

The Old Dog Who Knows a lot of Tricks

New York's deli-style has been a huge influence on UK sandwiches in recent years. The grand-daddy of them all has to be New York's 71-year-old Carnegie Deli. **Nellie Nichols** tackled one of their huge calorie sandwiches on a recent visit and lived to tell the tale

I've always considered myself good at planning. I make endless lists, double check details fanatically and leave nothing to chance.

So flying to New York on one of the first flights out of Heathrow the morning after the Sammies seemed perfectly reasonable. Due to time constraints though I failed miserably in packing beforehand, and ended up doing that whole Cinderella thing, rushing back before midnight to sort it all out.

Consequently I have to say I didn't feel that great on the plane and had my fingers crossed that there would be a couple of good films to watch on the way, Sex and the City being at top of my list. But sadly it was not to be - it hadn't

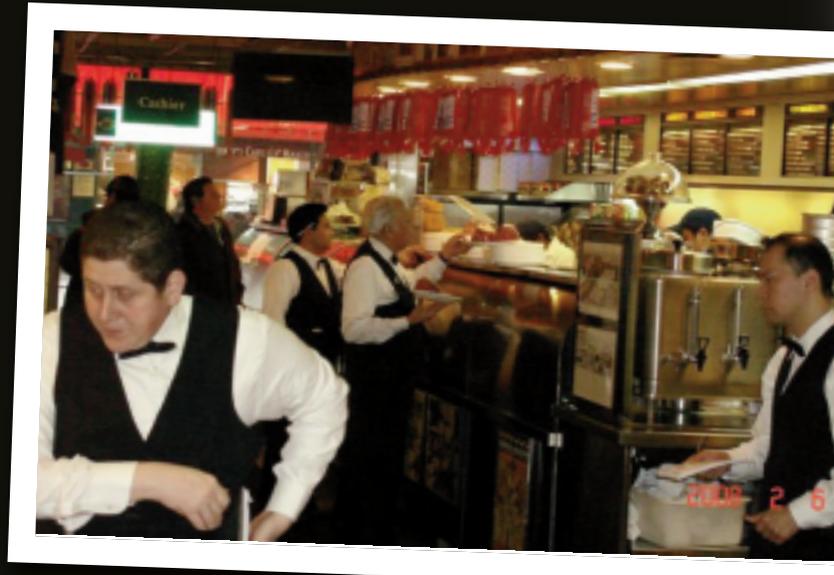
opened in New York and so BA weren't cleared to show it.

A shame really, as I'd heard there's a scene in it when Carrie and Miranda sit on a park bench eating Pret sandwiches. The product placement in Sex and The City has to be some of the most powerful currently on the screen, turning Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik amongst others into household names.

The movie has several "promotional partnerships" with companies whose products appear in the film and Sarah Jessica Parker who plays Carrie, and also produced the film, has been quoted as saying that it could not have been made without these deals. But the beauty of the Pret placement is, contrary to popular belief, that no fee was paid. SJP just happens to love Pret, who just donated free of charge.

Since my last visit to New York a few years ago, Pret has evolved into being a true part of





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the City and is now an established and slick brand that holds it head up along with the best of the rest. Currently with 14 stores and 21 planned by the end of the year, its projection is 50 U.S stores by 2010, including opening in DC by the end of 2008.

Without a doubt, it caters to a slightly less sandwich orientated palate; U.S. salad and soup figures are way higher than the UK and the sandwiches they sell are a slightly tighter range. When I taste them again I have to say their bread is fantastic and wholesome and startlingly superior in texture and taste to the airy bread used in Pret over here.

So I’ve decided to go on a bit of a ‘sandwiches in the movies’ mission while I’m here, which takes me to the Mecca of the U.S. sandwich world, the stalwart of the City; Carnegie Deli.

Opened an astoundingly impressive seventy one years ago, Carnegie Deli has been visited by just about every movie actor, singer and Head of State since 1937. Their signed photographs fill the endless walls – no photograph goes up unless whoever is in it has been to the Deli and then signed the print. Every MGM, Paramount and hot record label’s top stars have visited over the years. And, of course, there’s one of Sarah Jessica close up to the one of President Bush.

