



At Ben's, "We cure our own corned beef. Our chicken soup cures everything else." Photos by Patrick Spears

SOLO EATS: BEN'S

BY ALEX VADUKUL | FRI. MARCH 13, 2015 | 12:30 PM | FOOD

Solo eating establishments—the truly great ones—require a precise atmosphere. Some are quiet and discreet. Others are unexpected and lie in plain sight. But they can all be difficult to find in a metropolis. Alex Vadukul presents a new one here on the first week of every month. The latest in our "Eating Solo" series: Ben's, an old-school Garment District deli with a killer pastrami sandwich.

Sitting at the counter of a bustling Midtown kosher delicatessen for lunch, absorbed in a Dr. Brown's soda and a corned beef sandwich in the company of fellow lone eaters, is a faded New York City tradition.

This counter culture was once common to the city's lunchtime hours but has declined as delis have vanished. Kosher food is expensive these days, and the city's flagship delicatessens, such as Katz's and 2nd Avenue Deli, are better known as historic culinary destinations than everyman canteens.

But the solo counter lunch still thrives at [Ben's](#), a lesser-known stalwart of the city's delicatessen scene, located in the garment district. Ben's has a special place in the hearts of kosher purists. This location has been around since 1996, when it supplanted the legendary 79-year-old Lou G. Siegel's, which the *New York Times* called the "Rick's Cafe" of the city's Jewish community (the first Ben's, on Long Island, opened in 1972). A plaque commemorating the old restaurant's legacy sits outside the establishment today.

Ben's exterior marquee reads: "We cure our own corned beef. Our chicken soup cures everything else." Its interior shuns current design trends and tastes. The loud colorful décor (perhaps in vogue in the '90s) might be called gaudy but offers a John Waters-esque sort of charm. Circling the walls is the text of a joke that has not aged well, regarding a Chinese waiter getting duped into speaking Yiddish. Customers tend to be on the older side, having frequented the place for years.

The dining room's nine-seat bar counter becomes a community of its own at lunch. Customers eat alone, preferably with no one sitting on the stools next to them, creating a dependable sequence of vacancies around the bar. When I visited recently, a businessman, absorbed in his newspaper, broke away from his soup to greet another regular: "How doing?" The other man nodded. They did not communicate again. A small elderly woman, who consumed a chopped liver sandwich as thick as her fist, was asked if she needed a menu. "No," she replied. She finished the sandwich in 15 minutes and asked for the check.

The bar's solitude is pure and its quiet efficiency refreshing. Distractions are minimal. The food is hearty enough that you will be preoccupied eating it. Customers inevitably leave behind messy plates heaped with rye bread, liver, or unfinished pastrami, like some cholesterol-laden battlefield. There's also pleasure to be had observing the customers seated across the dining hall, taking in the din of their conversations.

Aside from the distinction of being the kosher deli that not everyone knows about, Ben's is also known for having lower prices than its competitors. Their pastrami sandwich is \$12.49, while the one at Katz's is \$18.45, and it has excellent fat to marble ratio, and is not unwieldy. The matzoh ball soup, served with noodles, is top-class, with a ball that is firm and substantial. Other classics are also dependable, such as freshly made potato pancakes and brisket with gravy.

If you crave a particular kind of peace, in which solitude is married with the foods that define a classic part of New York, seek the counter at Ben's for lunch. It's good for your soul.

Best seat: A stool at the counter in the main dining hall. There is a second bar near the entrance, but it has less character.

Best order: The matzoh ball soup and pastrami sandwich combination is undeniably a classic, but Ben's also prides itself on hot corned beef, which they pickle in-house. Potato pancakes are also freshly made.

Best pour: Something feels correct about ordering a Dr. Brown's soda with your sandwich, but beer is also served in frosted mugs.

Best time to go: For the old-school counter experience, visit during lunching hours Monday through Friday.

Ben's

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[MAP](#)