

Unanswered Prayers

Truman Capote, Part II • By Julie Baumgold



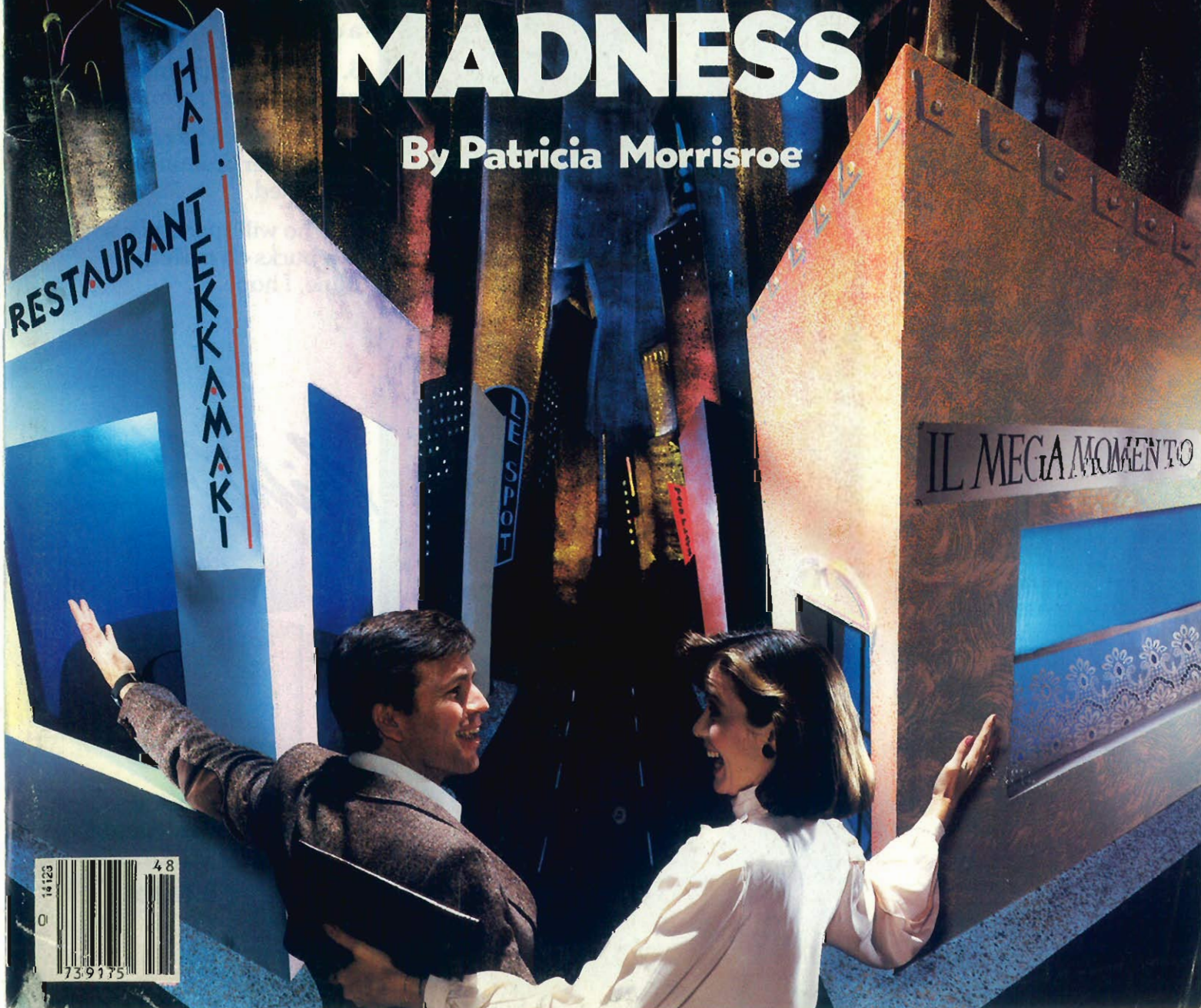
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Sex, Exercise, and Apartment Hunting Can't Match

