DELI MAN: THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN DELI

August 18, 2026

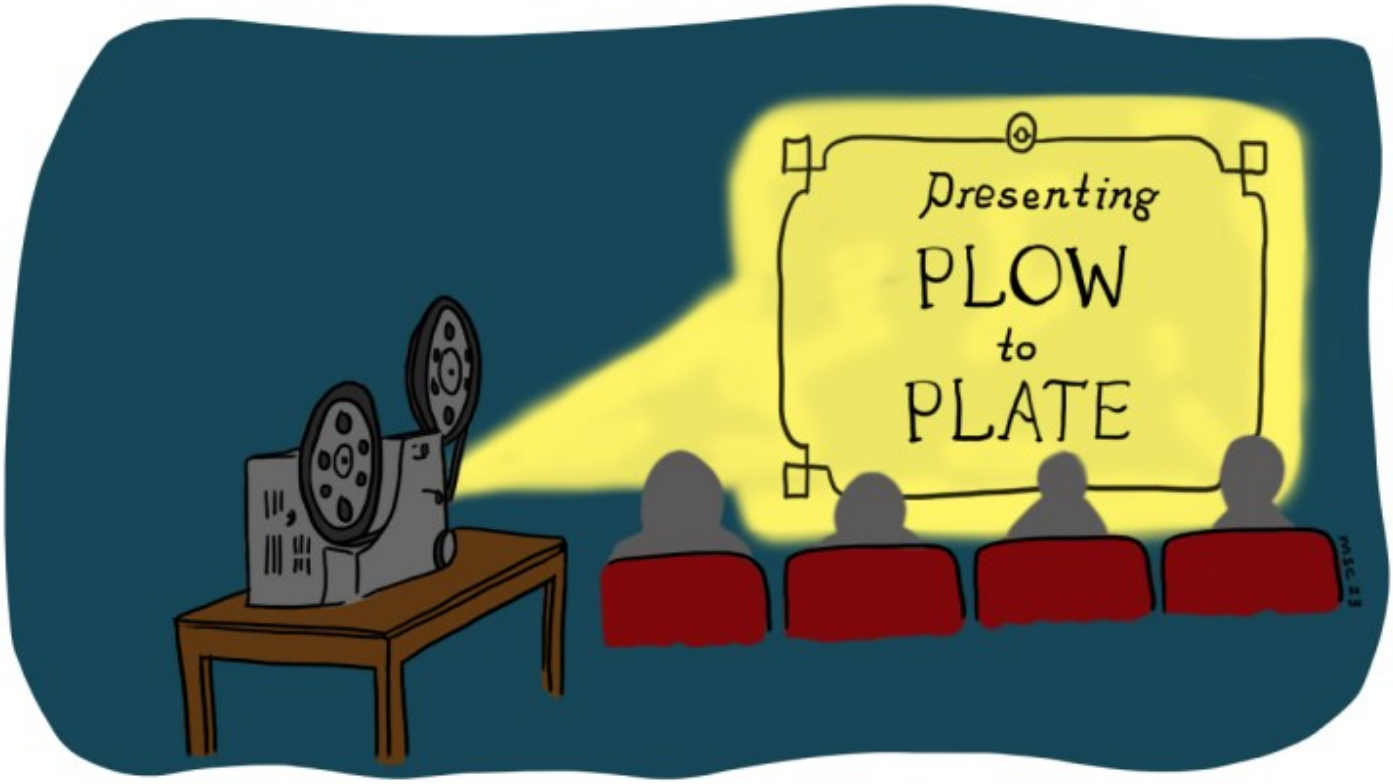


Illustration by Maggie Carson

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By Adam Rabiner

What type of restaurant began in New York City in the mid-19th century and peaked in the 1930s with thousands of locations scattered across the five boroughs, of which today only a handful survive? If you answered, “What is the delicatessen?” congratulations, audition for *Jeopardy*. The 2015 documentary, *Deli Man,* covers this culinary and Jewish cultural history in an amusing, often funny way, but its real focus is the men who dedicate their lives to running these establishments.

Deli Man is peppered with Yiddishisms, often spoken by old Jewish men who spent countless hours eating at the counters or tables of their favorite delis—comedians, ac-

tors and other celebrities like Jerry Stiller, Larry King, Alan Dershowitz, Freddie Roman and Fyvush Finkel. One of them recounts an anecdote about a stubborn waiter who only served him chicken, even though he always ordered the pot roast. Yet the typical deli customer can be just as difficult and demanding. One elderly lady told a waiter that the matzah ball soup was too salty. “But you haven’t even tried it yet,” he protested. “Yes, but I can tell by looking at it.” Stories like this, expertly and wryly delivered, pepper the movie from start to finish.

That customers put up with surly waiters and waitresses, and vice versa, is a testament to the vibrant communities that formed in these eating establishments, second homes to many. Quite a few of the deli men featured in the film were second- or third-generation, taking over from their parents and grandparents. While *Deli Man* features the owners of many delis throughout the United States, its heart and soul is David “Ziggy” Gruber of Houston’s Kenny and Ziggy’s New York Delicatessen. Ziggy’s grandfather started the business, and while his brother J. Mackye Gruber and his cousin Ross Elliot decided early on that they were not cut out for that life, Ziggy took to it from a young age, donning a white chef’s apron and cap while helping in the kitchen. He was devastated at 15 when his grandfather passed away, so to distract him from his grief, his mother traveled with him to England, where she grew up. There, he visited a well-known culinary academy, arranged an interview with the headmaster, and, despite lacking credentials, got himself admitted by implying that his family would make a generous offer to the scholarship fund.

Ziggy went on to prepare fancy food for the Queen of England, but something was missing. He decided to continue the family tradition but took it up a notch. The Jewish community of Houston, which Ziggy describes as a shtetl, where everyone knows everyone else, was always eager to patronize any new deli. But invariably, after a few weeks the enthusiasm waned, and the crowds thinned. But for Kenny and Ziggy’s they remained. This was the real thing.

Deli Man follows Ziggy as he walks among his patrons, telling stories and kibbitzing with the regulars as if they were family members. He’s equally at home and affectio-

nate with his loyal and mostly Hispanic staff. Like all deli men, Ziggy is a workaholic and constantly stressed out. He's overweight and out of shape. Despite friends and family trying to set him up on dates over the years, he's been unlucky in love. He says he is married to his business. Yet at some point, he meets and begins dating Mary McCaughey, who was born Catholic but is Jewish-curious. An acupuncturist who takes Ziggy on as a patient, she complements him like mustard on pastrami and tries to get him to take better care of himself.

Like Ziggy and Mary, *Deli Man* is a love story, a tribute to delicatessens, patrons and owners who love their jobs passionately despite long, exhausting hours and many challenges. Who else but a meshuggeneh would dedicate his life to an all-consuming business with rising food and labor costs, sky-high rents, changing demographics, evolving food tastes and preferences and increasing health concerns? It is not surprising that, in the decade since the film was made, several more featured establishments closed. Though one can hope that Ziggy has slowed down, decompressed, hit the gym and lost some weight. That, at least, would be a somewhat happy and appropriate coda to a bittersweet ending.

Deli Man: Tuesday, September 8, 2026

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Adam Rabiner lives in Ditmas Park with his wife, Dina.

ABOUT US

"Plow to Plate," presented by the Safe Food Committee of the Park Slope Food Coop, is a film series focused on food. Its goal is to educate the community about food-related topics and issues, such as how food is sustainably cultivated, harvested, distributed, as well as prepared and served. All screenings are FREE and open to the public.