

Schmear CAMPAIGN

Noah Bernamoff knows the best way to make a sandwich. Don't ask questions, **just eat.** You'll feel better.

Whatever you do, don't even think about wandering into Brooklyn's Mile End Deli and asking for beef brisket with mayo. If you do, expect the owner, Noah Bernamoff '01, to politely but firmly refuse your request. His smoked meat goes on rye with mustard. That's it. Will Bernamoff hold the mustard? Okay, but you'll have to pay a ten-cent fine for the privilege. And that little conciliatory nod is the extent of Bernamoff's flexibility. If you're looking for any more exceptions, he will gesture to the bodega across the street.

"They have Boar's Head sandwiches. They'll give you mayonnaise. They'll give you tomato. They'll even put it on white bread for you," he proclaims with faux enthusiasm. "Our style is not 'choose your meat, choose your vegetable, and choose your bread.' That's not how we operate."

His reasoning is simple to understand once you understand Bernamoff's upbringing and forget everything you know about New York Jewish delicatessens. Bernamoff was born and raised in Montreal. There, specialization is the key.

"Few delis in Montreal hold themselves out as, 'We make everything Jewish that has ever been thought to be Jewish,'" Bernamoff says. "Instead it's, 'Oh, that's the salami sandwich place.' 'Oh, that's the chopped liver place.' I'm inspired by that sort of approach, rather than have the mindset that we should have everything on hand just in case someone wants something."

"If we can't make it the very best, then we don't make it," he adds.

What Mile End serves is the best. The deli has been in business only since January 2010, yet already it has earned

armloads of ecstatic reviews. *New York Magazine* went so far as to declare Mile End the best deli in New York, hands down. What's doubly amazing is that Bernamoff, just a few months before Mile End first opened its doors, was a second-year law school dropout with no real experience in restaurant management.

When trolling for Mile End investors in the spring of 2009, Bernamoff pitched his Jewish Montreal deli concept to his good friend and former Lawrenceville classmate, Max Levine '01. Levine was, to say the

least, dubious. "I tried to talk him out of it," he admits. "I thought he was going to screw up his life. He was going to have to work 20-hour days. And there is an incredibly high failure rate with restaurants. I thought it was a terrible idea."

In the end, Levine backed his friend, anyway. "Noah's passion for food is evident," he says, by way of explanation. "When he puts his mind to something, and is passionate about it, that is something I would always bet on to come out on top."

The gamble paid off. From the first day

on, the place has been packed.

In the tradition of Montreal delis, Mile End is "the smoked meat place." "That's always been our strongest seller," Bernamoff says. "It takes two weeks from start to finish to transform a raw beef brisket into a smoked meat sandwich." And to be clear, Mile End is doing all the transforming. Though other delis have no compunction about getting their food from outside distributors, Mile End makes it all in their own commissary. They smoke the meat, make the salami, bake the bread, and even pickle their own pickles – with each creation reflecting the native tastes and fond memories of Bernamoff's hometown.

There is one exception to this everything-is-made-from-scratch philosophy: the bagels. As most everyone knows, New Yorkers demand New York bagels, and it would take a restaurateur with more than a little chutzpah to offer up anything different. Bernamoff, however, imports his bagels from Montreal, and they are just not the same. They're smaller, denser, chewier, contain more seeds, and are slightly sweeter than the New York variety – and if you don't like 'em, there's the door.

It turns out that being denied New York bagels in New York inspires more customer ire than being denied a schmear of mayo. To some it was a sacrilege.

As with everything else, however, the customers soon came around to Bernamoff's way of thinking. They, very un-New Yorker-like, put their opinions on hold and deferred to the expert.

So swift was Mile End's success that Levine, who, up to that point served as a silent partner and informal advisor to Bernamoff, signed on as a full-time strategic planner. He recently completed a deal to set up a second deli in Manhattan, with the Brooklyn-based commissary to supply both locations.

Down the road, Bernamoff and Levine plan to expand Mile End even further, through the creation of a packaged retail brand that will be sold in grocery stores. Some, no doubt, will be heartened by this news. Believe it or not, a day may come when you can purchase that beloved Mile End smoked meat, take it home, triple-lock the door, and slather it in mayo. Just don't tell Bernamoff about it; he would be so disappointed in you.



Photograph by Michael Branscom