RESTAURANT MADNESS

By Patricia Morrisroe



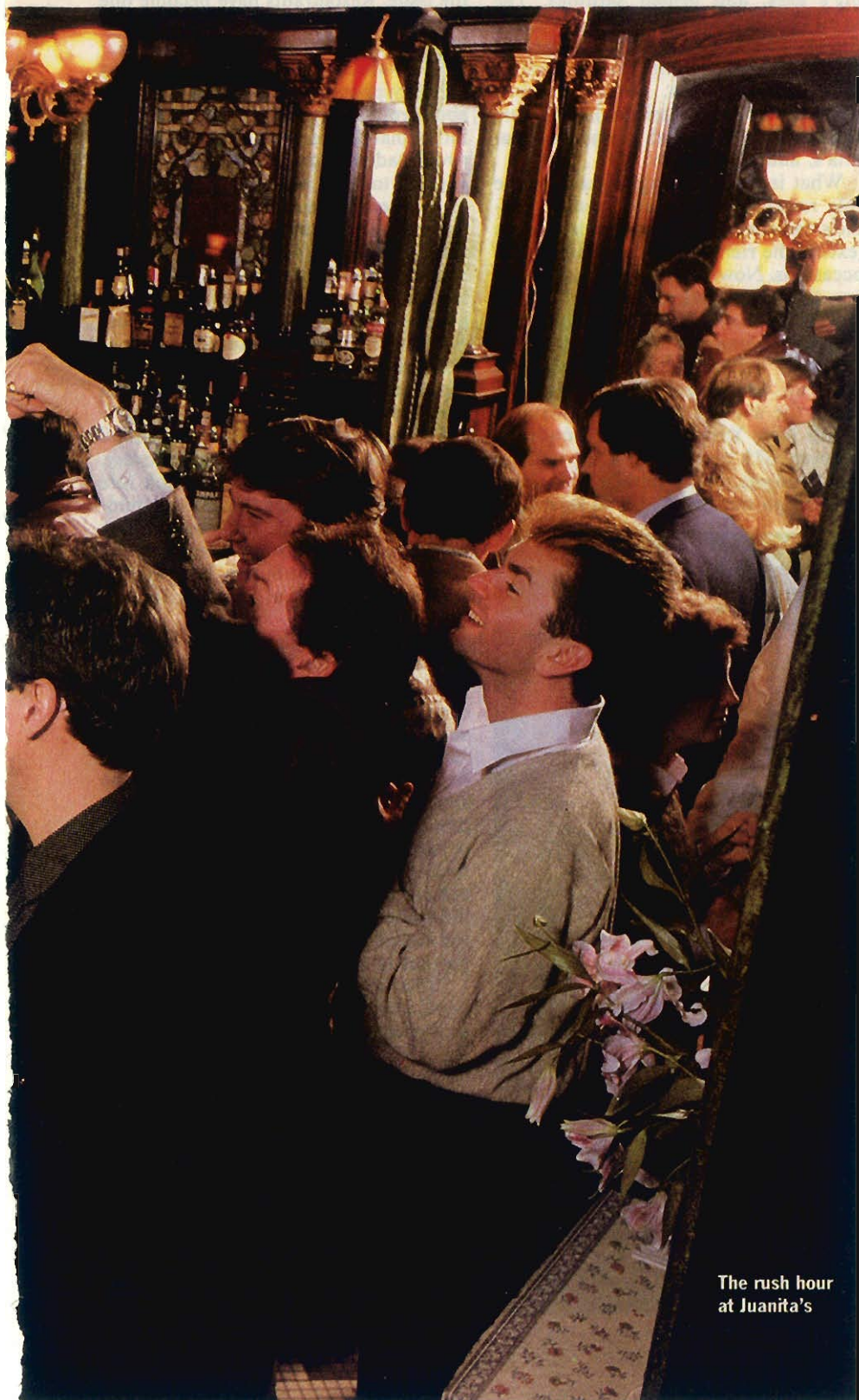
**SEX, EXERCISE, AND APARTMENT HUNTING
CAN'T MATCH**

RESTAURA



NEW YORK

NT MADNESS



The rush hour
at Juanita's



BY PATRICIA MORRISROE

THE CUSTOMERS ARE LINED up on the street, waiting to get into the newest Italian restaurant on Third Avenue. Those fortunate enough to reach the bar drink Bellinis, a concoction of champagne and peach juice, and exhale cigarette smoke onto the plates of pasta on the tables below. Those lucky enough to be sitting down ignore the smoke and concentrate on the aesthetics of their pumpkin-filled tortelloni in tomato cream sauce.

