

# A New Draw for the Delicatessan Crowd

By RICHARD JAY SCHOLEM

**M**URRAY, the central character in the play "A Thousand Clowns," says, "People fall into two distinct categories, Miss Markowitz; people who like delicatessen and people who don't like delicatessen." The pro-deli crowd is on a roll these days. After a long period of decline, Jewish delis are surging back on Long Island. A few years ago, Ben's opened a big one in Woodbury. More recently, Pickles started up in Port Washington, then Pastrami on Park in Rockville Centre, the City Deli in Huntington and two months ago the (516-377-4300).

The Pastrami King family has been in the delicatessen-restaurant business for a century. Their eating place on Queens Boulevard (it closed four years ago) seemed as though it was there forever. Generations of New Yorkers, many of whom now

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live on Long Island, tore into the deli's fabled house-cured, hand-cut pastrami and its other Eastern European specialties.

Although its pastrami is no longer cured on the premises and hand-cutting takes place only when it's requested, the Pastrami King is true to its sandwich-centered roots. It still turns out jaw-breaking sandwiches overloaded with stacks of moist meat. And sandwiches, be they traditional rye favorites, burgers or bagels, are what to order. The remainder of the long menu, which is split between conventional Jewish golden oldies and mostly lighter American main-line preparations, delivers more mixed results.

No matter what side of the menu diners choose, they still get nearly as much free food before ordering than many nouveau and nouvelle restaurants offer during an entire meal. A parade of good creamy cole slaw, pickles (new and dill) and baskets of thin-cut challah bread just keep coming, and soft drinks from the fountain are refilled at no additional charge.

Often menus are distributed as diners are getting seated. The service is sometimes too fast. On one visit, we received our entrees while we were still eating our appetizers.

In addition to the towering corned beef, brisket, tongue and pastrami sandwiches, burgers are a good bet and buy. The pastrami burger (\$11), with 10 ounces of meat topped with slices of pastrami and accompanied by fried potatoes, grilled onions, lettuce and tomatoes, sounded like culinary overkill to me, but its juicy, medium-rare beef and spicier counterpoint worked well. There are also dishes for cholesterol counters, including a Nova Scotia salmon platter (\$14) that came on two platters, one with rich skins-on potato salad and that cole slaw. The other came with a cascade of mild salmon, a toasted (though no longer warm) bagel, lots of cream cheese, onions, tomatoes and lettuce. Another light alternative is the Cobb salad (\$10.50), an agreeable mesh of white-meat chicken, avocado, blue cheese, bacon bits, tomato, chopped egg and lettuce in a good

balsamic vinaigrette.

The quality of starters and sides varied greatly, from a classic beef barley soup (\$4) that had me swooning to a merely passable matzo-ball soup (\$4). A fresh cheesy Caesar salad (\$5.50) was fine, but two bready, pasty crab cakes (\$11) absent any visible crab meat weren't. Two bulky stuffed cabbage (\$8.50) cylinders in a sweet raisin- and prune-studded sauce and potato knishes (\$2.75) with crusty surfaces and velvety-oniony filling drew nods of approval, but undistinguished, heavily battered onion rings (\$3) didn't. Crisp, tasty potato pancakes (\$2.50) made the grade, but limp French fries (\$3) needed salt and spunk. The moist, gutsy onion-crowned chopped chicken liver (\$6), like the beef barley soup, was a terrific classic.

A brisket of beef entree (\$15), layers of soft, thin-sliced meat allied with the two potato pancakes, a smidgen of apple sauce and hearty gravy, made a favorable impression, but a dryish roast turkey (\$14) main course that was bogged down in unannounced gloppy gravy was undistinguished.

Most desserts, all of which are large and eye-catching, come from an outside source. A cabernet pear almond tart was rich and comforting. A generous helping of cinnamon-covered rice pudding would have been better had it been flecked with raisins.

At the time of my visit (three and a half weeks after the opening), service, like the Pastrami King itself, was still in a shakedown period.