



Thumbs up for kosher hot dogs: Frank Paduano digs in at Pastrami N Friends in Commack. STEWART AIN/JW

## 'You Come Here And Buy Memories'

With a recent rash of kosher deli closings across Long Island, a staple of Jewish life is dying out.

Stewart Ain  
Staff Writer

And then there were two — kosher delis left in Suffolk County, that is.

Like independent bookstores or Amtrak stops on the Great Plains, the Long Island kosher deli, squeezed by changing demographics and eating habits, as well as competition from superstores like Costco and Trader Joe's, is fast becoming a thing of the past.

In the past year alone, five kosher delis have closed in Nassau and Suffolk, two of them with histories stretching back more than a half-century. Several others, with their proprietors' eyes peeled on the bottom line, have converted, so to speak, from kosher to non-kosher.

One recent afternoon, Barry Holzman and his wife, Arlene, who were visiting from upstate Cambridge, peered with obvious relish at the display counter in the front of Pastrami N Friends, a kosher deli in Commack. It was filled with deli staples like lean cuts of pastrami and corned beef, tongue, knishes, creamy potato salad and coleslaw.

"You come here and buy memories," said Holzman, who said he remembered this food from his childhood.

If Jewish memories can't always pay the delis' bills, especially in an area where the Jewish population is thinning out, perhaps non-Jewish ones can.

As he made change behind the counter, Ronny Roman, an owner of Pastrami N Friends, quipped, "We truly are a United Nations of customers."

He was making change for Mike Phillips of Huntington, who is African American, while Xian Chen, also of Huntington, waited for a table, and Frank Paduano of Ronkonoma downed a frankfurter hot off the grill on his way out.

Paduano's lunch companion, George Cavanagh,

paid their check and confided, "I'm Irish and I bring all my clients here. I come for the pastrami sandwich — there's nothing else like it."

Only a few of the customers interviewed during the busy lunch hour Monday said they were Jewish. The others either grew up eating kosher deli food or developed a taste for it after eating at Pastrami N Friends.

Ernie Quartarone, who opened Pastrami N Friends in 1975, said in an interview last week that there had once been four or five other kosher delis within a five-mile radius of his store. Today, his and Zan's Kosher Deli, about 25 minutes away in Lake Grove, are the only ones left following the closing last month of Commack Kosher Caterers Deli & Market and of Delsen's Kosher Delicatessen in Bay Shore last year.

Of course, Long Island is not the only place where kosher delis are closing. Last fall, the last full-service kosher restaurant on the demographically morphing Lower East Side, Noah's Ark, closed its doors (a non-kosher diner is reportedly taking its place). But the situation is particularly acute on the Island, away from Orthodox strongholds like the Five Towns, Great Neck and Plainview.

"There are fewer Jews [in Suffolk] and fewer who are keeping kosher in this part of the world," said Rabbi Jonathan Waxman, spiritual leader of the Conservative Temple Beth Sholom in Smithtown, L.I.

Pat Ruggiero, the owner of Zan's, agreed: "There is no growth in the Suffolk Jewish community, and there are fewer practicing Jews here who keep kosher. There are many who are just Jewish by descent, and there is a lot of intermarriage."

Caryl Walsh of Huntington, who is Jewish, brought her mother, Beth Stull, for lunch at Pastrami N Friends.

"She loves the Jewish deli," Walsh said. "She loves the chicken salad and coleslaw. And the size of the sandwiches you get here you don't get elsewhere."

Chen said he comes regularly because "the food is good." He said he has had non-kosher deli meats and prefers kosher meat.

"I don't know why, but the other just doesn't taste the same," he said.

Despite the changing demographic landscape, Quartarone said he plans to remain kosher.

But two longtime kosher landmarks on Long Island, Deli King in New Hyde Park and Boomy's in Plainview, became non-kosher in the last year.

"There isn't as much kosher business as there once was," Harvey Ovadia, Boomy's owner, said in explaining the switch. "And our clientele was getting older." He said he became non-kosher six months ago after 30 years in business. "It was tough," said Ovadia, who is Jewish.

Asked if he lost business as a result of the switch, Ovadia replied, "Not a lot."

Has business improved? "No."

But his bottom line has improved because, Ova-

dia said, there is a 10 to 20 percent price difference in what he now pays for food. "It's the only way to make it nowadays," he said.

David Newman, executive director of the JCRC-Long Island, suggested that the delis have failed because of a change in people's eating habits.

"Perhaps people are not eating out as much or the Jewish diet may be different from what it was 10 years ago," he said.

That was confirmed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which found last year that meat consumption declined 12.2 percent between 2007 and 2012; the agency said the decline continued slightly in 2013 and predicted meat consumption would fall still further in 2014. And National Public Radio's nationwide poll of 3,000 adults last year found that 39 percent said they eat less meat than they did three years ago.

