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In New York, Why Sammy's Is Famous

By Pamela Gerhardt

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Remember the days when Mom served up an appetizer of grated horseradish and chopped onions laced with chicken fat? Me neither, but the menu at Famous Sammy's Roumanian Steak House in Manhattan asks the question, and by the end of dinner there you will be nodding your head, swearing that your mom used to wear a babushka. So steeped in nostalgia and familial warmth is this crowded, rowdy restaurant that you might start dancing in the thin aisles or hugging Sammy as you stumble out the door and find yourself at the corner of Chrystie and Delancey streets--a Lower East Side intersection once busy with New York Jewish social activity. Most of the families moved north to Queens more than 20 years ago, but at Sammy's you can get a sense (or sensory overload) of the days gone by.

As indicated by the name, the restaurant specializes in steak, but don't expect the lean grilled variety. These foot-long, fatty tenderloins are broiled in butter and lathered with fresh crushed garlic (you can request no garlic, but why?). For variety, the menu includes half a spring chicken, veal chops or lamb chops.

Side dishes are simple. Four out of seven include potatoes: fried, boiled, mashed or grated into a pancake. Clearly, this is not the place for anything seared on a bed of adjectives. The appetizers alone are enough to help you forget all those complicated, power dinners back home on K Street. The waiter brings the chopped liver out in a big mixing bowl, tosses in crisp-fried onions, then asks, "You wanna hand me that chicken fat?"

You break away from clapping and faking the lyrics to "Those Were the Days, My Friends," played by the three-piece Israeli band on the tiny wooden stage. "Whaddya want?" you yell in your best New York accent. "The fat," the waiter yells back, and gestures to the center of your table. You focus on the bottle. Earlier, you had assumed it was honey, meant for some sort of Eastern European dessert. Suddenly, a carafe of fat seems perfectly reasonable. You tilt the bottle, and the yellow liquid inside moves. So it's good fat, right? The waiter douses the chopped liver, stirs and drops the bowl on the table with a clang. "Enjoy!" You spread some liver on the dark brown bread brimming from various baskets that someone keeps placing on the table. You sample the many varieties of pickles, also in baskets on the table. Salty. Sweet. Tart. The liver isn't bad. In fact, it's very good. You grab more bread. A pickled green tomato.

An accordion sounds a note, something you recognize. Suddenly, everyone in the restaurant sings, "Those were the days, my friend . . ." By the second round, you

start to believe it.

Before you leave, you freshen up in the bathrooms with the complimentary bottle of Brut (for guys) or Emeraude (for gals) on the backs of the toilets. And grab a free insider's dictionary of Yiddish terms. Oi vay. Translation: April 15.

Famous Sammy's Roumanian Steak House, 157 Chrystie St., New York, 212-673-0330 or 212-475-9131. Open seven nights a week. Reservations recommended. Take the B, D or Q train downtown to Grand Street. Walk two blocks north on Chrystie Street, crossing Delancey.

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