

# Poetry Chez Schwartz's

BY GUY DIXON

There are a lot of secrets in the world. For some, one of the biggest is the secret smoked-meat recipe at Schwartz's Deli, Montreal's deceptively modest, world-famous institution.

Cut deeper, and there's the secret of why there's such a palpable energy felt when entering the plain-looking little eatery. Cut even deeper, and there's the secret of why the men who work there stay for so many years, some for a lifetime.

Filmmaker Garry Beitel uncovered all of this, pressing himself, along with his film and sound equipment, into tiny corners of the crowded restaurant and wiring the waiters, meat cutters and kitchen staff with microphones for his equally modest, beautiful documentary *Chez Schwartz*. The film is playing Montreal's Festival du Nouveau Cinéma tomorrow and Monday and is expected to have a theatrical release at least in Montreal, and possibly in other cities. Télé-Québec is planning to air it in the new year, and the CBC is also said to be eyeing it. Even a screening last

month at the Calgary International Film Festival was packed.

So, like Schwartz's smoked-meat sandwiches, what's the big attraction here?

"One of the fascinating things about coming in, after you've been waiting in line for 20 minutes, is this sense of arrival. The look on people's faces as they walk in, there's a kind of aura that takes over," said Beitel, who shot the film between February and December last year and had become a fixture himself to Schwartz's regulars.

What that patience allowed Beitel to reveal is a hidden micro-culture between the workers. These are men who take years to move from working in the kitchen to working behind the counter. They speak a kind of multilingual, tough banter that rubs off on the restaurant, but which customers probably never hear.

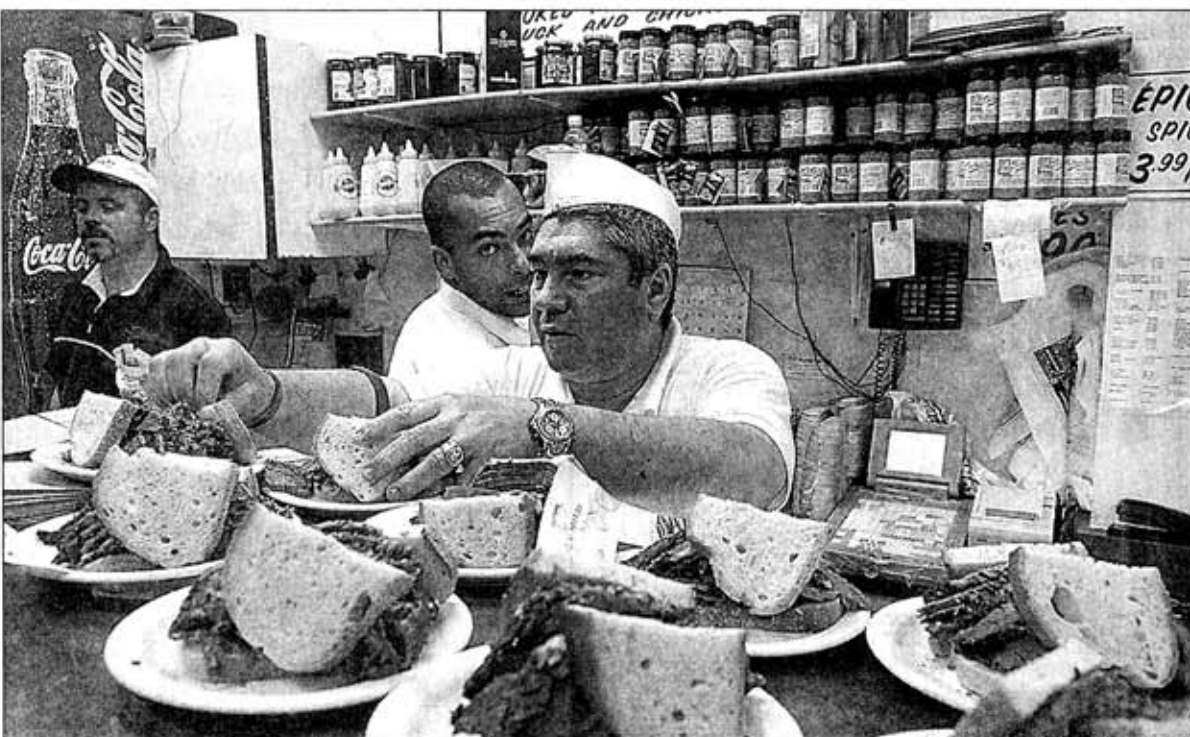
"Why is Cheech on my case again," says a new waiter, who graduates up from busboy in the film and who also likes to write poetry. Despite his lightening fast busboy moves, like a character from a screwball comedy, he's having trouble working at the counter.

"Because Cheech is trying to toughen you up, because you're like a little wuss," says a more senior waiter. This is from a man, however, who earlier in the film patted the poet on the face, praising him for a verse he reads to the camera about Schwartz's. This is also a guy who stops for a minute during the film to soak up the sounds of the restaurant. There's poetry all around these guys.

The banter is particularly subtle. The director would often move the camera depending on who was "on" that day, who was more lively or revealing something. Because of the ridiculously tight location though, Beitel said he learned to stay put and wait for a scene to unfold.

Like when a meat cutter chastises the poet for asking whether he just cut a medium or a lean smoked-meat sandwich. "You can see the white and the red," says the older meat cutter. It's funnier the more you think about it, since these are guys, after all, who serve medium smoked-meat sandwiches for days, years, even decades. Pickles, coleslaw, smoked meat, steaks, it's a documentary-maker's dream to have such great characters, all

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JONATHAN WENK/CHEZ SCHWARTZ

Filmmaker Garry Beitel says because of the tight location, he learned to wait for a scene to unfold.

based around a restaurant and a menu that's so elemental.

Finally, there are the panhandlers outside, who have spent 15 to 20 years themselves standing outside the deli. Beitel filmed and miked them too. One of them is Ryan Larkin, one of Canada's most respected

animators, who has begged for change for years. He was the subject of the acclaimed 2004 National Film Board of Canada animated short *Ryan* and the accompanying documentary *Alter Egos*. Like all of the others, nothing he says could have been scripted.

When asked why people from all over the world come to Schwartz's, he says, "Big mystery. I don't know. But I got my suspicions. I suspect that it's a Romanian-Jewish plot to take over the world, right here at Schwartz's. And they succeeded." He says it out of love.