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PAMELA ANDERSON



## IN THE KITCHEN

BY RICHARD CARLSON



Here at Epicure, Ike Starkman presides over the produce in Miami Beach's foremost gourmet supermarket, part of his Jerry's Famous Deli food empire.

# WE LIKE IKE

...and Rascal House, and Epicure, and Jerry's Famous Deli

Let's raise a glass—preferably of Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray soda—to the effervescent role that the delicatessen has played in American, and Miami Beach, cultural life. The concept started just before the turn of the 20th century, when Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, notably Poland, Russia and Germany, arrived in New York and started small eateries stocked with foods they craved from the "old country." By the 1920s, Jewish households were flocking to delis like matzo balls to soup, and in 1961, when Isaac "Ike" Starkman arrived in New York from his native Tel Aviv, the golden age of delicatessens was in full swing.

No longer just a gathering place for nostalgic Jewish immigrants, the deli became a social center for New York City's posttheatre and -concert crowds, as well as Catskills versions of the Algonquin Round Table—venues where writers, comedians and show-biz types would wisecrack over six-inch-high sandwiches of corned beef and pastrami. Young Ike couldn't have known that within a few decades he'd become the most successful operator of kosher-style delicatessens in America—one who would employ almost 700 workers in Miami Beach alone.

*"And now, as the electric sign blazed up again, lighting up the words Jewish National Delicatessen, it was as if we had entered into our rightful heritage."—Alfred Kazin, in A Walker in the City*

Wolfie Cohen's Rascal House opened at 172nd and Collins Avenue in 1954, when affordable hotels such as the Thunderbird, Dunes and Sahara dominated the neighboring beachfront, and Northeastern, largely Jewish vacationers lined up to get into the New York-style deli for their sandwiches, sour pickles, blintzes, stuffed cabbages, potato latkes, matzo balls, egg creams and babkas. Rascal House was more than a restaurant, it was a social hall, the neighborhood meeting ground. In the mid-'70s, when Collins Avenue went into decline, Motel Row was on the skids, and area restaurants were forced to pack it up, the 600-seat Rascal House was still packing them in. Sunny Isles has since risen again, now with sleek condos and young residents of vari-

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## IKE STARKMAN

ous ethnicities replacing the knish-loving snowbirds of old. The aging and dwindling nature of the traditional deli clientele caught many a purveyor of pastrami off-guard, but in 1978, when Ike Starkman opened his first Jerry's Famous Deli in Studio City, California, he did so with a modern-day model in mind: Like a savvy political candidate, Ike knew that the future of delicatessens would be all about expanding the base.

"When I opened Jerry's, delis were obviously dying. It was the Jewish store, but beyond that, the variety of food was limited; they were not getting out of their shells. If you have a party of four, six, eight people who want to go out, not everybody wants to eat pastrami. So you need to create a place for all people."

And so he did, not only widening the breadth of selections, but also bringing back the energetic ambiance of New York delicatessens in their heyday. "We attracted young people to Jerry's. It became the place to go to be seen, after a movie, before a movie, for a casual dinner." Plus, there was the L.A. nightlife, and, as Ike explains, "The liquor licenses only operate until 2 a.m., so we basically became the place for after-hours." Starkman would eventually bring his "deli for the new millennium" blueprint to Miami Beach.

*"More concentrated and more filling than other food-stuffs, a frankfurter or a corned-beef sandwich goes a long way toward satisfying the appetite."—Mogen David Delicatessen Magazine, 1931*

By the time Starkman (with partner Jonathan Mitchell) purchased the Rascal House in 1996, he had already made a name for himself on the West Coast, having grown Jerry's into six other successful California locations. He was, in other words, experienced enough to know that an institution such as Rascal House, which was serving upwards of 8,000 meals a day, didn't call for radical transformation (although Starkman didn't need to curb his enthusiasm as much when designing Boca Raton's new Rascal House in 1998). "I didn't want to change it," he says, "I wanted to perpetuate it." So although he pumped more than \$1 million into upgrading the cavernous kitchens and refurbishing the dining rooms, he did so "in a way so nobody feels that anything is different." Indeed, visiting the Rascal House on a Saturday night is like taking a trip back in time: Veteran waitresses (not necessarily the smiley, perky type) schmooze with long-time patrons in what is still clearly as much social club as dining establishment. And the club has become more inclusive these days, gleefully absorbing an influx of new Hispanic residents. Pass the pickles!

Foodwise, too, Ike was careful not to veer too far from an established and successful model. The Rascal House experience still encompasses pots of beets, pickles and coleslaw, bountiful baskets of assorted fresh breads and rolls, and gargantuan servings of home-cooked food. Starkman often speaks of the importance of variety, but his primary mantra is quality. He exudes enormous pride in this, even referring to himself as being "like the last of the Mohicans," in that most everything at his delis is prepped, cooked, cured, smoked, baked and pickled on the premises.

One other aspect about Rascal House remains



Jerry's Famous Deli, on the corner of Collins and Española Way, has brought back the energetic ambiance of New York delicatessens in their heyday.

Rascal House was more than a restaurant, it was a social hall. Sunny Isles has since risen again, now with sleek condos and young residents of various ethnicities replacing the knish-loving snowbirds of old. "I didn't want to change it," he says, "I wanted to perpetuate it."



