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The Kibbitz Room

by [Todd Longwell](#)

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Sometime in 1999, while millions were mindlessly bopping their skulls to Ricky Martin and "Livin' La Vida Loca," the government issued a report predicting that Latinos will constitute a plurality of California's population by the year 2020, surpassing Caucasians, not to mention people of African descent. To people like Patrick Buchanan, it was undoubtedly a national tragedy. To hardcore Mexican nationalists, it was sweet justice; a quiet retaking of the land the U.S. stole from them more than a hundred and fifty years ago. To most Californians, the Gringo as minority may be a new concept, but for the residents of Los Angeles, it's been the status quo for some time. The evidence is everywhere. Billboards en Español can now be found in neighborhoods that were white flight destinations in the '70s and a theater in a new shopping complex developed by uber-WASP TV star Tom Selleck and family on the site of the old General Motors plant shows films with Spanish subtitles.

Of course, Los Angeles is nothing if not diverse. It's also home to the third largest Jewish population in the world, behind Israel (#1) and New York (#2). One of LA's bedrock industries, the film business, was founded largely by Jews, so their cultural impact is much greater than their mere numbers would suggest.

Two cultures, so different on the surface, but both so vital to the city. How to bring them together? As with many sexual couplings, the key ingredient seems to be alcohol. In this case, tequila.

Determined to create my own personal Anglo-Judaic-Latino melting pot, I take my wife, the former Romy Greenberger (a lifelong resident of North Hollywood whom I met under the influence of cheap American beer at a sleazy Hollywood bar in 1990), to Canter's Deli (419 N. Fairfax, 323/651-2030) for some nosh and tequila. If you've spent any time in L.A., you know that Canter's is one of the oldest, funkier delis in the city. Established in 1928, it's renowned for its cranky Jurassic-era waitresses, round-the-clock service and tarnished once-futuristic Formica décor.

Given the fact that tequila shots might be a tad conspicuous amidst the coffee, kreplach and matzo ball soup, I decide that we should take our nourishment in The Kibbitz Room, a bar the Canter family opened in the back of the restaurant in the early-'90s. As we enter, it is deserted, save for a few Latino employees watching a Spanish-language soccer telecast and the classic lone drunk hunched over his drink at the bar. The Latino bartender comes to our table and is taken aback when we ask for menus. When I learn that the only tequila available is the dreaded Jose Cuervo, I decide to order a margarita. Now, I'm no big fan of margaritas. I consider them girly drinks only slightly more respectable than wine coolers and peach schnapps, often used as stepping stones by sorority girls on their journey from excessive college drinking to full-blown adult alcoholism. But it turns out that, as harsh as Cuervo can be, straight shots of the stuff probably would've been a more appropriate beverage.

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It's not as clear cut as the red wine with meat, white wine with fish rule, but I can safely say that alcoholic, lime-flavored, blended ice drinks don't go with pastrami reubens, Mish-mosh Soup (chicken pieces, matzo ball, kreplach and kasha in a chicken broth) and meat knish.

But if our planned Jewish-Mexican culinary summit is a failure, our evening is not. The Kibbitz Room possesses a one-of-a-kind atmosphere. Narrow, dark and even funkier than the deli itself, it presents live music nearly every night of the week. Although none of rock stars depicted in the numerous photos that grace the walls have ever been known to play here, the room has served as the spawning ground for one chart-topper - The Wallflowers, led by Jakob Dylan, son of great Jewish-American singer/songwriter Bob Dylan. On Sundays at 9 p.m., they present an open mike showcase followed by a classic rock jam by the house band, The Kibbitz Cowboys, whose drummer is one of the band members who spontaneously combusted in "This Is Spinal Tap."

An added bonus is a window at our booth that allows us to view the drama and pageantry of the Canter's Deli experience without having to hear the 70-something waitresses gripe about coffee refills. Soup-slurping, bagel-gumming oldsters, recognizable but unnamable character actors, alterna-girls and boys with tattoos and piercings and the occasional rock star - it's like observing an aquarium full of deli diners.

Halfway through our knish, a tipsy forty-something couple stumbles in and commandeers the booth next to us. Fortunately, they're happy-drunk. They tell the bartender to turn up the jukebox, and we discover it has a remarkable selection that runs the gamut from Johnny Cash and Louis Armstrong to Nirvana and AC/DC. Having consumed one margarita each, my wife and I aren't any kind of drunk, but the copious consumption of Jewish comfort food has left us feeling mellow and content, nonetheless. And the management enforces the no-smoking law, so I don't have to worry about having to threaten some nicotine-addicted libertarian with violence if he tries to burn a cancer stick.

The bottom line: The Kibbitz Room is not the place to go if you're some meshuganah cabrón hungry for a dissipated, Sam Peckinpah, "Bring Me The Head of Alfredo Garcia" tequila drinking experience. But if you're just an average mensch looking to mix borscht and agave, it's worth a try.