

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

spaces

Canyons & Valley Edition

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July/August 2008

Corned beef and comfort

Sunday morning at

LA's best (and busiest) deli

*A work of art, a work of love
— corned beef on rye, hot, juicy
and ready to go.*



By Merrill Shindler

By 9 o'clock on Sunday morning, they're already lined up at Brent's Deli in Northridge, waiting for a table or take-out order. An hour later, the crowd has turned into an affable mob of couples and families, all daydreaming of bagels and smoked fish, omelets and matzo brie. Forget "Eat at Joe's" — at Parthenia and Corbin, it's "Eat at Brent's."

Since 1994, without missing a year, Brent's has ranked as Southern California's No. 1 deli in the Zagat Restaurant Sur-



Brent's founder Ron Peskin, left, with son Brent.

PHOTOS: PAUL JONASON

vey. There isn't another restaurant in town, of any kind, that's run up a record like that. Indeed, it's been argued that Brent's isn't just the best deli in Southern California, but in America, a notion that doesn't sit well with New Yorkers. And yet,

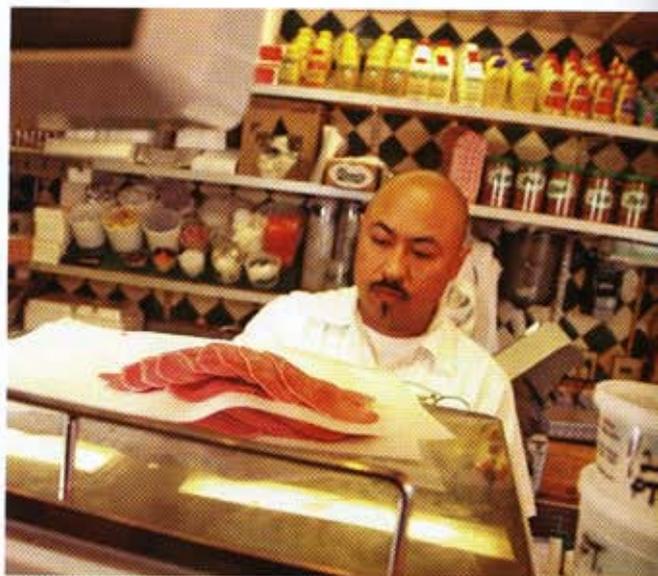
there's truth in it — where the delis of New York are a dying breed, Brent's has prospered and grown; the new Brent's in Westlake Village is nearly as busy as the original. And it has a full bar to boot. (Have some Ketel One with your knish!)

Ron Peskin bought Brent's Deli for \$1,800 in 1969. As luck would have it, his son, a youngster at the time, was also named Brent, so it turns out the sign didn't need to be changed. The eatery that once had room for 60 diners now seats 180. By the '80s, Brent's was a culinary phenomenon, on its way to becoming an institution as beloved as

Philippe the Original and Pink's.

Brent's remains a family business. Ron Peskin shares the workload with wife Patricia, son Brent and daughter-in-law Dori, daughter Carie and son-in-law Marc.

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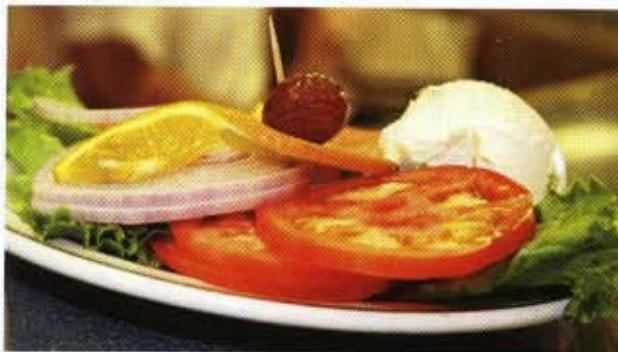


Deli manager Luis Melchor, one of the many Mexican-born workers at Brent's, who try to live up to the motto, "Se Habla Yiddish."

On an average Sunday, the restaurant serves a thousand diners and prepares catering for another thousand; several hundred more drop by to pick up something to go. By closing time, diners have consumed an estimated 150 pounds of lox, 200 dozen bagels and countless eggs.

"You wouldn't believe how many people order a corned beef or a pastrami on rye for breakfast," says Brent Peskin. "If it's on the menu, we serve it all day long."

It takes about 50 workers to keep things running smoothly on a Sunday, including three deli guys who never stop moving.



Where the deli meats give the eggs a sense of purpose, and where no order of bagels and lox is right without a side of onions, olives, tomatoes and cream cheese.



QUICK FACT

The word "delicatessen" comes to us from both the German "delikatessen" and the French "délicatesse." Either way, it refers to delicacies or delicious things to eat. So enjoy.

To stand behind the counter and watch them is to be in the presence of perpetual motion – human jugglers who can hold half a dozen conversations at once, while carefully slicing beef brisket for a customer who wants his meat cut ... just so.

Running it all is longtime deli manager Luis Melchor, a native of Mexico. Most of the workers at Brent's are also Mexican and had never seen a deli, never even heard of one. Chopped liver burritos are not a dish found anywhere south of the border. But, Melchor says, "I'm thinking about opening a Jewish deli down there. I think people would like it. And I'd have the only one."

The crowd grows steadily. The orders spin on the wheel, with Brent Peskin keeping an eye on the ebb and flow. The family patriarch arrives to see how things are going. "Watching this makes me hungry," says Ron Peskin. "But where will I sit? All the tables are taken. The counter is full. There are people waiting. I'd never bump them for myself."



RESTAURANT	Brent's Deli 18565 Parthenia Street Northridge 818.886.5679
RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED?	For parties of eight or more only
BREAKFAST FOR TWO	About \$40

Brent's Deli doesn't give out its recipes, but don't worry — we won't leave you hungry. There's a book called *America's Great Delis* by Sheryll Bellman, filled with wonderful recipes. Here are some of my favorites:



Carnegie Deli (New York) Matzo Balls

Serves 20

- 30 eggs
- 2 ½ cups liquid shortening
- 2 cups water
- 5 pounds matzo meal
- salt and pepper

In a large bowl, mix eggs, shortening, water, matzo meal, salt and pepper. The mixture should be thick but manageable. Refrigerate for about 30 minutes. This makes the mixture easier to handle. Remove from refrigerator and form round balls about the size of a billiard ball. Add matzo balls to chicken soup and boil for 45 minutes.

Second Avenue Deli (New York) Chopped Liver

Serves 8

- 1½ pounds beef liver
- 1 pound chicken liver
- corn oil for drizzling
- 2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons corn oil
- 1 tablespoon plus 2 teaspoons chicken fat
- 4 cups yellow onions, coarsely chopped
- 4 hard-boiled eggs
- 2 teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper

Heat broiler. Rinse beef and chicken livers thoroughly and cut away membranes and extra fat. Cut the beef liver in 1-inch pieces; chicken livers can remain whole. Place beef and chicken livers in a large baking pan; drizzle with corn oil. Broil 8 to 10 minutes. Turn liver pieces and broil for another 5 minutes. Liver should be fully cooked and lightly browned on both sides. Chill in the refrigerator.

In a large skillet, heat corn oil and 1 tablespoon of chicken fat. Add onions and sauté until well browned. Place in refrigerator to chill. Meanwhile, in the bowl of a food processor combine liver, onions, hard-boiled eggs, remaining chicken fat and salt and pepper; blend until smooth. (You'll have to do it in batches.) Chill before serving.