



THE ALL-NIGHT DINER

Kreplach, Kasha, Goulash and Schnitzel:

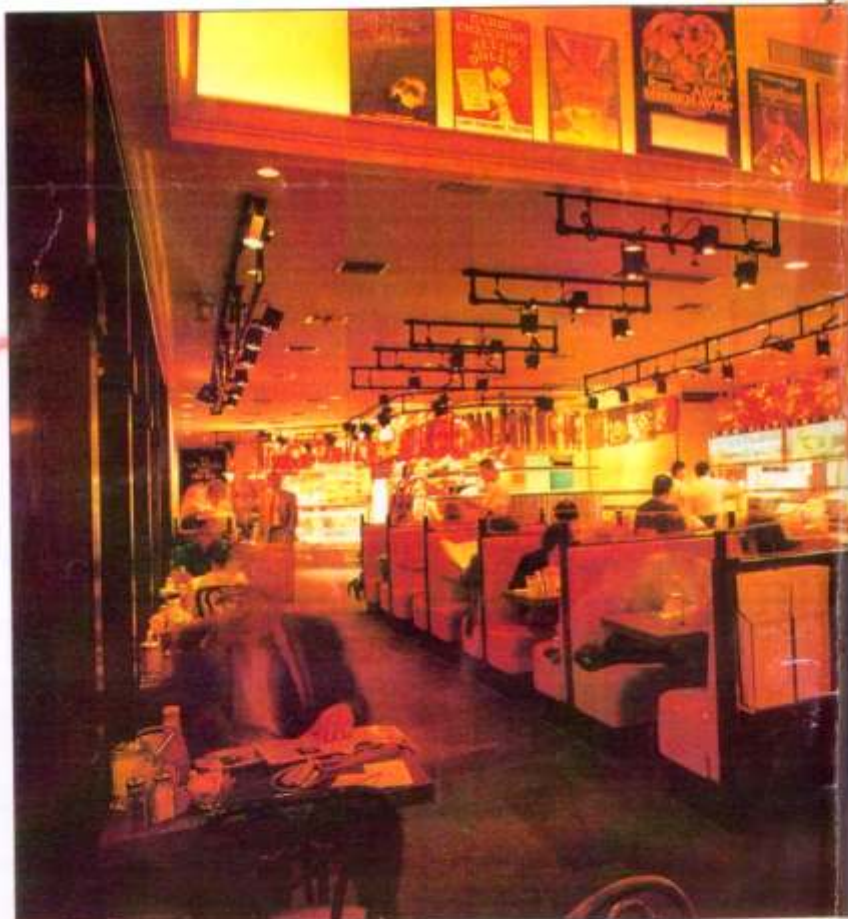
The stellar cuisine of Jerry's Famous Deli.

A COMMON COMPLAINT among New York expatriates is the dearth of real delicatessen food in the land of smog and sunshine. L.A. deli cuisine, or so the litany goes, is bland at best, while the restaurants themselves lack the friendly atmosphere of a typical neighborhood joint back East. While this assessment is not without some merit, Jerry's Famous Deli rivals anything the Big Apple has to offer.

Sharing a building with the Sports Center Bowl in Studio City, Jerry's quickly became a favorite hangout for actors, executives and technicians from nearby Universal Studios and Technicolor Laboratories when it opened 10 years ago. At almost any hour, Jerry's is crowded with happy eaters bantering with the cheerful staff. More upscale in appearance than most deli restaurants, Jerry's prices are reasonable and the portions enormous.

Not surprisingly, the ambience is more Hollywood than Lower East Side. Photos of celebrities crowd the walls alongside framed theatrical and movie posters; lighting from spotlights suspended from the ceiling adds to the showbiz atmosphere. Jerry's Encino deli, open only a few months and already jam-packed, shares the menu and decor of the original location.

While New York purists may find the interior decoration less than compelling, the food at Jerry's more



Onstage at Jerry's Famous Deli: Pastrami stars, desserts in supporting roles.

