

Table d'Hot

Power Lunchers Have Made Michael's in Manhattan the Place to Be Seen -- by Each Other

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If National Geographic is up for a new angle on the pack behavior of exotic animals, here's a can't-miss idea. Forget penguins. Instead, focus on the heavyweights of New York media, fashion and finance. Rather than the annual slog to a patch of ice, there'll be a daily migration to one restaurant: Michael's, in midtown Manhattan.

"Each day, they arrive by taxi, by limo or on foot," Morgan Freeman could solemnly intone in the voice-over. "All of them mysteriously drawn by some irresistible force to these modest rooms, where they will twitter about themselves and their careers, feasting on Cobb salads."

This zoo is always full. Last week, the creatures on view at Michael's included record mogul Tommy Mottola, who dined with actor Joe Pesci; Vanity Fair writer Dominick Dunne, who brought along Ron Reagan; Tommy Hilfiger, who huddled with Patrick Bousquet-Chavanne, president of the Estee Lauder Group. There were editors from People, Glamour and Time, agents from William Morris, editors from major publishing houses. On Tuesday, the latest Mrs. Donald Trump lunched with very blond friends.

"It's an important-persons club," says general manager Steve Millington, getting ready for lunch one recent morning. "It's a successful organization that represents and reflects people's accomplishments."

Why is Michael's the preening ground of choice for this crowd? And how, in a city so fickle, has a lunch table here endured for nearly a decade as such a valuable totem of success?

"It's not the food," says Henry Schleiff, the CEO of Court TV and a Michael's regular.

Not that the food is bad. Zagat voters rate the French-leaning fare, which includes such dishes as confit of Long Island duck (\$31) and fresh veal cheeks sous-vide (\$34) squarely in the "good to excellent" zone. But there's far hautier cuisine in this city and better values.

No, the reason people eat at Michael's is (a) to network and do business, and (b) to talk about the people who eat at Michael's, with a heavy emphasis on (b). The genius of the place is how it has transformed the city's perpetual anxiety about pecking order into culinary gold.

Which is to say that at Michael's, where you stand determines precisely where you sit. The place is

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divided into two rooms roughly the same size. The rear room is arguably the more appealing, because it's next to a garden, but never mind that.

"If you're stuck in the back room, you're probably with the wrong person," says Jeff Jarvis, a former critic for TV Guide and a Michael's frequenter.

The action is in the front room. Generally speaking, the closer you're seated to the windows overlooking 55th Street, the more juice you've got. Diners can request a particular table, but there are no guarantees. Millington and the maitre d' lay out the seating every morning after studying the reservations list. Names that aren't recognized are Googled.

Tables are apportioned using some vague calculation involving status and number of visits. The more you come, and the brighter your star, the better your perch. Alice Mayhew, ubereditor at Simon & Schuster, dines here five days a week, for weeks on end, says Millington, which all but ensures her a regular date with Table 14. Robert Friedman, president of Classic Media: Harvey & Golden Books Entertainment -- home to "Underdog," "Lassie" and other TV properties -- hunkers at Table 11.

"It's as though Michael's anticipated the integration of media," Friedman says, "because people from every part of the business come."

Synergy ought to be on the menu. While sitting at Michael's, and working at the time for New Line Cinema, Friedman inked deals to promote the "Austin Powers" movies with companies such as Virgin Atlantic. "It was there," Friedman says, "that I first heard the phrase 'Urgin' for a Virgin,' " which the airline used for its tie-in promotion.

"A casual conversation can be very productive," says Wayne Kabak, an agent at the William Morris Agency. "You never know what comes from saying hello and being out there."

Each day as diners arrive, a line of waiters and waitresses stands a few feet from the maitre d' station, hands behind their backs, ready to whisk patrons to their appointed tables. It's like that moment in every beauty pageant when men in uniform queue up to chaperon contestants to center stage, where the ladies then spin in their evening gowns. Except instead of Miss Texas it's, say, David Corvo, the executive producer of "Dateline," and he's headed for Table 11.

"In most clubs, you act like you're not at a club, even if it's very exclusive," says Michael Wolff, a Vanity Fair writer who was a fixture at Michael's until he called it quits in a huff, about which more in a moment. "But everybody at Michael's acts like they are at Michael's. Quite literally, the point of being there is to be there. There's no pretense about it, which is part of the fun."

