

# Deli talk with the old-timers

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| At Ben's Deli/ Courtesy Akiva Miller

## An evening at Ben's Deli with the Workmen's Circle

Akiva Miller

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Who can say no to a good pastrami sandwich, right? So when I got a chance to spend an evening at Ben's Kosher Delicatessen Restaurant in midtown Manhattan with members of the Workmen's Circle, I couldn't resist. The party assembles in the back room of Ben's, where the attendees, a few Bernie Sanders lookalikes among them, conspicuously outnumber their younger counterparts. The last arrivals settle in to their seats as Ann Toback, the executive director of the Workmen's Circle, remarks on Jewish food as a cultural foundation to the crunch of pickles.

Mini cabbage rolls are brought out as a starter as Ben's area manager, Hal Simon, begins his long discussion on the origins of deli staples in the Jews' old countries of Eastern Europe. The differences between pastrami, corned beef, and brisket are minutely explained. A comment is shouted from the audience: "These cabbage rolls aren't from Hungary; the Hungarian ones are sour, not sweet." Mr. Simon doesn't argue, and concedes that some liberties have been taken with the recipes. The cabbage rolls' sauce, we learn, has some cranberry sauce added to it for a richer flavor, a recent Canadian-inspired flourish unknown to our forefathers.

Over the next course, chicken soup loaded with both matzo balls and kreplach, the discussion turns to the business side of delis. So many delis have closed, so few remain. Just last year it was the Carnegie Deli, a once-fabled bastion, that shut its doors after 79 years. Mr. Simon runs through the reasons. Rising rents, rising salary costs, the new plethora of food styles to choose from, difficulties sourcing products, the transformation of the garment district, health awareness – all these have taken their toll on the popularity of Jewish comfort food. The white-haired heads nod knowingly, as if the decline of the deli is just one more chapter in the story of loss and dissipation that is aging. Even Ben's, which once mainly served the Garment District crowd, now caters mainly to tourists seeking a New York experience.



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As the main course of sliced pastrami on rye, mini knishes, and kasha varnishkes is served, Ben's *mashgicha* takes the stage to explain how the restaurant observes the strictures of *kashrut*. The feisty audience members, now comfortable with their collocutors and with full bellies, challenge her with hard questions, and she answers patiently. Nothing gets past Ben's *mashgichim*, all of whom are ordained Conservative rabbis, down to making sure that each

delivered item is properly labeled and certified, down to the dinner mints (kosher candy being one of the hardest items to source). No outside food is permitted, so Ben's even provides baby food for its youngest patrons.

I strike up a conversation with Bob and Marcia Kaplan, Workmen's Circle stalwarts, sitting at my table. Small plates of delicious freshly-baked rugalach are placed before us. "The Workmens' Circle is my Jewish identity" Bob tells me. He is a former president and current secretary of the organization. He's seen five generations – from his grandparents to his grandchildren – find in it their Jewish community. Alongside Jewish cultural programming, social justice activism, and secular values, schmoozing with friends in a deli is what it's all about.