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THE END OF A TRADITION
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A brisket slice of life going away

North suburban butchers to stop carving service

By Peggy Wolff
Special to the Tribune

On the day before the Jewish New Year of Rosh Hashana, a dozen or more customers will queue up in the parking lot of Northbrook's Elegance in Meats at opening time, not to pick up tickets or win giveaways, but to have a cooked hunk of meat sliced. Bringing back a cooked brisket for slicing has been a longstanding tradition, but as of Jan. 1, the meat-slicing practice will end.

Northbrook health officials are putting a halt to the service at Elegance in Meats and at least one other store, Sunset Foods. Lynn Hoette, the village sanitarian in Northbrook who oversees places that prepare, process, serve, sell and store food, said in an email: "the Village was unaware of the practice until we received a complaint from a Northbrook resident who was concerned about the safety."

Jewish families all over the country have traditionally celebrated the holiday with a brisket, and to them slicing is part of the appearance: beautiful looking, uniformly sliced, no shreds, no slivers, not even on the ends. The centerpiece of the table.

At Elegance in Meats, which is known to practically everybody in the neighborhood as E&M, the slicing service has been an "in-thing," or a happening, to borrow the artist Allan Kaprow's phrase from the '50s. Part community gathering — the crowd chatters and shares recipes — and part absurdity — bringing back cooked meat to be sliced? — it has been going on for 50 years, the first 20 years at E&M's Skokie location and the past 30 at the Northbrook store.

The same people come every year, and they know each other. Last spring, right before Passover when I was there, what you overheard on their cellphones was, "Hi, honey. I'm at E&M in the slicing line." Which meant only one thing: the brisket slicing line at the Northbrook deli and butcher.

Last year at Rosh Hashana, E&M sold 1,500 briskets. At two briskets per cow, that's 750 head of cattle, or 10,000 pounds of brisket. About 400 briskets came back for slicing.

Although Highland Park resident Anita Poll could have purchased her two briskets less than a mile from her home, she is an E&M regular with unending dedication, which is why she drove 13 miles round trip to the store — first to buy the meat — then another 13 miles round trip to have her cooked briskets sliced. When she learned of the old Jewish deli custom about to be lost, Poll was irate. "Oh my God, why? It's a Jewish tradition."

In an email, Hoette explained the areas of concern and potential risk that would be in violation of the health code: "an unapproved source, potential for cross-contamination, challenges in temperature control," and the impossibility of tracing back should a food-borne illness occur.

"There's airborne stuff all over," Poll fumed. Over a lifetime of eating in restaurants, she has watched people handle money and then touch food. "And what about the salad bar?" now a fixture in groceries and restaurants. "Why're they doing it? It's our tradition. Our holiday. It just seems bad."

Likewise, longtime customer Marla Schneider, agreed. "I've been coming here for 30 years. This is very bothersome."

The importance of the slicing tradition was clear while watching the scene during Passover season.

While waiting in the slicing line last March, Poll said, "I'm into yesterday. This is like going back to yesterday with the hellos.

NANCY STONE/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTOS

Elegance in Meats owner Eddie Manacek says that after the brisket slicing service ends in January, the shop may offer slicing classes. Another option: E&M also sells cooked, sliced brisket, he says.

> ***"I've been coming here for 30 years. This is very bothersome."***
>
> *— Marla Schneider, E&M customer*

And it's a feel-good place. We have enough distance during the week," meaning our culture of workaholics on computers. "Hi, Harry. Hi, Al," she said, smiling broadly at them, and, to me, she said, "Ya know, Harry's got a dog."

"To worry about slicing?!" she went on. "What's nice is you bring it to them, you wait and walk out with your brisket."

One elderly woman used to slice the meat herself, but her unsteady hand had trouble getting the simple things right. Another customer felt "more secure when they slice it. When I do it, it doesn't look right." Some said they didn't have a good knife. Others said it was their tradition.

The rules were straightforward: Buy a brisket at E&M, go home and cook it up, and bring it back before or after E&M's busy lunch hour in a lidded container, the meat chilled to 40 degrees — the temperature it would be if you left it overnight in a refrigerator. No gravy, no potatoes. No apricots, prunes, apples, honey or raisins. Scrape all that off and save it. And no carrots, tomatoes or onions.

At the front of the line, 11-year veteran and head brisket cutter Al Roskin manned the dedicated meat slicer. He pulled the brisket out of its container, removed any plastic or foil wrap, and asked each customer how she or he liked it sliced. Thin? Like roast beef for sandwiches? Medium? Or dinner cut? Medium to thick was for those serving it on a plate as a main course. If someone was uncertain, Roskin cut a medium slice, held it up for approval, set the dial for the desired thickness and sliced it, fat side up, across the grain. This was not about the rich world's eating habits. It cost nothing. And it was the honor system. They didn't ask to see a receipt. If the meat was undercooked, Roskin either gave it back unsliced with instructions to cook it some more, or he offered to do it himself in the store's ovens and the customer could pick it up at another time.