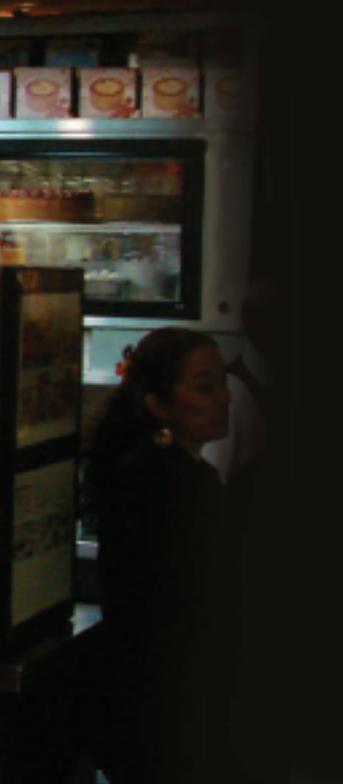
The Deli is famous for a lot of things: its pastrami which they cure themselves; its cheesecake that they bake; being open 365 days a year from 6am to 4am; for serving 1lb of meat in

every sandwich; for saying you can’t leave till you finish, and if you do they’ve made a mistake. Woody Allen insisted on filming scenes in Broadway Danny Rose around their opening hours and cleaning schedule and now there’s a sandwich named after him, ‘The Woody Allen’, known in the Deli as the ‘Danny’.

I am totally excited that a few days after I arrive in the City I am granted an audience at 9am with the President of Carnegie Deli Sandy Levine. 66 years old and still looking fabulous, Sandy has the impressive letters MBD after his name. He clearly can’t wait for me to ask their meaning - Married the Boss’s Daughter, Marian Levine, the daughter of Milton Parker, who owned the Deli from 1976 before handing it over to his son-in-law.

We sit at a table and I’m finally getting one of those American mugs of ‘drip’ coffee that get refilled by each passing waitress regardless of whether you want it to be or not. Drip coffee (or filter as we know it) is unbelievably popular here and apparently accounts for 90% of Pret’s coffee sales in the U.S., compared with a small fraction of that in the UK. It’s easy to drink ten without counting.

Hardly very good for you, but far healthier than what’s coming next. Sandy is insistent that I try all the favourites. Very, very insistent. Thank heavens I’ve had the good sense to skip breakfast, but not eating for the previous seven days might have been far more beneficial.



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Before I know it he's ordering me a Danny – not the lightest and healthiest of breakfasts, being over a pound in weight of their own cured Corned Beef (equivalent to our Salt Beef but far better) in one half of the sandwich and incredibly delicious and perfectly cooked Pastrami on the other. It comes groaning on a plate with their very own special recipe mustard (I had to bring a jar home) and a massive side order of pickles – Sour and Half Sour.

In fact, the first thing I notice when I arrive is the poster in the window advertising their Pickle Eating Contest, held every two years for lunatics who can eat the most pickles in a five minute period – sadly it's being held the day after I leave. How I'd love to witness that. The current record stands at 2.9lbs of pickles – it is, after all, National Pickle Week. One wonders how on earth having tasted one, how anyone can humanly keep 2.9lbs of them down?

Talking of keeping things down, Sandy has detailed me to accompany my sandwich with a classic Cherry soda – it has to be said the most artificial tasting drink that's ever passed my lips and that, along with the volume of meat in the sandwich and the pickles, is proving quite a challenge.

But I'm agog at Sandy as he recounts, clearly not to the first time, the history of Carnegie, of which he is exceptionally proud. One of the original Jewish Delis, the number of which are sadly now in decline, they moved from injecting their meat in the kitchen below to building what is now their own state of the art 25,000 sq ft commissary and smokehouse where they cure all their meats and bake all their own cakes, along with their famous strawberry cheesecake.

He enthuses about the cut of meat he uses - it must be the 'naval', the last rib, a 'heavy cut of meat with lots of fat.' because fat is where the flavour is and he can always trim it afterwards. With the amount of calories I'm currently looking at (approx 4,000), there's seems little point really. May as well leave it there and feed the customers up properly.

