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## THE CAPITAL JEWISH MUSEUM ANNOUNCES THE SPECIAL EXHIBITION "I'LL HAVE WHAT SHE'S HAVING": THE JEWISH DELI

**Washington, D.C. (January 30, 2024)** — The Lillian and Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum is pleased to announce the special exhibition "*I'll Have What She's Having*": *The Jewish Deli*, on view at the Museum from Wednesday, May 15 through Tuesday, August 20, 2024. The exhibition, organized by the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, explores how American Jews imported traditions, adapted culture, and built community through the experience of food. In addition to showing how Jewish deli forged an entirely new, quintessentially American cuisine by combining Central and Eastern European dishes with ingredients abundantly available in the United States, the exhibition traces the larger arc of the Jewish experience in the US during the twentieth century. On view will be neon signs, menus, advertisements, fixtures, historical footage, film and television clips, and artifacts that illuminate how delicatessens evolved from specialty stores catering to immigrant populations into the beloved national institutions they are today.

"I used to go to the famous delis on the Lower East Side with my grandma who would inevitably get in an argument (in Yiddish) with the grumpy waiter. I asked her why we always went there if she had such an issue with the guy. She responded that that was precisely *why* we went there. More than pickles and corned beef (though those are important!) American deli culture is in many ways the vernacular of Ashkenazi Jewish life. We're delighted to explore the topic in depth—the jaunty and the serious.," stated **Ivy Barsky, Executive Director**.

*"I'll Have What She's Having": The Jewish Deli* was co-curated by Skirball curators Cate Thurston and Laura Mart, and Lara Rabinovitch, renowned writer and producer, and specialist in immigrant food cultures.

The exhibition is organized into the following sections:

**Food of Immigration**—"The story of the Jewish delicatessen is as much about immigration as it is about food," remarked Thurston, "so we open the exhibition with a close look at how the influx of Jewish immigrants to New York City in the mid-nineteenth century meant that regional Central and European foods such as pickles, knishes, gefilte fish, borscht, and rugelach came to be served under one roof. This created an appetite for the mixed cuisine that we now know and love as Jewish deli." Meanwhile, an increase in America's beef consumption was a modern dietary development that opened up market opportunities for Jewish entrepreneurs. On view in this first section are artifacts from the Skirball Museum collection, such as candlesticks, knives, suitcases, passports, and textiles that were brought by Jews at the turn of the twentieth century with their hopes, dreams, and foodways.

**The Food**—From sky-high sandwiches to hot matzo ball soup to rich chopped liver on rye, Jewish deli is a fusion cuisine. In this section, a colorful display of food imagery, props, and helpful definitions of terms will give visitors clarity on what makes a bagel a bagel, why herring was a mainstay of the Eastern European Jewish diet, and what

distinguishes pastrami from corned beef, among many fun food facts. Visitors will enjoy the section's glossary of "Yiddishisms"— from chutzpah to nosh to verklempt—in honor of Yiddish, the mother tongue of newcomers from Central and Eastern Europe that subsequently emerged as the language of deli.

**Mid-Century Heyday**—This section focuses on the mid-twentieth century, a period of unparalleled growth for the American Jewish community and, by extension, its delis. Although New York remained the epicenter of Jewish deli culture, a plethora of delis opened around the country. It was during this heyday that Jewish food classics entered the mainstream, delis began to attract a wider clientele, and deli menus began to include local favorites, such as cinnamon rolls and rice and beans. On view in this section are mid-century menus from the landmark Carnegie Delicatessen and Lindy's Restaurant in New York's Theater District—which speak to deli's role as a hub for Broadway types and theater patrons— and mid-century matchbooks from LA's now-closed Junior's Restaurant in Westwood and Solley's Restaurant and Delicatessen in the San Fernando Valley.

**No Substitutions** — This section looks at the people who own and work at delis. Vintage uniforms and implements from classic LA delis Factor's, Canter's, and Nate n' Al's, alongside photographs and video interviews help tell the stories of the people behind the food. Nearby, visitors are invited to tap into their own experiences by writing down their go-to deli food or favorite deli memory and pinning it up on a restaurant-style order line.