One woman gave him a sheet of notebook paper with two short parallel lines drawn 1/4-inch apart. She wanted it sliced exactly like that. The next woman remembered the setting from last year: "I want a six." As the dinner servings came off the blade, Roskin, who could've handled a one-man comedy show ("just give me a deli counter on a stage"), stacked the slices back in the customers' pans, cleaned the machine, the signature flavor of the last roast wiped off, the line of brisket fans shortened.

Despite such a scene, this was not a revolutionary development but an old Jewish deli tradition. Customers have had the option of bringing back a cooked brisket for trimming and slicing at Sunset Foods (several suburban locations), The Grand Food Center in Glencoe, The Butcher & Larder in Chicago, Al's Market in Wilmette, and in Boston (The Butcher Shop), Cleveland (Mister Brisket and Gibbs Butcher Block) and Palm Harbor, Fla. (Harr's Surf and Turf Market).

If there was such a thing as a gastronomic chain letter, it was here, in the line of brisketeers who wanted to make the briskets of their mother's and grandmother's generations. Most lines I've stood in elsewhere have been restrained with silence; here, there was no silence to break. Though their recipes were short on both length and detail, they were folded inside bigger conversations of Jewish immigrants scattered in the Diaspora.

While Glenview resident Lana Poll waited in line to purchase her side dishes, she chatted freely about her family's leaving Russia in the 1980s.

"My father is a Holocaust survivor. He's 85, and the Holocaust Museum in Washington just asked for all his documents, so I sent them. Do you want to come over and meet him?"

A woman at the front of the line shouted back: "Is there anything but 350?" Someone chimed in, "325 — low and slow."

Owner Eddie Manacek's cooking method sounded tantalizingly easy, and I found that his one simple instruction gave my meat a make-or-break flavor.

"Caramelize sliced onions in rendered brisket fat (which he sells). Before putting the brisket in the oven, put them on top of the meat." I followed his instructions and discovered a remarkable transformation: Onions reduced to gloriously rich and deeply browned strands of concentrated flavor and sweetness made my brisket a standout.

Even a brisket eater of Manacek's seriousness could not have tested all the differing interpretations of what these brisket fans used to raise their dish to at least temporary greatness.

"Liquid smoke," said one customer.

"Is that in cans, bottles or jars?" asked another, which prompted a full inventory of "secret" ingredients, proving that roasting a brisket is a lot more complicated than opening a bottle of wine.

"Dr. Pepper." "Tomato paste." "Ketchup." "Gravy Master in a small bottle, diluted." "Beer." "French dressing." "Russian dressing." "Brown sugar." "Beef broth." "Chili sauce." "Steak sauce." "Onion soup mix." Which made me realize I had never actually seen soup made from a package of dry mix; it always went into a dip or sauce.

"There's the guy who smokes it in a Big Green Egg (grill)," said Roskin, when an overwhelming whiff of garlic came in the door. Some beef came back overcooked, some entirely blackened. One woman shrugged: "I went to a movie and left it in the oven and forgot about it." The edges of this mess had some similarity to a doorstop.

Schneider, who requested a "5-to-6 on the dial," used her great-great-grandmother's recipe from Germany. "Two cans of 16-ounce tomato sauce, an equal amount of water, couple bouillon cubes, two cups of very strong coffee, season with garlic powder, onion powder, oh, put in carrots, mushrooms, potatoes, onions. 325 degrees for three hours, uncovered the last half-hour."

A few people with the brisket gene spoofed the idea of a recipe altogether. Like 80-year-old Lorraine Brotman, who made her Russian great-grandmother's brisket.

"Look, it's not an absolute. Steak sauce, salt, garlic salt, bay leaves, enough water to cover." She claimed to be the one who started the tip jar five years ago: a plastic bucket on top of the deli counter.

I wouldn't say that the morning's recipes held an impressive reservoir of hard-to-find ingredients or technical know-how, but they were open to the widest interpretation.

"Just pour Coke around the edge of the pan."

And so the morning went.

Next year customers will be told when they buy meat that they cannot bring it back for slicing. For customers who want to show off a beautiful roast, Manacek will, as he always has, sell cooked, sliced meat. Then he hinted that he "might have slicing classes. And for every brisket sold, give customers a container of gravy."

foods@tribune.com

Al Roskin slices a brisket at Elegance in Meats in Northbrook. The carving service ends Jan. 1.

Health concerns

The meat-slicing tradition is on its way out at E&M in Northbrook. Northbrook Village sanitarian Lynn Hoette said in an email that health departments "never allowed for food from unapproved sources (residential, unlicensed kitchens) to be brought into food establishments."

At E&M, as well as all the other north suburban stores that offer the slicing service, businesses have taken precautions to clean the machines between customers. One butcher uses hot water, soap and bleach; another uses a steam wand; another wipes it down then hoses it with extremely hot water.

As for other towns, at least Lake County Health Department would be willing to work with stores, spokeswoman Leslie Piotrowski wrote in an email, to set guidelines to avoid cross-contamination.

— Peggy Wolff