

March 8, 2000

TO GO

TO GO; Shepherd's Pie and More

By Eric Asimov

AS the name suggests, **DEB'S** is a modest place, the equivalent of a Joe's or a Just Good Food. It occupies a humble spot on Varick Street just south of Houston Street, a no man's land that's not SoHo and not the West Village. But on this nondescript block, Deb's is royalty, a benevolent neighborhood monarch whose flock cries out for sturdy, tasty meals that give them the strength to carry on.

Certainly, the lineage is there. Deb is Deborah Gold, a second-generation owner of her little storefront. Under her father, it was a delicatessen, but when Ms. Gold took it over four years ago, 15 years after her training at the Culinary Institute of America, she turned it into a carryout shop that stood out from the others nearby. Before establishing Deb's, she had been a partner with her brother in S.O.B.'s, the Brazilian nightclub and restaurant down the block.

Deb's, little more than a display counter, with a small serve-yourself salad bar and a few beverage cases, is open for breakfast and lunch but closes at 5 p.m. When I can squeeze myself in during the lunch rush, I pass the attractive display of sandwiches and opt for the hot entrees (\$6.25 with one side, \$6.50 with two), which change daily. If you're lucky, Ms. Gold will be serving her salmon glazed with hoisin sauce, a small but impeccably fresh piece of fish subtly amplified with mild sweet and soy flavors. Meaty chicken wings are tasty and satisfying, served in a mustard and orange sauce that again achieves a balance of sweet and sour. I wouldn't call the jerk chicken authentic -- it had none of the heat, spice or smoke -- but it was good baked chicken crusted in thyme.

I loved her turkey shepherd's pie (\$5.50), layered with creamy mashed potato, chopped turkey meat, peas and carrots, and I even enjoyed her lively Salisbury steak, which is simply chopped meat in mushroom sauce. Salisbury steak? In the year 2000? She's just giving the customers what they want, Ms. Gold says. Of course, Deb's also offers trendy dressed-up sandwiches like meatloaf with watercress and chipotle ketchup (\$5.50). As many monarchies have found, survival means flexibility.

Deb's, 200 Varick Street, near Houston Street, (212) 675-4550. Delivery: Canal Street to Christopher Street, West Street to Broadway.

Along Broadway in Upper Manhattan near Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, restaurant signs tend to be in Spanish. EL PRESIDENTE, one of my favorite places in the area, describes its food as Caribbean, which is technically true, though many people nowadays assume that Caribbean means Jamaican. El Presidente specializes in the foods of the Hispanic Caribbean -- Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic -- where flavors are powered by garlic, bell peppers and onion rather than the heat of chilies.

Pernil or roast pork (\$7.25) is simple but wonderfully satisfying. The meat is marinated in lime juice and garlic and then roasted until the edges are crispy. A huge serving comes with rice and beans, French fries, sweet or green plantains or salad. A variation on this dish is mofongo, a mound of mashed green plantains spiked with pork cracklings and enough garlic to ward off the knife-edge of any winter chill. El Presidente supplements this with a pile of pernil (\$7.75) or shrimp (\$11.75). You will not go hungry.

El Presidente also serves an excellent charcoal-broiled skirt steak (\$14.75), well charred around the edges yet still juicy. It comes with grilled onions and peppers.

El Presidente is a small, bright restaurant with a pounding jukebox. I prefer to take out, and this food travels well. And El Presidente is open around the clock. I can think of no better skirt steak at 4 a.m.

El Presidente, 3938 Broadway, near 165th Street, (212) 927-7011. Delivery: 10 blocks.

Photo: LUNCH SPOT -- Deb Gold serves sandwiches and entrees. (Gary Dunkin for The New York Times)