They can't hear one another because the restaurant's hard edges pump up the noise level. They can't move because there isn't any room—the place is the size of a Laundromat. They eat under the blinding glare of an overhead light. After 45 minutes of waiting and 35 minutes of dining, they hand over \$85 and walk out the door.

"What's it like?" asks a woman who has been waiting in line outside.

"The Lexington IRT," a customer replies.

"Thanks," the woman says, elbowing her way through the door.

New Yorkers are in the grip of restaurant madness. Never before have so many people spent so much money on eating out. Popular places are jammed, and *everybody* is talking about food. A New York telephone operator was recently asked the number of the Yellow Rose Cafe. "It's 595-8760," he said. "Order the pork chops."

It used to be that the only people so obsessive were professional food groupies who made their living on the restaurant scene. Now the ranks of foodies have swelled to include people like ABC



THE HOME-COOKED MEAL IS NOW AN OCCASION.

executive Patty Newburger, who goes to nearly every new place. "Maybe it's neurotic," she says, "but I'm constantly searching for the perfect restaurant. I have a list of criteria that includes everything right down to the temperature of the bread. I haven't found the right place yet, but I'm visiting another new one tomorrow night."

Penny Greene, whose husband owns Greene Luggage, hasn't eaten a meal at home in five years. "I'm thinking of turning my kitchen into a huge walk-in closet," she says. "The only time I cook is when I throw a steak in the broiler for the dog."

New York has always been a thriving restaurant city. But experts agree the current flurry of activity is unprecedented. (The New York Department of Health issued 12,800 restaurant permits in 1982, and 14,445 in 1983.) Within the TriBeCa area alone, at least a dozen new restaurants have appeared in the past year and a half, including Ecco, Le Saint Jean des Prés, the Sporting Club, Café Americano, and El Internacional.

And the city's new and upcoming restaurants are exuberantly varied, from basic chicken-potpie cafés to elaborate Catalan tapas bars that feature octopus, pig's ears, and grilled sardines. The names tell the story: Petaluma, Jams, Positano, Petrossian, Seryna, Mezzaluna, Prima Donna, Scarlatti, Sistina, Yellow Rose Café, America, Diane's, Jezebel, Hometown, An American Place, Café Marimba, Caliente Cab Company, Juanita's, and Pig Heaven.

What is most striking, though, is the role restaurants have assumed in people's daily lives. In the past, most people (except the rich) ate out only on special occasions. Now, for an increasing number, the home-cooked meal is the special occasion, while the \$75 dinner for two has become commonplace. (Actually, given that restaurant prices have gone up 10 percent in the past two years, the average dinner for two at a stylish New York restaurant now runs between \$75 and \$150.) Oblivious to their budgets, many middle-class New Yorkers go out for dinner at least four

times a week. "Even when I can't afford it, I still do it," says Maureen O'Sullivan, a free-lance production coordinator. "Whether it cuts into my income isn't the issue. Restaurants have become one of those built-in necessities, like telephones and electricity."

There are any number of reasons why so many people have become so crazed about restaurants. One is a social revolution that has been building for the past two decades. More and more people feel entitled to what was once the preserve of the wealthy, and in accommodating these people, restaurateurs have democratized dining. You no longer need to read French to order haute cuisine. Nor is it necessary to sit on red-velvet banquettes in order to enjoy good food. Many of the newer restaurants, such as Jams, pride themselves on a relaxed atmosphere that encourages diners to ask questions about what they're eating.

The wide availability of first-rate food has created a heady sense of discovery. "To hear all the talk, you'd think foie gras was just invented," sniffs one middle-aged gourmand. But for affluent baby-boomers, who grew up on Big Macs and peanut-butter sandwiches, gourmet food is a new, titillating experience.

Dining out has also become a necessary social ritual. The kitchens of most New Yorkers are cramped, and dining rooms, if they exist at all, are often converted into nurseries. Even if people do have a dining-room table, there may not be a family to sit around it. With the city's large single and divorced population, the restaurant functions as a kind of extended home. "Even when I go out to dinner with a date," says one 39-year-old divorcee, "I always make sure I tip the maître d'. The men may change, but the maître d's remain the same. It's important to establish ties."

