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**“New York Jewish Delis: A Photographic Essay”**

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For my Bar Mitzvah I had to create a major project that connected me to my Jewish roots, values, and role models. I have chosen to photographically document the Jewish delis of New York because I enjoy the creative process. I also **love** the eating process. And eating is something I like to share with my family.

My photo-essay explores and captures the life that stills thrives in the New York Jewish deli, a living museum. Nathan's is in it's 91<sup>st</sup> year of hotdog eating contests, Katz's is still sending those salami's to boys in the army, and the Carnegie still sells the biggest pastrami sandwich in New York, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Deli will soon be reopening on Toidy Toid and Toid. Today, the Jewish deli is not only for Jewish people, it's a place where people from all over the world come to explore, experience and taste Jewish culture.

But just to give a little background of my exploration; the deli is a piece of modern Jewish history. Between 1881 and 1924, two million Jewish people immigrated to America from Eastern Europe and three-quarters of them settled in New York City. Many of these immigrants entered the American mainstream through the food they sold. A large number of Jewish immigrants began as pushcart peddlers selling food products in their neighborhoods.

Some peddlers achieved success and moved from a pushcart to a small shop owner or deli owner. Others, in a display of American entrepreneurial spirit, became manufacturers of such big brands as Manischewitz, Hebrew National and Nathan's.

Many of the deli's still operating in New York are run by third and fourth generation family members. I found the delis to be very different from each other, but they also share a lot of connections. Through the food they serve, the traditions they continue to practice, all the proprietors share a special bond. There is still pride in what they do, what they offer, and a love for the life they have inherited.

When I go to a restaurant I look for a number of things; taste, atmosphere, service, and the character of the place. I think a Jewish deli is a Jewish restaurant with a lot of character.

When I walked into Katz's I felt a rush of traditions and Jewish culture. It is a timeless, living-history museum. It is also a New York City official landmark, and a staple in New York Jewish culture. During World War II, the three sons of Katz's owners were all serving their country in the armed forces, and the family tradition of sending food to their sons became the famous slogan "**Send a Salami To Your Boy In The Army.**" This sign still hangs behind the deli counter.

All this adds to Katz's character. Its signs, its waiters, its counter men, its chefs, even its food, have old time character. The head chef gladly shared with me that the corned beef is still made the old fashioned way, pickled for a month. He also shared his insights on what he thought happened to the late Abe Lebenwohl, the owner of the 2nd Avenue Deli who was shot to death in his delivery truck, but that's another story. The most important thing I learned at Katz's deli, was get your own sandwich and tip the counter men.

The Carnegie is a gathering place for many types of people. The customers are about 90% tourist families from all over the world. The staff is international. There are people from Tibet, Taiwan, Ireland, Greece, India, Indonesia, and many more. What I'm trying to say is that the Jewish deli isn't just for Jewish people. It is a gathering place for everyone.

When I have to go photograph a deli I always ask for the owner. When we told the owner of the Carnegie what we were doing for this project he instantly offered to take me around the restaurant and to take as many pictures as I wanted to. He also nicely let us skip the line and get seated quickly. As I went around the restaurant all the employees were telling me their nationality, the many years they have worked there, and they were happy to pose for a picture. At the Carnegie I felt like I was part of the family.

There are deli's and then there is one special Jewish restaurant where the atmosphere steals the show, Sammy's Romanian Steak House. Just entering the place is an experience. On one side of the room was a wedding party, on the other the Russians. Balloons were everywhere, the vodka was flowing, as a singer belted out hits from the 1970's. At Sammy's everything was a joke, the musician was so bad he was good, he made fun of himself, the restaurant, and everybody around him. Everybody was cracking up. The owner, who introduced himself as "Son of Sam", strange sense of humor, was able to laugh at himself and even call his own place a dump. Well it's a dump with a \$40 veal chop. The whole dining experience was a party; wait staff singing, and people dancing, it was just great. Sammy's is a place where you'll immediately feel at home. I also learned that evening, that Sammy's is the place where my Romanian great grandfather loved to party with his family.

Nathan's hotdogs is a big part of New York; its food, attitude, and style of on the go. It is a huge business consisting of franchises, with their own line of products and recipes. But although Nathan's is big now, it used to be hardly known.

Nathan Handwerker was born in Poland, in June 1892, and emigrated from Belgium to the U.S. In the U.S. he worked various small kitchen jobs in New York including working weekends at Feltmans, an established deli *restaurant* at Coney Island. After saving up \$300, Nathan was able to purchase his own place on the corner of Stillwell and Surf Avenues. But the crowd still went to Feltmans, the cheap half price Nathan's hotdog made them suspicious.

With entrepreneurial creativity and a desire to succeed, Nathan went with the Coney Island spirit and hired bums to stand around the store eating hotdogs to make the store look busy. He paid them in hotdogs. Unfortunately, it did not make a great impression. So Nathan took it to the next level by shaving the bums, making them take showers, and put doctors clothes on them. He then put up a sign that read, "If doctors eat our hot dogs, you know they're good!" The rest is history.

As I thought more about it, and as I looked back upon research, I realized how creatively Nathan used promotion to become a successful entrepreneur. Especially after surviving the 91<sup>st</sup> hot dog eating contest on July 4<sup>th</sup>.

These were my favorites and they were my most memorable experiences. But for my photo essay, I also visited : Russ and Daughters, Barney Green Grass, Yonah Schimmels, Guss' Pickles, Kossar's Bialys and The Stage Deli.

Of course, at all of these delis, portion size was never a problem. The problem was trying to eat it all. I felt like I was at my great aunt Zelda's house, so much food, so little time, and eyes so much bigger than my stomach.

After visiting all these historic Jewish landmarks, I believe the Jewish deli continues its heritage of a gathering place where people still go to find community and share a sense of home.

If I had to recommend two classic New York Jewish delis, my favorites are: Katz's and Sammy's Romanian. Katz's because it still feels like a neighborhood place. And Sammy's because it uniquely combines Jewish humor, nightlife and indigestion.

The deli is all about perspective. Some may think it's just a restaurant with a certain kind of food. Some may think of it as a hangout for family and friends. Some may think of it as a place to touch up on your roots, to try nasty sounding foods like tongue, chopped liver, grivens, schmaltz, and gefilte fish. And to quote Peter, my rabbi, "To some Jews, the delis were more of a sacred place than a synagogue."

For me, I enjoyed making discoveries on my pallet and connecting to my ancestors' lifestyles. Personally, I think all of these factors make up the deli. Overall, my main goal was to visually capture the history, humor, sense of family and diversity that makes up the classic New York deli as it exists today.