Newman noted that the latest UJA-Federation Jewish Population Study in 2011 said the number of Jews in Suffolk decreased in 10 years from 90,000 to 86,000. It said also that the Jewish population in Nassau increased from 221,000 to 230,000.

Rabbi Howard Buechler, spiritual leader of the Dix Hills Jewish Center, said there is more to the change than a declining Jewish population.

"From Florida to upstate New York and New Jersey, the trend has been that large chain supermarkets have sections dedicated to kosher bakeries, butchers and takeout," he said. "Several Costco stores have a huge array of kosher food — including a kosher dairy bakery. So there has been a seismic shift in how people get kosher food. It more available than ever."

Menachem Lubinsky, president and CEO of Lubicom Marketing and Consulting and an

expert on the kosher food industry, pointed out that not only have "supermarkets and club stores like Costco, Target and Trader Joe's ventured into kosher in a big way ... [but] there are also a number of super kosher stores that are capturing the lion's share of the business."

But for some, there is nothing like deli meats.

Laura Conigliario said she grew up on Long Island, moved with her family to Chandler, Ariz., 13 years ago, and "missed" Pastrami N Friends.

"We tried to find other hot dogs, but there is nothing like it out there," she said. "We used to come here every week. We're leaving tomorrow and I'm here now buying to bring it home with us. Yes, Italians know what a good hot dog is."

Ronald Dagoon, the owner of Ben's, arguably the most successful kosher deli chain and one that is opening another store in Scarsdale this summer, said he believes delis are failing because of a "decrease in the number of kosher processors, which has resulted in prices going up."

"And there used to be many kosher slaughterhouses," he added. "Now very few are left and prices are very high. Between the cost of product, rent, electric and gas and all kinds of labor pressures today — rightfully so — put that all in the mix and it becomes very difficult to make a living."

Dagoon said he succeeded because "I want to be more of a restaurant than a delicatessen. ... The restaurant section is separate [from the deli counter] and has more of a restaurant feel."

Ruggiero pointed out that not only are many kosher delis hurting but kosher butchers are hurting as well.

In addition to the demise of Commack Kosher, which had been in business for 60 years, Kosher Emporium in Merrick closed last year. Interestingly, another glatt kosher butcher, For Goodness Steaks, opened in January in Merrick.



Woodbury Kosher Meats' co-owners Andrew Feldman and Ray Lisoski: "More of a family business than an impersonal place."

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Among the kosher delis that have closed in the last year: Adel's Kosher Delicatessen, which closed in December after 60 years in Roslyn Heights; and Deli on Rye in Albertson. Another deli, Ruven's in Plainview, closed a few years ago.

At Woodbury Kosher Meats & Catering in Hicksville, L.I., a customer, Lisa Hadar of Woodbury, said she believes the fact that Commack Kosher and many of the kosher delis were not under Orthodox supervision contributed to their demise.

"The Orthodox didn't go because they said it was not kosher enough," she said.

And she pointed out that supermarkets like Fairway that carry kosher meat and kosher prepared food "are open on Shabbat and can still sell glatt kosher meat."

One of Woodbury Kosher's owners, Ray Lisoski, said part of his shop's success lies in its sense of tradition. "We help customers continue following their mothers' traditional recipes. This is more of a family business than an impersonal place — and we're going after the younger crowd."

Another shopper, Dawn Grabois of Plainview, said she had once lived in Commack and found herself "the only kosher person in that neighborhood."

"There are very few of my generation who keep kosher," Grabois, 48, said. "None of my friends do. They look at the prices and say, 'It's so much money.'"

Jonathan Greenfield, the owner of Shoprite stores in Plainview and Commack, said that because of the closing of Commack Kosher he intends to increase the amount of kosher meat he sells in his Commack store. "The demand is there," he said.

"Kosher is growing in those areas that have a core Orthodox clientele, and declining in those areas that do not have the core base," Lubinsky observed.

One of Plainview's kosher establishments, Kosher Emporium, was sold this month to 24-year-old Denny Wang, who said he plans to continue keeping it glatt kosher under the supervision of the Vaad of Queens.

"I have a lot of Jewish friends I am close to and I see that there is a need for such a store here," Wang said. "I feel the community is supportive of it and I want to keep it here. The community people I have talked to said they are glad I'm keeping it kosher."

While Wang may have a good shot in a place like Plainview, Scott Horowitz, president of Nassau Provisions, the only kosher wholesaler on Long Island, sounded an ominous note. He said the only way for delis to survive is to find "a new way of presenting it — kosher tapas, for instance — to introduce people to corned beef and pastrami. If they taste it, they will like it. ... It is not the staple it once was, and if they don't get the young people, there is no future in the business." ■



Beth Stull stares down a thick sandwich at Pastrami N Friends. STEWART AIN/JW



Arlene and Barry Holzman at the deli counter. STEWART AIN/JW