

Katz's Deli - When Harry Met Sally

Fred Austin: Since the movie *When Harry Met Sally* was released we've become famous worldwide. We have visitors literally from every country on earth.

Marion Kane: Was that filmed in here?

Fred Austin: Sure, sure. Right at that table.

Marion Kane: The famous scene?

Fred Austin: The famous scene. And it's our food that does that. That's why people keep coming in.

Marion Kane: (Laughs).

Introduction:

Marion Kane: Maverick food and travel guru Anthony Bourdain considers Katz's Delicatessen a must-visit destination in New York City. I took his word for it and I'm glad I did. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth, and welcome to "Sittin' In the Kitchen". Katz's Deli on New York's Lower East Side has been serving its delicious pastrami sandwiches for more than 125 years. During that time this part of Manhattan has moved away from its roots as a working-class hub of Jewish culture but a few places including Katz's continue to serve their traditional fare. I spoke with Fred Austin, one of the owners of Katz's, amid the hubbub of that 350-seat restaurant.

Marion Kane: These guys are firefighters. Why do you eat here?

Firefighter 1: Best pastrami in the world.

Marion Kane: How often do you eat here?

Firefighter 1: Not as often as we'd like to. (laughter)

Firefighter 2: We're here now.

Firefighter 1: We wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Marion Kane: Hey Fred.

Fred Austin: How are you?

Marion Kane: So Fred. You are the owner of Katz's Delicatessen.

Fred Austin: Yes I am. It's a family business now. My brother-in law. Our wives. We've recently given the place to my nephew Jake. He's going to be running it.

Marion Kane: Really?

Fred Austin: Yes. We want Katz's to go on for many more years.

Marion Kane: How long has it been here?

Fred Austin: It's been here since 1888. You can do the math.

Marion Kane: Yes, it's 125 plus years.

Fred Austin: Plus years, right.

Marion Kane: So it's a family restaurant. Obviously it's Jewish.

Fred Austin: Jewish-style. We're not kosher by any means although we do have all-beef products. We specialize in smoked meats, most notably pastrami which is known far and wide. Once people come here they come back over and over again.

Marion Kane: You gave me a taste of the pastrami and it was delicious. Smoked flavour, juicy, you know moist. How would you describe pastrami to someone who's never eaten it?

Fred Austin: It's an all-beef product.

Marion Kane: Is it brisket?

Fred Austin: Close to the brisket. This was a cheap cut of meat which was originally just a cast-off and it's become more and more gourmet item. More and more places offer pastrami in some form. In egg rolls or in omelets or like we do is sandwiches.

Marion Kane: Yes, the famous sandwich. Piled high.

Fred Austin: Piled high.

Marion Kane: What should the sandwich have on it? It should be rye bread with caraway?

Fred Austin: No caraway. We use seedless rye. Mustard and pastrami. That's all you need for a perfect lunch.

Marion Kane: How about a dill pickle on the side?

Fred Austin: Well, pickles and a Dr. Brown's soda.

Marion Kane: Where is the pastrami made?

Fred Austin: We do the pickling in-house. Smoking is done for us off-site. It's very difficult to smoke in Manhattan because of the pollution laws... the scrubber laws.

Marion Kane: I hear it's quite an art to cut the pastrami properly.

Fred Austin: Our meat is hand-carved. We don't use machines and it's a much-valued tradition. People love the product. They love the process.

Marion Kane: Okay, so you specialize in Jewish food. I grew up with it and I'm sorry my late dad isn't here. I'm thinking of him because he grew up in Montreal with the Schwartz's smoked meat, that's what we call it in Canada. So what are the typical Jewish foods that you also sell?

Fred Austin: We sell potato latkes which are a potato pancake. We sell blintzes. Pretty much everything you'd find in a Jewish home. Stuffed cabbage.

Marion Kane: Do you have kishka?

Fred Austin: Yes we do.

Marion Kane: I love kishka.

Fred Austin: So do I. You're a wise woman.

Marion Kane: (Laughs). We have the same taste. I see that almost every seat in this place is filled. It's lunchtime. 300 plus seats. Do you think many of these people are Jewish?

Fred Austin: I try not to think. It just gets in the way of operating.

Marion Kane: (Laughs).

Fred Austin: But we're a complete mix of people.

Marion Kane: When you took over the place 30 years ago, was it largely a Jewish clientele?

Fred Austin: It was more Jewish. More and more Jews have moved out of the neighbourhood - the Lower East Side that is - and moved to the suburbs but they still come back like you do.