Fake

Stagehands:
Jerry's bartender Todd Sanders
and waitress Ann Sweeney.



Photos by Richard Buckley/Onion

than compensates. While nibbling on the complimentary pickle assortment, the diner can peruse an extensive menu that offers everything from traditional deli sandwiches, fish plates

and salads to more unexpected choices—steamed artichokes, chicken chili, Beluga caviar. Complete dinners, costing from \$7.75 to \$14.95 and available at any hour, run the gamut from Mitteleuropean fare (such as Wienerschnitzel, Hungarian goulash and roast duck) to daily seafood and chicken specials prepared with a modern California touch. In a peculiarly West Coast example of cultural hybridization, they also offer guacamole served with bagel chips and salsa (\$3.95). Both restaurants have a full bar, an extensive selection of domestic and imported beers, and a

short list of wines available by the bottle or glass.

But the merit of any deli worth its chopped liver is determined by how well it handles the basics, and in this regard Jerry's is a strong contender for the title of "Best Deli in Los Angeles." A good starting point at Jerry's is a bowl of chicken matzo ball soup (\$3.35). Based on a rich, hearty, homemade stock, it comes loaded with chunks of chicken and a surprisingly light matzo ball. The soup also can be ordered with either noodles, rice, kreplach, kasha or a whole chicken leg in place of the aforementioned dough-ball. No matter the final creation, the soup is superior to any other restaurant version available on either side of the Sepulveda Pass.

Critics have rightly pointed to the seeming inability of any deli west of the Rockies to produce decent pastrami. Sadly, the typical specimen in these parts is a dry, flaky travesty with the flavor and texture of salty cardboard. Given the quality, the usually skimpy portions are almost an undisguised blessing. But Jerry's delicious New York-style sandwich (\$6.95) redeems the notion of West Coast pastrami. Piled high on fresh,

chewy rye bread redolent of caraway seeds, the thinly sliced meat is lean, spicy and succulent. Easily enough for two, it's a triumph of curing and seasoning, even if the accompanying potato salad is only so-so. In a city-wide pastrami showdown, only Langer's deli near MacArthur Park can surpass it. Other sandwich choices include excellent pepper beef, tongue and brisket.

Though it can be difficult, saving room for dessert is highly recommended. Jerry's offerings run from freshly made rice and bread puddings (\$2.35) to the caloric overload of their "suicide chocolate cake" (\$3.50). The Snickers cake made with—surprise—Snickers candy bars (\$3.95) is a favorite. But it's Jerry's cheesecake (\$3.25), flown in fresh from New York, that takes top dessert honors. The luxuriously rich and creamy cheesecake also can be jazzed up with toppings that include blueberry, chocolate and cherry for an additional 60 cents.

For those who prefer a hearty breakfast, a daunting variety of egg dishes, cereals and fruits are served around-the-clock. Particularly well prepared are Jerry's scrambled eggs with lox and sauteed onions (\$7.35) and the spinach omelette (\$6.35). Jerry's matzo brie (crushed matzos soaked in egg and fried, \$5.35), served with apple sauce or sour cream, is especially homey and satisfying.

Many of the local establishments purporting to serve delicatessen cuisine turn out to be nothing more than glorified coffee shops with all the ethnic *vérité* of Wonder Bread. Perhaps nothing short of a parking-lot mugging will convince certain Eastern emigres of the "authenticity" of any deli west of the Hudson, but nighttimers making the trip to Jerry's will find that the quality, flavor and variety of the food challenges any offered on either coast.

Jerry's Famous Deli is located in Studio City at 12655 Ventura Blvd. (818) 980-4245. In Encino, Jerry's is at 16650 Ventura Blvd. (818) 906-1800. Complete dinners with dessert cost from \$10 to \$18. In addition to the restaurant, both locations boast full-service delicatessen and bakery counters open 24 hours. Jerry's also offers party platters and catering service. Delivery is available until 1:30 a.m. with a \$15 minimum order (delivery fee based on distance). Visa, Mastercard, American Express and Diners Club accepted.