* * *

The founder and owner of this place is Michael McCarty, a hearty, pink-faced man with a booming voice. Last Wednesday at lunchtime he was eating at the bar with some friends, shouting for more oysters and greeting everyone who caught his eye. He wore a dark blue Zegna suit and gave the impression of a man in a huge rush.

"Good show, good show," he said a few times during an interview, words that roughly translated into "Let's get this over with." He opened his first restaurant in Santa Monica in 1979, when he was 25 years old. It was seized upon by a new generation of Hollywood moguls then on the rise -- Steven Spielberg, Michael Eisner, Jeffrey Katzenberg.

"There weren't a lot of great restaurants in L.A. back then," McCarty says. "The place was one of the founding spots for new American food."

In 1989, he opened here at 24 W. 55th St., a space that previously housed a restaurant called the Italian Pavilion. McCarty coveted the spot for the garden room, but he knew also that he was moving into an ideal neighborhood:

"William Morris was next door, you had the MGM building nearby, you had ICM, that was a block away, all the publishing houses."

Location is just part of it. McCarty seems to understand intuitively how to feed and flatter the elites. His stock in trade is non-celebrity celebrities -- the rich and/or powerful who aren't recognized by the masses and therefore crave recognition by the few, which is to say, each other. He gives these people the feeling that they are exactly where they ought to be.

Especially on Wednesdays. That's when Laurel Touby shows up to report on who is eating at Michael's for the Web site FishbowlNY.com. Her dispatches come complete with a schematic drawing of the restaurant's tables, helpfully numbered.

"We started doing this in July after we asked [Spy magazine founder and New York magazine columnist] Kurt Andersen how we could get readers at, you know, the highest level to go to the site," says Touby, who is the co-founder of Mediabistro.com, which owns and operates FishbowlNY. "And he said: 'Just go to Michael's and report on who is eating there. That would be interesting.'" Initially, Touby was intimidated by the place and unable to identify anyone except the TV talent. But as the weeks went by, the sightings got easier, in part because the Michael's regulars started visiting FishbowlNY, and when she misidentified someone, or left a name out of the mix, an e-mail would arrive setting the record straight.

"Sometimes I get people e-mailing in the morning telling me they are on their way to Michael's," she says.

The management's response?

"If the activity of our clients is reported with discretion, and as long as it doesn't affect anyone's dining experience, Michael and I will turn a blind eye," Millington says. "The second we get complaints about it, we'll call it a day."

The unwritten ground rules are that Touby is not allowed to embarrass any patrons -- no mistress sightings, no bad-outfit alerts, no hissy-fit reports. She's also not allowed to wander around the room, notebook in hand, taking down names, which she did for a while.

"The place is sort of like a terrarium with a very fragile ecosystem," Touby explains, "and it needs just enough buzz, but not too much or it'll break down."

That terrarium can get a little claustrophobic. Vanity Fair's Wolff abruptly abandoned his regular table (No. 5) and swore off Michael's about a month ago, after the restaurant told him one day that his usual table had already been booked. (Millington says that Wolff simply called late that particular day and the table was taken.) Livid, Wolff called the New York Post and tattled to a gossip columnist, who ran an item announcing that Wolff and Michael's were kaput.

This seems a tad petulant even to Wolff, who says he mostly was looking to sever his ties after dining at Michael's about a thousand times.

Initially, he ate there with a sort of ironic detachment, back when he started to cover the media for New York magazine in 1998 and wanted to poke some fun at the cool kids. But the plan backfired.

"As soon as you start to write about Michael's they want you there, so the price of my making Michael's a kind of a comic shtick was that I became part of Michael's, and no matter how much I protested that this was just a joke, no one really took me seriously. At the same time, it became completely enjoyable."

Then it became suffocating. When he didn't take a friend to Michael's, the person felt slighted, since the decision seemed to imply that the friend wasn't Michael's-worthy. He sounds, these days, liberated.

But he also remembers the place fondly. So is he ever going back?

"They immediately sent me all kinds of flowers," he says. "Which I coldly ignored."

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