**Who's at the Table?**— Although delis have come to symbolize Jewish culture, or a certain characterization of Jewish culture, they never existed in isolation. This section reflects on how immigrant-owned delis and their foods were woven into the urban American landscape. On view are several posters from the famous advertising campaign "You Don't Have to Be Jewish to Love Levy's Real Jewish Rye," which underscore how the deli was embraced by Jews and non-Jews alike, but also reveal how ideas of Jewishness in the United States during the 20th century were rooted in Central and Eastern European Ashkenazi Jewish culture, leaving out Jews from other parts of the global Jewish diaspora as well as multiethnic Jews. Visitors can also view snapshots of political candidates from across the aisle stopping at delis on the campaign trail, including Senator Ted Cruz at Shapiro's Delicatessen in Indianapolis and President Barack Obama at LA's Canter's Deli.

**Survivor Communities**—For many of the four hundred thousand Holocaust survivors and refugees who rebuilt their lives in the United States, delis were a lifeline as they acclimated to a new country. Laura Mart explains, "Delicatessens provided a livelihood and a purpose for the immigrants who became owners, waiters, cooks, and customers. One such business was Drexler's Deli in North Hollywood, which was owned and operated by Rena Drexler, a survivor of Auschwitz, and her husband, Harry. For them, the deli was a place to give sustenance and a sense of togetherness to the Orthodox Jewish community that grew up around it. We are honored to display the stunning original neon sign that brightened the entrance to their much-beloved deli."



**Pop Culture on Rye**— Why has the Jewish deli inspired generations of creatives in the entertainment business? Perhaps this is because of the fascinating characters that inhabit delis, their popularity as late- night nosh spots for showbiz folks, or the fact that delis are the most visibly Jewish secular spaces in the American landscape. This section features artifacts and photographs that explore deli nightlife as well as a viewing station where visitors can savor footage from TV hits such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Seinfeld*, and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, and film classics like *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and *At War with the Army* (1950).

**Shifting Landscapes**—The final section considers how delis have had to revise their menus, move locations, or close because of health trends, real estate prices, family issues, or business woes. “Memory is a consistent theme in deli, but so is change,” explains Lara Rabinovitch. “At the end of the twentieth century, ethnic diversity began to serve as a point of celebration in food and new, artisanal Jewish delis have opened across North America and Europe. Young entrepreneurs are reviving the pre-industrial techniques of their forebears and developing homemade ingredients like schmaltz or new takes on old- school cuisine.” This section contains menus from eateries around the country that reflect the ways delis have changed in recent years, including incorporating influences from Sephardic and Israeli Jewish cuisine, focusing on justice in running their businesses, and adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**For the Washington, DC, presentation of “I’ll Have What She’s Having”: The Jewish Deli**, the Capital Jewish Museum will incorporate new research and works from its collection to highlight the local Jewish community’s contributions to deli culture. Additions to the galleries include photographs, menus, and ephemera from Hofberg’s, Posin’s, and other Jewish-owned delicatessens. Additionally, drawing on recent efforts to document vendors from the past century, a selection of scanned advertisements will be included here and in the ongoing exhibition, *Connect. Reflect. Act.*

The Lillian and Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum’s presentation of the exhibition was coordinated by Capital Jewish Museum’s Lauren Hoffman, Curatorial Assistant, with Jonathan Edelman, Collections Curator.

#### **Hours and Admission**

Effective as of Wednesday, May 15 through Tuesday, August 20:

Tuesday—Sunday, 11am–6pm

Evening Hours: First Wednesday of each month until 8pm

Member Hours: First Sunday of each month from 10–11am

Admission to the Capital Jewish Museum and its ongoing exhibitions is always free. The cost for the special exhibition “I’ll Have What She’s Having”: *The Jewish Deli* is:

\$15 Adult

\$12 Ages 65+

\$10 Ages 21-13

Free Ages 12 & under

Free for Members

To book a Group Tour, please see <https://CapitalJewishMuseum.org/visit> for details.

**About the Skirball Cultural Center**

The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. The Skirball welcomes people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and calls upon everyone to help build a more just society.

**About the Capital Jewish Museum**

The Lillian and Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum opened to the public in June 2023. The new Museum explores the Jewish experience in the national capital region and inspires visitors to connect, reflect, and act: connect personally and collectively, reflect on the relevance of the past to today, and act on behalf of their communities and values. With its experimental spirit, the Museum connects the past to the present through thought provoking exhibitions, dynamic programming, and creative public experiences.

For more information about the Capital Jewish Museum, please visit <https://CapitalJewishMuseum.org>.

**For additional information, please contact:**

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