A perennial favorite, Rascal House now purveys familiar delights to an evolving Sunny Isles crowd.

the same: People still queue up to get in. If anything, the lines are longer, which says a lot for a place that, in just one 13-year period, served more than 41 million meals (seven million of which involved corned beef).

*"They didn't even have enough brains to take a couple of good pastrami sandwiches."—Leo Steiner, owner of the famous Carnegie Delicatessen, after it was robbed in 1986*

Certainly the SoBe crowd at Jerry's Famous Deli on a late Friday evening is not the same as you'd find at Hoffman's Cafeteria in the 1930s, which was the original occupant of the space located on the corner of Collins and Española Way. Like its predecessor in Los Angeles, this 300-seat Jerry's, since opening five years ago, has been the ultimate postclub place to be. As Ike puts it, "Some people can stay in the clubs for 24 hours, but most people leave after two or three. On the way home they like to stop and eat in a place



## IKE STARKMAN

where they can talk to each other."

Perhaps they talk about what they're going to eat—Jerry's has more than 700 items, from standard deli fare to, well, just about everything. "It's okay to serve pizza in a deli," Ike insists. "It's okay to serve oriental chicken salad, and cobb salad, and to introduce lighter foods. It's the way people eat nowadays. Some people say, 'You can't do that. A deli is a deli is a deli.' But I don't think so."

He manages to satisfy the purists, too, by keeping what he calls "the hard-core deli" items on hand, even though he admits that "people don't eat this stuff anymore. They don't eat herring, or schmaltz, or kishke. We carry it just so people who stop in and want it can get it." He also stocks Dr. Brown's Soda, the *vin du pays* of Brooklyn, explaining that "while it's not as popular as it once was, you couldn't be a deli without it."

Nor could you be a legitimate deli without serving reputable renditions of corned beef and pastrami, hot and steamy between slices of fresh-baked rye bread. In New York days of old, the relative merits of these meats used to be debated with the same intensity as Eisenhower versus Stevenson, or Willie versus Mickey. When pressed, Starkman offers that he's in the corned-beef camp, which, like the red states, has been the majority for a while. Just the same, pastrami seems the ultimate symbol of delicatessen splendor: Cured with spice and streaked with fat, it is beef's answer to bacon.



Epicure stocks old-style fare as well as sophisticated gourmet foods, reflecting the gamut of demand.



Jerry's Famous Deli carries more than 700 items on its capacious menu.



Pastrami is the ultimate symbol of delicatessen splendor: Cured with spice and streaked with fat, it is beef's answer to bacon. Sandwich at Jerry's Famous Deli.

"Epicure Market has been here for 60 years; it is part and parcel of the history of Miami Beach. I started improving it about six years ago. We have expanded it, brought in better foods, delicacies from around the world."

*"As I see it, there are two types of people in this world: People who love deli, and people you shouldn't associate with."*—Damon Runyon, posted in Jerry's Famous Deli

Ike Starkman recalls arriving in Miami Beach for the first time and happening upon a gourmet market on Alton Road in South Beach: "It was one of the best in the country. When I first saw Epicure I thought it was a dream." Epicure wasn't a dream, nor is it a deli—but it is, like Rascal House, a landmark property. So when Ike snapped it up in 1999 he applied the same formula: Upgrade the quality and variety, but in a cautious fashion. "Epicure Market has been here for 60 years; it is part and parcel of the history of Miami Beach. I started improving it just about six years ago. When I started, the selection was a little narrow. We have expanded it, brought in better foods, delicacies from around the world. Our clientele has almost doubled."

When asked to what he attributes the market's success, Ike answers without pause: "if you have a team of wonderful people, like we do, who understand what we want, and what the people who opened it 60 years ago wanted, that's the key thing. We have the best people at Epicure. We also have the best variety and quality of prepared foods anywhere."

These days, excepting annual visits to his native Tel Aviv ("I'm very dedicated to the Jewish and Israeli causes"), Ike spends much of his time traveling in a triangle from Miami to Los Angeles to New York, where he operates concessions in Broadway theaters. "It's a pretty good situation. But mainly I love coming here. I like that everything is in one place, like a real island—it's part of the United States, but also like an offshoot. It has become so quality-oriented, and the places to go are endless. That's terrific."

There may be even more places on the horizon, as Starkman and partner Mitchell have plans to expand Jerry's and Epicure—but don't expect any-

thing too soon. "We'll do it very deliberately. I want to make sure we perpetuate what we have, keep the quality, make sure it doesn't become just another chain. That's why it takes a long time. It's not like opening a fast-food operation."

While Starkman has long championed a culinary combination of quality and quantity, at this point, concerning his own life, he is focused more on the former: "Whatever I do I want to do less, and better." His two sons are poised to take over—though, according to Ike, they already have: Guy runs the operations in Los Angeles, and Jason runs the operations here. "I work for both of them, and I never worked so hard in my life." He laughs when he says this, but he's quite serious in his belief that Rascal House, Epicure Market and Jerry's Famous Deli have played and continue to play an important role in keeping Miami Beach culture alive. And the words painted on Jerry's Deli's window, "in perpetuity," are an indication he plans on keeping them that way for quite some time. 