



Bacon sandwich at Steingold's.

# Fresh meat

## STEINGOLD'S IS THE JEWISH DELI OF THE FUTURE

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

Deli food, like sex and barbecue, is very personal. Within minutes of posting a picture of the Uncle Rube Reuben (\$13 or \$22 “overstuffed”) from Steingold’s, a new deli and cafe in North Center, on Twitter, people harrumphed, “Where’s the beef?”

A Facebook friend harangued my wife after she posted a picture of a Steingold’s bagel stuffed with belly lox, which was “too briny,” in her friend’s opinion. Latkes, pastrami and matzo ball soup, none of which were tasted by the social media

disparager, were also dismissed for minor infractions.

Owner Aaron Steingold confirmed my reality.

“On more than a couple occasions, I’d walk around the neighborhood in a Steingold’s T-shirt and sometimes wondered if someone would punch me in the face for not delivering the Reuben they expected.”

This is not surprising. Some deli food is literally religious in origin. Multiple Torah passages describe or command a duty to eat matzo or unleavened bread. Without matzo, there is no matzo ball soup.

I appreciate these things, but as a culinary moderate, I’d also like to forward the

notion that such radical religiosity toward Jewish deli has made a fantastic cuisine almost extinct in Chicago. Outside of Manny’s, Eleven City Diner (excellent chilaquiles, BTW), and if you’re willing to travel that far, Kaufman’s in Skokie, good Jewish deli is rare.

### Meat

Here’s the thing: If you go to Steingold’s looking through the nostalgic prism of your bubbe’s kitchen window, you’re going to find a bone to pick. But while Steingold’s is inspired by Jewish food culture, it is not even really a delicatessen. It is instead one of the best destination sandwich

### REVIEW

#### STEINGOLD’S DELICATESSEN AND CAFE

1840 W. Irving Park Road, 773-661-2469  
★★★

shops in Chicago, something we have a dearth of.

Consider the Reuben. Most folks around town use factory pastrami or corned beef from Vienna or Ginsberg from Detroit’s United Meat and Deli. They tend to pile it on dry seeded rye bread with a slice of Swiss, which is melted only if you’re lucky, and add sauerkraut from a bag or can.

Steingold's pastrami is Snake River Farms wagyu beef smoked for six hours and rubbed with a proprietary blend of spices. The shaved beef is slicked with delightful glistening fat and peppery juices. This meat is crowned with smoked tangy sauerkraut, Swiss cheese with edges caramelized on the griddle, a lustrous lick of Russian dressing and stuffed in between two pieces of dark Publican rye bread. If anyone can find me a better Reuben in Chicago, I will buy you the most expensive of Alinea's pre-fixe offerings, with wine pairing.

Rarely does beef lose to turkey. In fact, on Thanksgiving, I have generally stopped buying turkey in favor of Southern country hams and standing rib roasts. But as much as she liked the Reuben, my wife lost it over the Grandma Rachel (\$10 or \$18 for an overstuffed portion, named after Steingold's 100-year-old grandmother), which features house-roasted Fern-dale farms olive oil and herb-rubbed turkey, fiery espelette pepper-spiked coleslaw, bubbly Havarti and two slices of golden challah.

If any single dish will raise the Jewish deli purist hackles, it's the Sister-In-Law sandwich (\$13), which dares to pair Steingold's luscious pastrami with house-made dill kimchi and Chinese mustard in between the shattering bark of a baguette. While purists demand atonement, I will be nominating Steingold for the highest order of hasidism or saintliness for pairing fermented kimchi fizz, searing mustard and pastrami spice in honor of his actual Korean sister-in-law.

## Fish

The tartine (\$6)—an open-faced sandwich of creamy, smoky whitefish sprinkled with everything spice, tiny tufts of dill and crisp peppery rafts of radish—skews traditional in flavor, but looks a little like a modernist painting.

There's also nothing to kvetch about if you order the Steingold's Classic "all the way." This is not a prom night promise, but a bagel smeared with whipped cream cheese that has a bright zippy note from a touch of sour cream and labneh (Middle-eastern yogurt), topped with your choice of protein, (the silky belly lox, \$12, is best), capers and zingy pickle scrims.

It should be noted that the bagels (\$2) at Steingold's made by a dude named Max Stern, aka The Bagel Chef, are good, probably better than other major local option New York Bagel and Bialy. But my gold standard is the honey boiled and wood-fired Montreal bagel from St-Viateur, which is bit thinner, sweeter and has an airier chew. Steingold's bagel does not quite measure up to that standard.

Caviar service is also available. If you are a baller, there are \$100+ options, but the \$20 trout roe, big orange, salty roe bubbles, is just fine. I have long believed that the best conveyance for caviar is a Ruffles potato chip. However, Steingold's latkes—crisp circles stuffed with potato



Pastrami spiced trout.



Steingold's soup.

and the nutty sweetness of parsnip—make a good case as a roe delivery mechanism too.

## Drinks, soups and dessert

There is a full selection of Dr. Brown's sodas (\$3), including Cel Ray, a celery-flavored pop I consider one of the greatest soft drinks of all time.

There's an egg cream (\$4) too, which contains neither egg nor cream, but Fox's u-bet chocolate syrup and milk, and in a Pilsen-friendly twist, Topo Chico mineral water replacing traditional seltzer. It's like fizzy chocolate milk.

The only liquids (and really the only things at Steingold's) I take issue with are the soups (\$7). The matzo ball is light, not dense, and the broth is rich, soulful and swampy due to a serious schmaltz (chicken fat) infusion, but it needs more salt. The chicken noodle broth is more golden and it, too, needs more salt. The noodles (\$6) are actually bow tie pasta, which, while cute, do not soothe my primal desire for good old-fashioned noodles. Steingold's wife was in the background while I interviewed him for this piece, and she heartily agreed on this count. He suggested they were looking into changing this.



Neon sign at Steingold's.

## The room

You will not find members of the political machine at Steingold's as you do at Manny's. The interior features a mid-century modern palette of steel grays, whites and blacks complemented by mod tulip-style seats and cool plastic folding-style chairs. There are also a couple decor holdovers from when the space was a creperie, including a street lamppost and what looks like a mansard-roofed clock tower. Though slightly at odds with the rest of the space, they also kind of give Steingold's an idiosyncratic Woody Allen period piece vibe.

## Bottom line

If you are a deli purist plagued by nostalgia, suspend your disbelief and you will be rewarded with lip-smacking Jewish deli of the future. If you're just looking for good food, Steingold's is destination sandwich heaven.

*Michael Nagrant is a RedEye freelancer. Reporters visit restaurants unannounced and meals are paid for by RedEye.*