"This whole phenomenon is not so much about food," says writer and film producer Jane Becker, who is making a series of specials on food and culture. "It's really about our urban social structure. It's about who we are."

DICK BRASS, A SUCCESSFUL 33-year-old computer entrepreneur, points to a Plexiglas cube that sits on his coffee table. Suspended inside are several reddish objects that resemble moon rocks. "My kidney



"This is what happened to all the freaky people from the sixties. They opened restaurants."

Pig Heaven's
Ed Schoenfeld



stones," Brass says. "That's what happens when you eat too many rich foods." That hasn't stopped Brass from going to restaurants about four times a week. He used to go every night, but that was before his wife, Regina Dwyer, enrolled in medical school. She's usually busy with her studies, so tonight she's eating take-out food from a four-star French restaurant. "Shhh!" Brass says. "Don't reveal the name. Then everybody will want it."

Brass says his fascination with food began in Westchester in 1956. He was sitting at Tung Hoy, a local Chinese restaurant, when his parents dared him to try lobster Cantonese. Brass was five, and up until then, he'd ordered only hamburgers. "I loved the lobster," he says. "It was the last time I was afraid to try anything. By the time I was thirteen, and my parents asked what I wanted for my birthday, I said, 'Lunch at Cafe Chauveron and the right to order wine.'"

A former reporter and editor at the *Daily News*, Brass once took a job as a restaurant reviewer for WNBC-TV just to support his food habit. Now he has to pick up the restaurant tab himself. But that hasn't stopped him. He goes to Lutèce as often as possible. When he isn't there, he's at the Four Seasons, Felidia, Jams, Pig Heaven for Chinese, Smokey's for ribs, and John's on Bleecker for pizza. He also visits just about every new place that opens.

"I'd much sooner go to a restaurant than do almost anything," Brass says. "The lines at movies are impossible. Museums aren't open at night, and theater is terrible and overpriced. Restaurants are the best entertainment in the city. Give me a choice between foie gras and a theater ticket and I'll choose foie gras every time. Last week, I spent \$70 to see *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and afterward I felt depressed and awful. But after I eat foie gras, I'm in a wonderful mood for hours."

Like Brass, Jay and Tricia Mitchell see restaurants as their main source of entertainment. Though they have a two-year-old son, they still try to go out four nights a week. "I know about new restaurants long before they're reviewed," says Jay Mitchell, who owns a clothing business. "When I'm in the sauna after playing tennis, what do you think all the guys are talking about? They're not talking sports—they're talking restaurants."

Four years ago, the Mitchells discovered Trastevere on East 83rd Street. "We really liked it, so we went seven nights in a row," he says. "By the end of the first year, we had eaten dinner there a hundred times. Now we know the whole family, so when they opened Latanzi down in the theater district, we started going there too. [Trastevere has also opened Trastevere 84 and Erminia

on the Upper East Side.] I like it best when Paolo, my favorite brother, does the cooking. I'll call up and say, 'Paolo, I'm coming over tonight. Save me the porcini mushrooms.'"

Mitchell, who frequently flies to Europe on business, credits travel for his increasingly sophisticated palate. "When we eat in Paris or Florence," he says, "we're usually inspired to duplicate certain tastes when we return home. I go to Italy at least three times a year, and I've developed a feeling for authentic Italian cuisine. In Genoa, the

thirds of baby-boom wives work, and they rarely have more than two children. And having a small family leaves more money for eating out.

But such people don't want to eat just anything. They pursue excellence in their foods the same way they demand top-of-the-line computers and natural-fiber clothing. *BusinessWeek* called them the Boutique Generation, and what they want is "boutique cuisine." Weaned on Wonder bread and canned vegetables, they graduated to whole wheat and bean sprouts, and finally to



"Give me a choice between foie gras and a theater ticket and I'll choose foie gras every time."

Dick Brass at Lutèce

basil tastes different. It really does. And I can recognize it."

It wasn't always that way. Before Mitchell moved to Manhattan eleven years ago, he lived on Long Island and never went to restaurants. "As far as I was concerned, there weren't any," he says. He doesn't remember going out with his parents either. "When I was growing up," he says, "we had every meal at home. But it was different then. Our parents ate to live. We live to eat."