Marion Kane: (Laughs). What do you think is happening to the Lower East Side demographically?

Fred Austin: Manhattan is an island as you know and people want the cachet of living in Manhattan. The last dozen years or so we've seen rents comparable with midtown Manhattan. A lot of young people are moving into the neighbourhood. First it started with artists and boutiques and now the Lower East Side has become a Mecca for high-class restaurants, experimental restaurants. The neighbourhood used to be a discount shopping area many years ago.

Marion Kane: What did they sell down here?

Fred Austin: There were blue laws in New York state for many years which prohibited stores from opening up on Sundays. The Jewish merchants on the Lower East Side, because the neighbourhood was primarily Jewish in the 20s and 30s, successfully petitioned the state to allow them to close on Saturday - the Jewish Sabbath - and open on Sundays. The Lower East Side became a destination point for anybody who wanted to shop for clothing, leather goods, back to school products. I remember weekends - Sundays here we used to be wall-to-wall people on Orchard Street. Now the neighbourhood as I say has changed. It's not so much a neighbourhood because now department stores have come into existence and they're open seven days a week but the neighbourhood shopping centre has been replaced by a lively mix of people and cultures and shops.

Marion Kane: You told me before that there's a chef down here doing molecular gastronomy. That's very avant-garde.

Fred Austin: Wylie Dufresne, he just recently closed his WD-40 - his restaurant on Clinton Street - but we do have many innovative and creative chefs down here none of which I like to publicize because I want everybody to come to Katz's.

Marion Kane: (Laughs). You don't need to publicize it by the look of things.

Fred Austin: Well we've been very lucky. Very fortunate. It happens when you sell a quality product. It used to be a fairly inexpensive cut of meat as I said but now the scarcity has driven up prices and we're no longer as much of a bargain but you can see from the size of the sandwiches you get your money's worth.

Marion Kane: There's a guy in front of us with a pastrami sandwich that is probably three or four inches high.

Fred Austin: Pretty close to a pound of meat. Because of the way we hand-carve we don't have an exact weight of the sandwiches but it's up to the eye of the cutter.

Marion Kane: How much is that sandwich?

Fred Austin: It's about \$20.00.

Marion Kane: Wow. I think it's all you need to eat all day.

Fred Austin: Pretty much. People have a half a sandwich, take the rest home for dinner.

Marion Kane: I'm going to watch this guy and see if he finishes it.

Fred Austin: Better yet - why don't you get your own and see if you can finish it.

Marion Kane: (Laughs). That's good advice. Lastly I hear that there's still a knish shop down street, a vestige of the old days. What is the name of it?

Fred Austin: Yonah Schimmel, just down a block and a half away from us serving knishes the way they've done for many years and in addition I might mention Russ & Daughters, the shop down the block which has been in existence not quite as long as Katz's but it's done a fine job of preserving the traditions of the Lower East Side.

Marion Kane: You were a recruiter for Silicon Valley before you got into this. It's a completely different business with a lot more human contact I'm thinking.

Fred Austin: Much more human contact. One of the most gratifying thing about Katz's is the number of people that come in telling me they were here 40 years ago with their grandparents and now they're bringing their grandchildren back to experience it. For the most part, we haven't changed. The food is the same. As good as it ever was. The staff is as surly as they ever were.

Marion Kane: (Laughs).

Fred Austin: Mostly it's the food that matters.

Marion Kane: Yes. The food is the vehicle for human connection. That's what I always say.

Fred Austin: Yes it is. The best form of human connection, short of the obvious.

Marion Kane: (Laughs). So your nephew is taking over this place. When are you going to leave?

Fred Austin: Hopefully never.

Marion Kane: Oh.

Fred Austin: I'm going to be a fixture around here for many many years.

Marion Kane: You have a position by the cheesecake display.

Fred Austin: I like to stay by the high-calorie items.

Marion Kane: (Laughs). That's great. Do you want to say anything else?

Fred Austin: When you're in New York make it a point to come to Katz's and then spend the afternoon walking off your lunch by walking around the Lower East Side. It's a fascinating neighbourhood.

Marion Kane: That's what I'm going to do. Thank you Fred.

Fred Austin: Thank you.

Conclusion

Marion Kane: That was my conversation with Fred Austin of Katz's deli. Find them online at katzsdelicatessen.com. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth. You can find more stories like this at marionkane.com and on iTunes. Thank you for listening.