



This page, clockwise from above: Elaine Kaufman, owner of the famous Elaine's, on Second Avenue, with guest George Plimpton; the Who's Who of New York converged at Elaine's, including Candace Bushnell, in 2002, with Gay Talese in the back; the restaurant's exterior.

THE INSIDER CAFÉS OF NEW YORK'S CAFÉ SOCIETY 1987-2017

BY ALEX HITZ





This page, above (left to right): Mortimer's restaurateur Glenn Bernbaum with public-relations guru Paul Wilmot, 1984; Bernbaum (seated) with maître d' Robert Caravaggio (right), chef Stephen Attoe (center), and the Mortimer's team. Below (left to right): An evening at Swifty's; Caravaggio and Attoe, who opened Swifty's when Mortimer's closed.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO CELEBRATE the 30th anniversary of a New York insider's eye like *Quest* without at least a nod to the canteens frequented by the smartest of the smart set—and those who've come from around the world to see them. As I've said before in these pages, the restaurants I love may not be the hippest, latest, last-worded, coolest, Michelin-starred-est bodegas on the rosters, but travel guides be damned: to *insiders*, these are the places that matter.

MORTIMER'S, AND THEN SWIFTY'S

Insider Glenn Bernbaum dreamed up the *ne plus ultra* insider neighborhood joint with Mortimer's, on Lexington Avenue at 75th Street, in a space that he, quite literally, lived in above. For almost 30 years, Glenn ruthlessly ruled over which table which patron got or didn't get, and sold "wholesale" caviar out the back door for double the price. His menu combined 1930s WASP country club favorites like curried chicken salad, crab cakes, meatloaf, and calf's liver with "nursery food"—creamed spinach, mashed potatoes, peas and carrots. On top of it all, the joint wasn't too ambitiously priced because, as Glenn acknowledged, "even rich people love a deal." They all came: the Bill Buckleys, Nan and Tommy Kempner, Judy and Sam Peabody,

Bill Blass, the Henry Kissingers, the Abe Ribicoffs. When Glenn died in 1998, Mortimer's closed and left a sudden void that maître d' Robert Caravaggio and chef Stephen Attoe filled by opening Swifty's, in a different space down the street. And for a long while, it was a great success. As Swifty's fell on hard times and suddenly shuttered, in 2016—a surprise to even its staff—a void in New York City insider canteens opened up that has yet to be filled.

ELAINE'S

A way-the-hell-up-there place on Second Avenue, Elaine's *must* be mentioned in the insider list, although, as a customer and chef, I really never understood it. It certainly wasn't the food... I'll leave that part there. Nor was it the atmosphere. Nor the place. And hostess, sometime-chef, and owner Elaine Kaufman could be, let's just say, difficult. But somehow Elaine's was always a coveted insider's spot for celebrities: Bobby Short, Elaine Stritch, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, Georges Plimpton and Hamilton, Chita Rivera, this or that Tony winner, and whichever Hollywood legend who was in from the coast. The mind boggles but Elaine's was a *thing*, and whether I understood it or not makes no difference. It can't be argued.





This page, left to right: The interior of the venerated La Côte Basque; Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis exits La Côte Basque through its famous revolving door, 1970. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: An archival image of the “21” Club, which originally opened as a speakeasy; famous ornamental horse jockeys guard the gates to “21”; the interior of Sette Mezzo, an Upper East Side insider canteen (and its exterior, to left); the awning entrance to La Grenouille; it has long been a family affair at La Grenouille; Ralph Lauren at the foot of the stairs of his much-hyped The Polo Bar; the exterior of The Polo Bar, on East 55th Street; the exterior of La Goulue, now shuttered.

LA GOULUE

It's with more than a tinge of nostalgia that I write about La Goulue, a brasserie that inhabited nearly a block on Madison Avenue for what seemed like a zillion years. When I first lived in New York almost 25 years ago, Prince Dimitri of Yugoslavia and I met there for the original “Board Meeting,” a group of locals and Euros who regaled each other over steak frites and Sancerre at lunch every Saturday and Sunday. The Board still meets, downtown these days, but its golden age was at La Goulue on Madison at 64th Street. Just so you know, we were *always* seated along the wall to the left in the front—’natch—while Mr. and Mrs. Dodsworth from Michigan were *always* shown straight to the back.

LA CÔTE BASQUE

This place was such an insider scene. The room was pretentious—simply charmingly decorated with murals of France’s Basque fishermen on its walls. But don’t be fooled: this was no simple fisherman’s joint. The *goujonnettes de sole* and chocolate soufflés were good. But the restaurant was really more infamous than famous because Truman Capote’s roman à clef *Answered Prayers* was set there. The book’s protagonists were thinly veiled insider characters, and the book spilled the secret beans of an uber-eschelon extramarital affair—a tale that had been told to Capote in strictest confidence. None of the Babe Paley, Lee Radziwill, or Gloria Guinness types who’d been Capote’s confidantes and lunch buddies at La Côte Basque ever spoke to him again. I first went there with my parents in December 1991. Next table? Valentino and Jacqueline de Ribes *en tête-à-tête*.

“21” CLUB

On the left side—note: not the right side—of the Bar Room at “21” there is another super-secret insider place whose favorable tables are saved for big-tipping regulars, mobsters, tycoons, and visiting heads of state. Not to be missed is the insider tour of the wine cellar, an armored labyrinthine set of rooms that made up a speakeasy during Prohibition. If you have self-esteem issues and

want to avoid being seated in Siberia, please have a really good regular customer make the reservation for you. I always do.

LA GRENOUILLE

This restaurant may be the most glamorous of all—and when I say glamorous, I mean that dimly pinkish-golden-lighted, red-velvet-banquetted, pale-ranunculus-filled, diamonded, perfumed, and furred come-hither type of glamour from a bygone time that exists here still, and does almost nowhere else in the world. It’s civilized. One does not simply eat here; one dines. One does not merely come into a room like this; one makes an entrance. Good enough for Jackie, Annette, or Suzy? Good enough for me.

SETTE MEZZO

I live a block away from Sette Mezzo, and it’s my neighborhood place. There are a million fresh specials every night, the food is simple and great, and it’s a colorful scene in a way that insiders recognize and appreciate—New York playing itself. Until very recently, Sette Mezzo never accepted credit cards. Pay your bill on time and you’ll always get a good table. Don’t and they’re fully booked.

THE POLO BAR

It’s no coincidence that the storied past of La Côte Basque’s famed location on 55th Street is where Ralph Lauren chose to launch his signature restaurant concept for insiders and those who want to be insiders in New York. Although reconfigured from the old days, the place is quite literally marinated with history. Its entrance is discreet and cozy and it’s *really* hard to get into so, from the beginning, its allure is established. Cast straight from the photos of Ralph’s ads, the room is a sensation, and it’s hard to tell whether the staff is more capable than they are gorgeous, but if you’re like me, who cares? Calvin, the Giulianis, Donny Deutsch, and Cate Blanchett can say whatever they want, but the pastrami on rye, dripping in clarified butter, is simply NOT to be missed. ♦