He is more than aware of the health benefits that are obviously lacking in his huge and extensive menu. But, he is also an astute and

clever businessman. He knows his customer base is from all over the States and every continent; he speaks to every one that passes him, asking where they are from, sharing a joke and a banter. They love him, he is as well known as the Deli and the famous heads in frames that surround him. He knows they will return once or twice a year whenever they visit New York and don't care about the calories. They love the experience and consider it a naughty one-off treat. He can well afford to absorb his waste as no-one can possibly finish their food because he is his own butcher, owns his own factory and makes all his own ingredients.

I quiz him about expansion – this has to be a gold plated globally endorsable tourist brand, another Hard Rock Café - he says he would want to see the colour of an investor's money first, but doesn't believe it's possible. His food isn't the food that can be eaten every day and he is a realist.

He doesn't serve a salad and his sandwiches are considered not even as healthy as a pizza. They only have one other store, in The Mirage in Las Vegas, which has been a resounding success because they have embraced doing business the Carnegie Deli Way. Countless franchises have failed across the States, in Atlantic City, Florida and Beverley Hills among others, the quality wasn't upheld and Sandy wasn't happy.

Again and again he introduces me to his many staff as they come on shift. Each one stops to chat, they clearly adore him. They are from Japan, Tibet (a Sherpa he saw climbing Kilimanjaro with no ropes who impressed him so much he gave him a job on the spot), Thailand, India, Peru, Mexico, literally everywhere.

Cleverly, his staff are as international as his customers are. Many have been with him ten or even twenty years. He says he can train anyone



CARNEGIE DELI



and he does. His chef Ricky who's been with him 27 years, was a dishwasher first, Julia who does the ordering, has been with him for 16 years. Mary the Irish waitress is close to clocking up 31 years.

The staff are fiercely loyal and would do anything for him. His staff turnover is so minimal it's nearly non-existent – they just never leave. I've never come across anything like it before. It's clearly a terrific place to work.

He's shouting for the company video to be put on for me – and he's constantly telling me to watch bits of meat curing footage while introducing me to member after member of staff while I'm still trying to wade through the sandwich on my plate.

I'm never going to get out alive if I try and finish it. I'd like to taste some other sandwiches on the menu; perhaps a Fifty Ways to Love Your Liver; Chopped Liver, Hard Boiled Egg, Onion, Lettuce and Tomato, or a Tongue's For The Memory; Tongue, Corned Beef, Swiss Cheese and Coleslaw with Russian Dressing, but that would be nothing short of demented if I want to avoid a heart attack and live to see London again.

Finally he gives me some form of weird absolution by asking for the sandwich to be removed and replaced with a portion ('give her a child's portion, ha ha') of strawberry cheesecake. It's just as well I don't live there because I'd eat it everyday – it's simply the most delicious cheesecake I've ever had – heavy and old

fashioned, because Sandy says he doesn't scrimp on the cheese and fill it with air.

The crust is made with real dough not Graham crackers. I've never had a piece like it in the UK and probably never will.

His cheesecake is so famous it gets sent all over the States frozen, as do his sandwiches with their own reheat instructions inside. He stops a package on its way to the door for a Federal Express collection to show me. It's two sandwiches on frozen freight going to Kansas. The sandwiches cost \$27 but the shipment costs another \$45. What the heck, the customer clearly doesn't care as long as they get a Carnegie experience for their lunch. Sandy is as proud as punch.

I have to know what the future holds and Sandy is surprised I'm asking. He has no intention of ever retiring because he loves working too much.

He's there every morning and checks every inch of the store, his eyes are everywhere and he misses nothing. The counter, the tables and washrooms, even the sidewalk gets a check when his vehicles deliver the huge containers of cured salt beef and pastrami ready for cooking.

He believes every important occasion in life is celebrated with good food: weddings, anniversaries, birthdays. "Food," he says, "makes people happy and that's what makes it my passion". He has made provision for his heir apparent though – his son in law Chuck Smith whom I briefly meet. This is a family business after all – son-in-law to son-in-law. Chuck has brought the mail and is clearly equally as hands on. He is unassuming and straightforwardly working through his internship, learning from the best.

Things are getting busy here, it's turning into a global social whirl and it's time for me to go, but not before I'm given a copy of the book on sale at the front counter, 'How to Feed Friends and Influence People,' the story of the Carnegie Deli.

A giant sandwich, a little deli, a huge success. Sandy makes sure it's signed by every member of staff he sees in the store who has a mention; they all know what page they're on.



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