

NOSHES: Old-style delis open around city;

running them isn't

easy

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FILLING AN ORDER: Jeffrey Bank of Artie's, an Upper West Side deli that may recoup its opening expenses sooner than expected.

Pastrami Central

Old-style delis return; difficult operations

BY LOUISE KRAMER

Despite the boom in upscale eateries, New Yorkers still want a plain old meat-laden sandwich every now and then.

It may seem hard to digest, but the city that put delicatessens on the map has lost so many of these cholesterol centers over the years that diners are feeling deprived of their corned beef.

"Between McDonald's and Gramercy Tavern, there's a screaming need for middle-market food," says restaurant consultant Arthur Levy, a partner in ADL Hospitality Group, a division of accounting firm J.H. Cohn.

Several New York restaurateurs with a knack for knackwurst are trying to profit from

this deprivation. Some are opening old-style delis and others are staging expansions.

Newcomers include Artie's New York Delicatessen on Broadway and 83rd Street and Wolf's Delicatessen on 57th Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues.

Mendy's Kosher Delicatessen has just branched out to the dining concourse at Grand Central Terminal and is in lease negotiations for another spot at Rockefeller Center. Junior's, the legendary Brooklyn cheesecake monger, recently expanded to Grand Central as well.

Ratner's makeover

Meanwhile, Ratner's, the Lower East Side home of the fresh-baked onion roll, earlier this month began a makeover and promises to emerge in September in a trendier guise.

"New Yorkers love delis," says Mendy's owner Mendy Merel. "People are watching their cholesterol, but when they feel like cheating they want pastrami."

With so much competition for

every ethnicity and price range, it's not enough for a deli to have a tender brisket anymore. To lure customers, deli owners are opening in expensive locations and are working hard to create points of difference, whether it's a signature recipe for pastrami or a mouthwatering architectural design.

But even with great real estate and noshes, these delis can be harder to operate than a typical sit-down restaurant. There are usually two businesses under one roof—a takeout counter and a restaurant with table service. Most do catering as well.

"It takes a tremendous amount of energy to open one of these establishments," says Jeffrey Bank, an owner of Artie's, the largest deli to hit the Upper West Side in years. Artie's has two kitchens, plus a separate area for takeout. "People ask why we didn't open sooner. It's because it's not an easy thing to do."

The deli, which opened last November, is named after Arthur Cutler, the late restaurateur responsible for some of the area's biggest hits, like Carmine's, Dock's and Ollie's Noodle Shop. Artie's is so far on target to ring up sales of \$3.5 million in its first year, and may recoup opening expenses some six months sooner than expected, Mr. Bank says.

Of course, these are not your father's delis. Ralph Rocco, who has been working in New York delis since he was 12, spent \$2 million to open Wolf's, a 5,500-square-foot restaurant housed in a former fur shop. This restaurant is entirely different from the fluorescent-lit 57th Street deli called Wolf's, which closed in 1996 following a rent dispute.

With terrazzo floors encrusted with seashells and a zinc-topped bar, Wolf's is as stunning as some new restaurants, like the nearby Brasserie. Sure, there's a certain dissonance in seeing men at little marble tables gnawing at giant corned beef sandwiches. But Mr. Rocco, who owns two other, more pedestrian New York delis—Celebrity Delicatessen and Metro Delicatessen—says fancy is what he wanted.

"We didn't want to have just paint on the walls and Formica tables. We wanted something nice," he says.

Mr. Merel purposely avoided big and fancy for his new outlet. He has the smallest space in the

new dining concourse at Grand Central Terminal—311 square feet—and pays about \$200 per square foot. Since he opened in January, business has been strong, but not enough to make him wish for a bigger space.

"Selling sandwiches, you can't pay such high rents," says Mr. Merel, a former real estate executive who got into the deli business a decade ago. "It comes to \$5,000 or \$6,000 a month. I can handle that. If I knew I could have more space, I wouldn't want it."

Mr. Merel, who owns Mendy's East on East 34th Street and Mendy's West on East 70th Street, had been thinking about expansion for some time and decided to bite when the space became available at Grand Central.

But finding employees and keeping them are major causes of indigestion for deli owners. It's not just the tight labor market, either. Staffers must be expert at the disappearing art of slicing meat by hand, and those who have the skill command top dollar.

\$18 to banter

Mr. Banks says Artie's counter workers get anywhere from \$10 to \$18 per hour, depending on their experience. If they have the gift of gab, it's even better. One prized staffer is Uncle Bill. "He's 75 years old, and he can slice and he can banter," says Mr. Banks.

Artie's apparently has a talent for hiring good help. One perky worker turned out to be a former Miss America, Kate Shindle, the title holder in 1998. She had never let on to that distinction. When her past was discovered, Artie's made national headlines and the morning news. For a new restaurant, that free publicity is worth its weight in chicken fat.

Speed is what's cutting it for Mendy's. Mr. Merel says the long lines at Grand Central move fast because he's engineered a way—he won't reveal his methods—for his workers to serve each customer in 20 seconds. Plus, he's got a very fast cashier. During most lunches, Mr. Merel is at the restaurant, assuring frustrated diners that they'll get served before they know it.

Of course, all the new delis have some version of chopped liver lite for the weight-conscious. But pastrami is still king. Artie's sells 1,800 pounds per week. And although Mr. Rocco put a raw bar in Wolf's, the brine-cured meat is still what has the cash registers humming. ■