

TRAVEL TALES

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THE JEWISH TRAVELLER

By MIKE COHEN

JEWISH RESTAURATEUR THRIVES IN ST. PETE: Canadians in particular will want to visit Harold Seltzer's Steakhouse when visiting the St. Petersburg, Florida area. Harold is a native Montrealer, whose grandfather Sam was one of the city's most legendary butchers.

Upon arriving at the St. Pete locale, I felt right at home. There was the well-lit up sign no passing car could miss, several model cows near the entrance, a packed parking lot accompanied by a sizable lineup for tables and a menu

which looked oh so familiar. Harold Seltzer was only eight years old when he started to work at his grandfather's iconic butcher shop in Montreal for 75 cents an hour. As he grew up, he learned the business inside out and put himself through school by waiting on tables and working in management for different restaurants. While he chose a different career path and became a commercial tax real estate lawyer, the food industry remained close to his heart.

Sam Seltzer (1905-
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1997) began working as a young boy delivering packages of meat on the street-cars of Montreal. He worked for the butcher shop of the man who would become his

father-in-law and eventually opened up one of his own, for which he became deservedly famous for more than 60 years.

Harold's father Nelson and his uncle Norman took over the family business and grew it to greater heights, serving the finest cuts of aged and marbled beef to individuals, as well as the better restaurants, hotels and private clubs in Montreal. Nelson also owned and operated many restaurants in Canada, before returning to the meat and wholesale food business. He still works full time.

OPPORTUNITY ARISES: In 1995 an opportunity presented itself to launch a steakhouse concept in the Tampa-St. Petersburg, Florida area and Harold jumped at it. He called the restaurant Sam Seltzer's Steakhouse, after his legendary grandfather, and from the first 1,000 seat dining establishment in Tampa it grew into a chain of seven with other locations in Clearwater, Orlando, Sarasota, St. Pete, Port Richey and Fort Myers.

Harold sold his interests in Sam Seltzer's Steakhouse in 2004. One night, six years later, he was watching the news and saw that the entire chain was shutting down. He was shocked and felt particularly bad for the staff who would be out of work. A few days later he purchased the contents of the St. Pete and

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Port Richey locales and reopened under the new name of Harold Seltzer's Steakhouse.

Harold Seltzer's Steakhouse is reputed to have the best prime rib in town and I can personally attest to how good it is. He buys all of his beef in bulk and ages it for five to six weeks to make it more tender. They make their own dough each day in order to serve homemade dinner rolls and croutons and house-made dressings and they have strict meat handling approaches. From the time the meat is produced, Harold's has control over it. It is cut in-house and aged a minimum of 35 days.

FAMOUS MILLEFEUILLES: The St. Pete restaurant seats about 350 people. Their menu and ambience is very much like some Montreal steakhouses we have known. Take the millefeuilles for example. Harold orders them on palates from Les Delices Lafrenaie in St. Leonard and calls them the Napoleon. Well we made sure to save room for this

favorite, sharing two among the three of us. Harold also brings in his signature steak spices from Montreal;

Harold spends four to five nights at the restaurant. "I tell my staff all of the time that we are not in the restaurant business; we are in the entertainment and hospitality business," he said. "All of our team go the extra mile.

It was impressive to watch Harold in action. For one thing he stopped at every table to chat and most customers spoke to him on a first name basis. He cleared dishes and when I went to the washroom there he was cleaning the sink counters. A little later I saw him circulating in the kitchen.

The St. Petersburg restaurant is located at 3500 Tyrone Blvd. while the one in Port Richey is at Gulf View Square Mall. Log on to www.seltzerssteakhouse.com

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