

GQ ON EATING & DRINKING

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Canadian-Style Smoked Meat in New York, Eh?

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I've always thought my neighborhood in Brooklyn feels decidedly like Montreal. The people here are friendly on a Canadian level, everyone dreams about socialized medicine and separatism, and lately all the men have taken to wearing their beards thick and their flannels heavy—a sort of Quebecois-lumberjack chic. It seemed only a matter of time before somebody said, "Hey, if it feels like Montreal and looks like Montreal, then it should taste like Montreal, too." And last week, with the opening of Mile End, that moment was finally upon us.

Mile End is a Montreal-style deli smack in the heart of Boerum Hill. By "Montreal-style" I mean that the place serves smoked meat—the traditional cured, smoked, and steamed brisket that will forever immortalize the Jews of Montreal as some of the most important Jews in history. Until this past Monday, if I wanted smoked meat, I had to have a friend bring it back from the Old Country. By "the Old Country" I mean Schwartz's—that legendary Montreal deli and temple of smoked meat. That was simply the only way: smuggling.

I spent many pensive hours wondering why. Was it (1) about our own deeply seeded prejudices? We're a pastrami-and-corned-beef culture, and that's just where we draw the line? Or (2) because Americans just aren't in the business of replicating Canadian things? (See: hockey, curling, doughnuts, manners.) Or maybe it was (3) the fear of competing with Schwartz's. Having worked the deli lines myself, I can report that there exists an unspoken

understanding amongst grizzled counter vets that you do not mess with another man's proprietary meat; engaging the home team in such a battle is asking to get whapped.

I had to wait a full three days after their opening to sample Mile End's goods and finally put all this philosophy to bed. The first two days, they sold out of meat before I could even get there. Now, just back from lunch, I can tell you this: Their housemade pickles won't be ready for another twenty-seven days; their fresh-cut French fries are overpriced (more per order, please), but they're also probably the best in the borough of Brooklyn. And their smoked meat? It's absolutely the real thing and then some. Its succulence sets it apart from traditional New York deli meats, and flavorwise, due to a whole lot of expert spicing and smoking, it's more closely related to the famous brisket at Kreuz Market in Texas than to the downward-trending pastrami at Katz's. All of which means that it has a far deeper flavor than deligoers are used to around here.

In fact, its arrival could be just the jump start our dying deli culture needs.

On to matters of sandwich analysis. Mine had a solid peppery bite, an even smokiness that didn't overpower, and a pleasing fattiness that was distributed in all the right ways; never once did I get a mouthful of blubber, that second most dreaded of all deli moments (the first is Heimliching an older patron with matzo ball lodged in his windpipe), and I couldn't help but admire and enjoy the consistent tenderness of each bite. The whole show was served on soft Orwasher's rye with a slathering of mustard, and the only thing currently better about Schwartz's iconic version is that it's a little more substantial in size. The sandwich I had today at Mile End could have been bigger, I think, by precisely three slices of meat (see: my previous occupation), but as far as flavor goes, it couldn't have been any better.

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— *Howie Kahn* photo: www.alwayshungryny.com

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