

PASTRAMI KING

196 Merrick Rd.
Merrick
516-377-4300

WHY: Deli classics and some surprises.

WHEN: Same menu all day, Tuesday to Sunday, noon to 10 p.m. Closed Monday.

HOW MUCH: Appetizers and soups, \$3.95 to \$10.95; sandwiches and salads, \$7.95 to \$13.95; entrees, \$9.95 to 21.95; desserts, \$4.95.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Ramp at entryway; rest rooms fully accessible.

By Joan Reminick

STAFF WRITER

Nothing brings on a bout of nostalgia for the great Jewish delis of yesteryear like a great pastrami sandwich. At Pastrami King in Merrick, the meat is warm, lush and peppery, piled high on fresh, crusty rye. It's a challenge for the human mouth to open wide enough for a bite.

And that's where the similarity to the delis along Memory Lane ends. Unlike the bare-bones establishments of old, Pastrami King's airy and attractive dining space is hung with tapestries and paintings. The menu is anything but kosher (cheese and meat appear everywhere in various combinations), even though several Jewish delicatessen favorites are present. If you're looking for those old-time deli waiters — proud, petulant professionals — you'd be hard-pressed to find any on this staff. On three occasions, servers proved ditzy and distracted, each in his or her own way. Cope.

Pickles and very good coleslaw may arrive immediately — or you might have to ask. The slaw's texture can vary from visit to visit, ranging from the rough-hewn to a fine julienne. Matzo ball soup is a winner, the rich golden broth floating noodles, vegetables and a single dense and savory ball. Beef barley soup comforts, recalling Grandma's flanken; lentil soup is hearty and substantial. But skip the crab cake appetizer. Although made with real crabmeat, it's mushy on the inside and not the reason you came.

On the other hand, you might be surprised at how good the Southern fried chicken salad with ranch dressing is. Made with pieces of boneless fried chicken, corn kernels, glazed pecans, red onion and vegetables, it's a combination that works. And they make a good classic Cobb salad that includes avocado, blue cheese, bacon, tomato, chopped egg and lettuce (although I wish



Newsday Photo / Michael E. Ach

Abe Yamali displays a pastrami sandwich special in his Merrick restaurant, Pastrami King.

the grilled chicken pieces were warm and not cut into such precise little cubes).

You won't go wrong with a warm corned beef sandwich, lean but not overly so. However, a tongue sandwich arrived ice-cold; our waitress had it slightly warmed, looking peeved to have to do so. Dryness marred an otherwise flavorsome turkey sandwich, but the chunky chicken salad was a treat. My hot dog made an audible snap when I bit into it and oozed garlicky juices, the way a hot dog should. Have yours with either the super hand-cut French fries or a marvelous baked potato knish.

Cranberries are part of the mixture in the house-made turkey burger, which I found heavy and just plain weird. But roast chicken is terrific, served with fine mashed potatoes. A special of salmon stuffed with spinach and crabmeat seemed like a bad idea when a friend ordered it, but the alliance proved to be an amazingly good one.

Conclude with some rugalach from the refrigerator case (do you dare to ask to have yours warmed a bit?) and a cup of tea. And drink to the fact that no matter how updated a deli might be, pastrami is always king. ■