could have the best deli-waitress shtick in L.A. She delivers asides, performs double takes, and brushes off orders as wrong. “No, honey,” she might respond to a knockwurst sandwich request, “that’s not for you.” The old-fashioned interior is a curious mix of ceiling fans, sepia murals of downtown Glendale, and bas-relief moldings. A bakery counter serves black-and-white cookies and macaroons. Although the food has an uncompromising density, it is graced by telling detail—the homemade pickles are proof of that. Many come simply for the brisket sandwich au jus. Should you special-order the noodle kugel, Evy’s been known to say, “This will turn you into a nice Jewish boy,” as she sets down the portion. ➤ 216 N. Orange St., Glendale, 818-246-1689 or billysdeli.com.



Factor's LOS ANGELES

➤➤ From the candy display to the signed movie posters to the pleasant way that owner Suzee Markowitz stops by the tables, Factor’s offers lived-in comfort. The 59-year-old deli’s dash of showbiz is tempered by plenty of stuffed cabbage. A cold case features an excellent selection of meats as well as pickled green tomatoes and halvah. At breakfast connoisseurs go for the tongue and eggs scramble; lunch is a clamor of orders as the dining room fills up. During dinner the room buzzes. At one table a group of older men retell stories; at another, kids fresh from judo class slurp cream sodas. The liver and onions exemplifies griddle cooking, the meat blackened but not to the point of burning, the onions charred into moist submission. ➤ 9420 W. Pico Blvd., L.A., 310-278-9175 or factorsdeli.com.



Label's Table LOS ANGELES

➤➤ So the Pico Boulevard location could do with a coat of paint. Still, to see a roomful of people leaning into their juicy sandwiches and sipping their cream sodas gladdens the heart. Label’s interior has a kind of austerity. There is no table service—customers order at the counter and wait for their number to be called—but the impression of starkness dissolves before one of the towering sandwiches. Hot corned beef with a side of Sky-Hi Slaw is superlative. The newer Woodland Hills branch—in a mall, next to a FedEx Kinko’s—is far more cheerful and just as good as the 33-year-old original. Busboys and waitresses bustle, serving fine pastrami sandwiches to the crowd. ➤ 9226 W. Pico Blvd., L.A., 310-276-0388; 23311 Mulholland Dr., Woodland Hills, 818-222-1044; or labelstabledeli.com.

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