

Deli Story

My earliest memories are about living in the apartment behind The Garfield Market, a grocery store in Phoenix, Arizona



The Garfield Market 1950

My parents owned and ran the grocery store during the 2nd World War. In the 1950s Mom and Dad made a daring move to California where they bought Morrie's delicatessen in Long Beach, California. They worked close to 16 hours a day in that delicatessen.

In time my father became ill with TB. Mom and Dad sold Morrie's and about 5 years later opened another business. It was a deli called "Gourmet Foods."

It was a small store on Nieto, a side street in Belmont Shore, California. Because Dad had had TB, he was not allowed by law to work in the Deli. Mom and an employee did everything. At night after the store closed, my father came in and cleaned the entire store. He would roll up the rubber mats and scrub the floors, wash the stainless-steel sink and disassemble and clean the two Hobart slicing machines. One sliced meat and the other machine sliced cheese. The machines had large rotating blades. "Never touch the blades, Michael." Over and over, I was told of severed fingers and injuries to people who did not watch what they were doing. Over and over the story came.

When you entered Gourmet Foods, to your right was a case of baked goods. Bagels, Rye bread, pumpernickel and challah egg bread were in high glass cases over the

bread slicer. The slicer could be set for thick or thin. It made a tremendously loud sound and kicked-up an odd mix of cornmeal, rye and flour dust. It was a unique smell, but it belonged in a delicatessen.

Customers would stand before that case and ask, "Is it fresh?" The question came before nearly every bread purchase. I worked at the store on weekends and later during college breaks. Sometimes, I would literally be unpacking the giant paper sacks from the bakery with my back to the customers. "Is it fresh?" "Is it fresh?" My 18-year-old self would groan inside. "Yes, it is fresh." I would say without turning. Next, they would turn to my mother and ask, "Sarah, is it fresh?"

Bread and rye dust were not the only smells. As a deli, of course, you smelled garlic. Garlic from the pickle brine which would at times bubble from the wooden barrel that held cucumbers and spices. The deli meats: salami, corned beef and pastrami, blended with the smells of smoked white fish and lox. The lox was another "Is-it-fresh?" item.

Some items were made each day: baked beans that were "doctored" by mom. They contained end pieces from all of the meats making this an unusual and very popular dish. You never knew just what was in each bite.

This was not a kosher delicatessen. From the earliest days, my folks sold Polish hams. The hams came in wooden crates with polish writing stamped on the outside. They were very expensive, but somehow they were imported despite the "iron curtain" that separated Poland from the USA.

"Be sure to slice it very thin. Let me see," came from the freshness police

But one must mention the dreaded Lox. As an 18-year-old novice, I would occasionally be alone in the store. When such moments occurred, I might be asked to slice some lox. I would carefully position the giant slab of smoked salmon and use a special knife to attempt to slice the lox (beast). My slicing was never correct to the typically older lox-critic. Usually, they would not even order from me, but would ask when my mother would be returning to the store. But on occasion I would try to perform this difficult **delicatessen** operation.

The gourmet part of Gourmet Foods came from a set of shelves across from the bakery items. These were various exotic things. In the early 1960's wine was considered unusual if not gourmet. Dust gathered on the bottles since they were

rarely purchased. Similarly, the store had a huge array of Spice Island (brand) spices. Again, in that period wine and spices were not big sellers.

To keep the theme of low volume, low profit items, the store had several shelves of very weird things such as fried grasshoppers, chocolate covered ants and a variety of pickled items not found in normal food stores. I was always curious about pickled watermelon rinds and most all kinds of vegetables that were preserved in a vinegar and a spice brew.

Continuing on our tour, we come to a very high volume, high profit item: the beer case. Mom had stocked (with the help of various salesmen) a large variety of imported beers: Heineken, Lowenbrau, Becks, Dos Equis. Beer was constantly sold at the deli.

The other high-volume items were deli sandwiches and various standard salads such as potato and coleslaw. Now those two salads could actually spoil. It was important that they were always truly fresh. However, no person ever asked if they were fresh. They would just buy quarts and quarts of the salads with relative abandon. They would also rave about how wonderful it was that we could make such high volumes of these salads every day.

Mother told me to just say nothing and to never tell customers that these products came from the Knudsen Dairy company in 25-pound plastic bags. They were indeed fresh, but they were not homemade. I always smiled inside when I heard those compliments to our food.

Finally, the Walk-In. This was the huge refrigerator that stored food. On one side was a dairy case. Standard dairy products plus more pickled fishes and a strange product called yogurt which had not yet made it to the mainstream of our daily diet.



...e a thick wood lined door behind
...n case of emergency. I had never
...ut we were prepared. I did
...ld see out through the dairy
...From within I could watch the
...?" "Slice it thin."

Milton and Sara Gorodezky, 1950