Host Nation

A family feud removes a beloved figure from a classic restaurant and tests one percent allegiances: Are high-powered New Yorkers loyal to their canteen ringmasters or just the social circus of their city?

BY HOLLY PETERSON SEPTEMBER 12, 2014

Andrea Portago & Kitty Hawks outisde La Grenouille, c. 1971. Photograph by Berenson/Vogue/Conde Nast

ON A HUMID SUMMER'S EVE THIS PAST June, Charles Masson couldn't help tending to the tightly packed peonies as he waited for the well-turned-out crowd to celebrate him on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Ten society women were giving a party at Swifty's, a clubby little café on Lexington Avenue, to honor his years running La Grenouille, the restaurant from which he had been recently banished by his family. Masson had spent decades fussing over details and anticipating every need of New York's most distinguished ladies and gentlemen, many living landmarks of a bygone era. This evening he must have felt a very strange kind of pre-dinner jumpiness as he fiddled around, early for his party, a guest in a restaurant that was not his own.

Shock waves crashed against the cement shores of Park Avenue only weeks before, when it was announced that Masson's brother and mother had abruptly ousted him—for reasons unspecified—from his nearly four-decade perch as the face and host of La Grenouille, a dining establishment that was born in the French haute cuisine heyday of Le Pavillon, La Côte Basque, La Caravelle, and Lutèce—all since shuttered.

"We thought it would be nice, when he felt a bit lost and shell-shocked, to throw him a party," said Elizabeth Peabody, one of the hostesses. "It was about 70 people, almost everyone you know in New York."

La Grenouille, many say, continued to exist only because of Masson and his highly mannered yet unobtrusive way with patrons. He always welcomed guests like cherished relatives before they even sat for their seared foie gras with quince or quenelles of pike Lyonnaise with caviar. Susan Burke, who spearheaded the event honoring Masson, summed up the sentiment of his following: "Manhattan's a really small town in some ways. None of my friends are going to La Grenouille anymore. They'll be fine. They'll have out-of-towners. It will just be a very different place."

New York's restaurant landscape is dotted with exclusive establishments where it's unclear whether the allure is the scene inside or the manager who created it. It's no surprise that the 10 women hosting the party for Masson chose Swifty's. Pretenders who get reservations there won't feel like (God forbid) out-of-towners, but they might not feel they quite fit in, either. "New Yorkers like clubs because they like to be a member of something," Swifty's co-owner Robert Caravaggi says. He worked with the inimitable Glenn Bernbaum, who ran Mortimer's, the legendary Upper East Side boite, like a private club. When Bernbaum died, Mortimer's closed. The crowd nested safely at Swifty's. "We are not an official club," Caravaggi says, "but we enjoy being around like-minded people. It has a lot to do with tradition and friendship. These people have an affection for me and my co-owner, Stephen Attoe, and we try to return it to them."

Society columnist Liz Smith, who has frequented every New York hot spot from El Morocco on, explains: "Restaurant-going at Manhattan's top level has always been about playing to people's illusions that they are able to eat in expensive places and know who everyone is around them." The symbiotic relationship between patron and gregarious owner only intensifies the creation of an inner circle—elite members who get special treatment—above the hoi polloi. Without that relationship, a restaurant, even a great one, is just a place to eat.

"People follow people," says Tina Brown, CEO of Tina Brown Live Media and one of the city's most successful conveners. "It's all about the maître d'. It's not about the place. It's that personal touch of the bon vivant who greets you, who knows you want to sit on the corner bench on the left, who understands you hate it when you're given too many choices and will give you your baked potato with olive oil even before you ask for it, and knows you love lime juice and soda to keep you cool when it's hot."

Though New York likes to project the Emma Lazarus image that it is open to all, many of its restaurants have stringent rules that endlessly confound us. "There are de facto clubs, and it's unclear what the rules are," says Michael Wolff, author and media analyst. "You don't know how to get into nightclubs, much less into these restaurants that have become this sort of portal. It's weird: Restaurants are public places, in business to feed people, and, at the same time, people fear they can't get in." The host provides the entrée.

On the Manhattan restaurant scene, this much is clear: The more family- (and lineage-) oriented Upper East Side restaurants tend to cater to a set crowd, while the power lunch establishments recognize more of a meritocracy ladder of haute accomplishers. In the spectacular coliseum that is the Philip Johnson–designed Four Seasons Grill Room, the men and women who pretty much run New York like to sit at quiet tables about two feet from the other gladiators. Seen and not heard is the object as they conspire to merge some institutions and take down others.

"Something is always going on at the Four Seasons Grill Room," Smith says. "I don't think anyone knows who the chef is. The guys running it"—hosts Julian Niccolini and Alex von Bidder—"have become famous for their outrageous behavior." Niccolini and von Bidder spend every weekday morning placing the powerful at appropriate tables, in a complex game of musical chairs. "They are funny and sexy and make people feel at home," she says. "Patrons come because it's easy to get to, and it's a great place to talk business. If Julian left it would be terrible—and it's hard to tell what would survive."

Society people gravitate more to the manager who understands where the overlap is between an Upper East Side den and a country club. The powerful like a convivial and famous greeter like Julian or Alex, who understands the delicate seesaw of jocular insubordination and obsequiousness—but let's face it, the people in this group are also drawn to one another. With dozens of world class restaurants in Manhattan, many of the Four Seasons regulars return several times a week to the same booth and even the same $35 baked potato made to their liking, as if the Four Seasons were their personal commissary.

The power lunch spots further diverge between business and media. Journalist (and executive producer of Veep) Frank Rich remembers a time early in his career, at Time magazine in the 1970s, when "lunch was a huge part of the culture. Top editors like Henry Grunwald would go to La Caravelle all the time. My back-of-the-book editor and I would have lunch almost every day. She knew the owner of Chez Napoléon—it's still there, in the West 50s—and we'd have long lunches and we'd discuss what we were writing and everything that was going on in the magazine." Though Rich notes that technology has made doing editorial business over lunch less common, the tradition still prevails in publishing, magazines, and television. There is what is essentially a big cafeteria where you can find all the machers: Michael's, on West 55th Street. It's hard to determine if it's owner Michael McCarty himself or his general manager, Steve Millington, who commands the crowd, or if everyone in the media is just drawn to this locale, like bugs to a porch light. "It's a function of recognition," McCarty says. "It's more of a human relationship than a financial one. Each day we go in there, we put together a fantastic seating, and then it's showtime, it's theater."

"From a functional point of view it's efficient," says Wolff, who had a public feud with Michael's managers, boycotted the place for a few years, and is now back enjoying his front-and-center table. "You know the people who are going to be there, the people who are interesting and helpful to see. If you do that, and then you go into a restaurant where you don't know anyone, you kind of feel gypped. What do I get out of this? Just a bowl of pasta?" Imagine that: going to a restaurant for the purpose of having a wonderful bowl of pasta.