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# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## The Jewish Deli

Elisa Leonelli · Thursday, April 14th, 2022

An [exhibition at the Skirball Cultural Center](#) about the history of the Jewish Deli is humorously titled “I’ll Have What She’s Having” from the famous line uttered by a woman played by director Rob Reiner’s own mother in the movie *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) after Meg Ryan fakes an orgasm while eating a deli sandwich with Billy Crystal. That scene plays on a monitor—[watch it here](#).



Jewish Deli neon sign-photo by Elisa Leonelli

“The Jewish Deli” explores, through neon signs, menus, advertisements, uniforms, photographs and video clips, how Jewish immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe imported and adapted food traditions to create a uniquely American restaurant. Delicatessen is a German word that loosely translates to “a place to find delicious things to eat.”



Rena and Harry at Drexler's Deli, North Hollywood 1970s

One of the curators, Lara Mart, told the poignant story of Rena Drexler, who was liberated from the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland on May 8, 1945, then with her husband Harry moved to Los Angeles in 1951 and opened Drexler's Deli on Burbank Boulevard in 1957. Her words are on the wall: "After all those years of being hurt as a young girl, I needed to learn to trust people again. And this deli helped me do that."





Shapiro's Delicatessen, Indianapolis c.1932

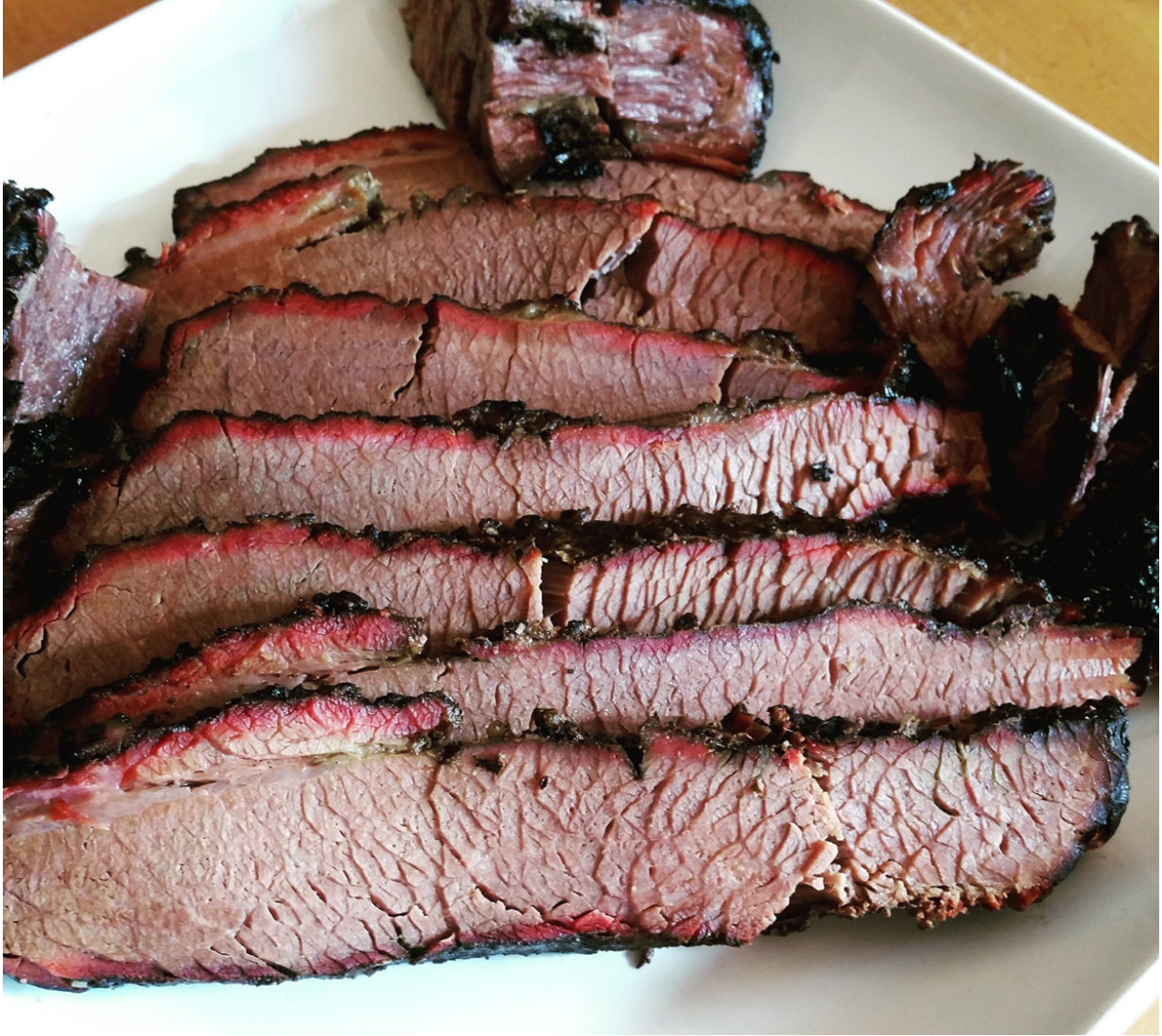
Visitors are encouraged to share their favorite deli memories, so here's mine. You may ask, what does an Italian know about Jewish food? But actually there are many similarities between the two cuisines, as I soon discovered after moving to the United States in late December 1971, to join my future husband, who I met in Rome, Italy, at his parents' home in Teaneck, New Jersey. When I first visited Los Angeles in early 1972, we were staying on Laurel Canyon and I was introduced to [Greenblatt's](#) at 8017 Sunset Blvd, the very first deli in Los Angeles, opened in 1926, which sadly closed in August 2021.



Jewish Deli uniforms-photo by Elisa Leonelli

Canter's Deli, at 419 Fairfax Ave, opened in Jersey City in 1924 and in Los Angeles in 1931. When I moved to Los Angeles in May 1973, after living in San Francisco and New York, I used to get lunch from Langer's Deli, at 704 Alvarado Street, opened in 1947, because it was close to my job as controller of the prints' color balance at Alpha Photo lab.





Brisket of beef

Of the deli meats, like corned beef and pastrami, my favorite is brisket, very similar to the boiled beef that is mixed with chicken for the Italian version of chicken soup, which I much prefer to Matzo ball soup. The best brisket for my taste is from [Fromin's Delicatessen](#) at 1832 Wilshire Blvd in Santa Monica. The latest deli that I sampled is [Wise Sons](#) in Culver City, opened in August 2021, but they don't even offer brisket, so I ordered their corned beef.



Lox and bagels

I still enjoy the [lox and bagels](#) that are included in breakfast buffets of upscale hotels like the Four Seasons, and, of course, they were served at the Skirball press preview. Lox means salmon in [Yiddish](#), the Germanic language spoken by Ashkenazi Jews in Central Europe. A list of Yiddish words and their meaning is included in the exhibit. I had learned some early on from my Jewish relatives. I was a [shiksa](#), a non-Jewish woman, and my husband often played a [schlemiel](#), a fool, in our *Chicken Little Comedy Show*.

“The Jewish Deli” is on view at the Skirball from April 14 to September 4, 2022. Get your timed tickets [at this link](#).

*Featured photo: Jewish Deli, When Harry Met Sally by Elisa Leonelli (c) 2022*

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