

Remembering Ratner's: An Ode To Onion Rolls

A waiter at the iconic dairy restaurant dishes.

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The author's brother and father, both Ratner's waiters, with a customer at the restaurant. "My father brought us in to be soldiers in the Ratner's Mafia." Photos courtesy of Eli Shoshani

Out of sight but not far from our hearts is Ratner's Restaurant, a kosher dairy establishment that operated for nearly 100 years on the Lower East Side, serving Jewish comfort food to customers craving a culinary connection to their roots. A visit to Ratner's was the perfect way to cap off a Sunday afternoon of bargain hunting on Orchard Street. No place embodied the old Lower East Side better. Of course I'm biased — I was a Ratner's waiter.

At Ratner's, character was the top item on the menu — from the rude waiters who'd stick their thumbs in your split pea soup (apparently it was a cure for arthritis) to the little old ladies who'd steal the onion rolls off the table. Waiters as old as Methuselah limped around with side towels stashed in their armpits and a snide remark on their lips. Their hearing aids didn't work, so if you ordered potato pancakes, there was a high likelihood you'd get served gefilte fish. And you'd better like it. This might sound morbid, but since Ratner's waiters never retired, I got my first station when a waiter kicked the bucket.

To work there, being a character was a prerequisite. You had Diego with his false teeth and hair mayo from the 99-cent store, and Alex, the Ratner's Romeo, who livened up the workday with tales of his sexual exploits. You had the headwaiter, Hy Kirsch, who loved to gab with his customers as if he were hanging out at a country club, and another waiter with a side business selling shoes out of his locker. You had Walter, a wannabe actor who recited poetry to strangers on the corner of East 88th Street.

And then there was the customers' favorite, my father, Ezra, a 5-foot-2 Israeli immigrant whose "study customers" (as he referred to his steady customers in heavily accented English) would line up out the door to sit with him.



Author Eli Shoshani

My father enslaved my brother and me and brought us in to be soldiers in the Ratner’s Mafia. He instilled in us his system of “fast turnovers,” teaching us to serve the food and hustle and muscle the customers out the door before they could protest — or digest. He thought he was Tony Soprano. He even had my brother working as a maitre d’ part-time and would signal which parties to seat at his tables by tapping on his yarmulke.

Being a teenage waiter at Ratner’s was better than a bar mitzvah. When the customers weren’t mocking my baby face and criticizing my hands for not shaking enough, they were busy squeezing my biceps to get me to bring them free seltzer and find every last black bread crust on the premises. If I was lucky, I’d get a decent tip, although one customer got creative and left me a one-size-fits-all button-down shirt ... and it fit!

The food wasn’t half bad either!

When I think back to the food — matzah brei, blintzes, vegetable cutlet, lox, eggs and onions, savory soups, delectable broiled fish and tasty side dishes like creamed spinach and kasha varnishkes — I want to write an epic poem.

And what about the desserts—the corn muffins, black and whites, rugelach and cheesecake were worthy of a Broadway musical.

Another great thing about Ratner’s was that everybody ate there. At Ratner’s, little old grannies from the shtetl sat elbow-to-elbow with celebrities like Jackie Mason, who once wisecracked to my father, “Ezra, you saved my life with that bowl of borscht.” My brother and I also served Rick Moranis, Tim Burton, Abe Vigoda and Lauren Hutton. And I don’t want to forget Roberto Benigni, who belted out exuberantly at the end of the meal, “Mamma mia, I’m full! Gif me da check!” Jerry Stiller ate at Ratner’s many times. Jerry’s waiter, Alex, told him he’d written a love song and sang it right at the table. Then he asked for Jerry’s agent’s address and mailed him the cassette.



The scene at Ratner's. "Everybody at there," the author writes. "Little old grannies from the shtetl sat elbow-to-elbow with celebrities like Jackie Mason."

Ratner's was also a popular destination for politicians who were after the Jewish vote. Everyone from Gov. Nelson Rockefeller to Chuck Schumer to Rudy Giuliani stopped by for a photo-op, before heading to Katz's for another. We also had plenty of gangsters — at Ratner's you had both the Cosa Nostra and the Kosher Nostra. Italian bookmakers from nearby Little Italy set up shop and ran their operations out of the restaurant; famously, Meyer Lansky used to eat in the back room with Lucky Luciano — the waiters maintaining a safe distance so they wouldn't be suspected of eavesdropping. Eventually, the restaurant, which shuttered in 2004, opened a nightclub in that back room named after him — the Meyer Lansky Lounge — which could be reached via an alley on Norfolk Street.

Lansky's menu featured lobster, mussel soup, a seafood grill consisting of scallops, shrimp and monkfish, bacon cheeseburgers, corn fried calamari and oysters on the half shell.

Elderly Jewish women came through the alley with their shopping bags, shrieking, "What did you do to Ratner's? Where are the onion rolls? I want my babka!!"

Their cries reverberated across Delancey Street.

A lifelong resident of the Lower East Side, Eli Shoshani is director of the Writing Center at Columbia Prep School on the Upper West Side. He is currently completing a book about his experiences at Ratner's Restaurant.

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