THIS DISTINCTION IS PARTICULARLY apt for members of the baby-boom generation. Nearly one third of the population, they are fueling the restaurant craze. Unlike their parents, most of whom believed in saving, they have few qualms about spending money. Two

croissants and sun-dried tomatoes. Gourmet delis cater to this newfound sophistication by serving take-home portions of pasta primavera and curried-chicken salad.

When people can get homemade pasta at the corner store, they're going to want more than spaghetti with meatballs at a restaurant. "The old 'eat it, beat it, and burp' days are gone," says Don Karas, president of Bill Communications, which publishes *Restaurant Business* magazine. "People aren't eating just to fill their stomachs. They're not only looking for great food but they want an attractive plate presentation and a perfect environment. Dining out has become an artistic experience."

"Having models hang out in your restaurant isn't enough anymore," says architect David Rockwell, who designed Sushi Zen and the new Sushi Palace at

Photographed by Ted Hardin



FOIE GRAS IS THE NEWEST STATUS SYMBOL.

Studio 54. "Consumers want architecture that is innovative and makes them feel special."

Designer Sam Lopata laments the current trend. One of the hottest names in restaurant design, he is responsible for Café Seiyoken, Pig Heaven, Prunelle, and the soon-to-be-opened Café Marimba and the Safari Grill. "There's such competition in the business that every restaurant has to be a design piece," he says. "Each one has got to be more costly and more spectacular. The architecture has become as important as the food. I think that's wrong. Everybody is going overboard. Restaurants shouldn't be taken so seriously. They're supposed to be fun."

But it's rarely fun for the owners. Two out of every three new restaurants fail, and the slightest errors in judgment can wind up costing thousands of dollars. "We used to have a saying that a classic restaurant was one that stayed open during the life of a ten-year lease," says restaurant consultant George Lang, who owns Café des Artistes. "Now you become a classic if you last a couple of years."

Part of the problem is the high cost of construction, which can run from \$125,000 to \$2 million. On the high end of the scale, Sea Grill, the American Festival Cafe, and Savories, all part of the new Rockefeller Center complex, together cost an estimated \$22 million. Normally, however, experts calculate the construction costs at \$100 to \$300 a square foot. "Of course, you have to factor in the extras," Lang says. "The bar can run as high as \$75,000, and the air conditioner is another \$75,000. Unless you know what you're doing, you can easily have a financial disaster on your hands."

"Opening a restaurant was one of the toughest things I've ever done," says Jerome Kretchmer, co-owner of the popular Gotham Bar and Grill. Kretchmer, a real-estate developer, came up with the idea in January 1983. "Basically, I wanted something big," he says. "I'm six foot four, and I was tired of feeling cramped in restaurants. I had this vision of a nice, airy place, kind of like a high-tech banquet hall."

With three partners, Kretchmer raised \$1 million and then went shopping for an affordable space. He settled on an antiques gallery on East 12th Street that had once been a drug rehabilitation center. "It was dark and run-

down," he says. "But it had 5,000 square feet, and I figured all I needed was an architect to transform the place."

After an extensive search, including a much publicized design contest, Kretchmer selected Jim Biber of Paul Segal Associates. Biber, who was given a budget of \$650,000, spent four months on the plans before any construction took place. Meanwhile, restaurant consultant Barbara Kafka was working on the menu and the table design.

From start to finish, it took fourteen months. "Everything ran pretty smoothly," says Kretchmer, "and I think a good part of the reason is that I worked with professionals who knew what they were doing. But we had fights all the time. There was a lot of screaming and yelling. People stamped their feet and threw temper tantrums. I'm happy with the results, although I never got my high-tech look. Oh, well... maybe at my next restaurant."

Sybil Broyles thought that San Miguel, her Mexican restaurant on Third Avenue, would be open by mid-October. But there were unexpected prob-

lems. "We color-coordinated the carpet to the paint, and they sold the last roll of carpet," she says. "We had to redo our color scheme. We spent months designing our own china, and then at the last minute, we were told it wouldn't be ready on time. We had to pick out totally new dinnerware. To top it off, our beautiful ceramic tiles broke when an Aeroméxico flight hit the landing strip. We had to send the little pieces back to the factory at San Miguel."

Now the restaurant is scheduled to open the first week in December. "If it doesn't," says Broyles, "I'm going to jump out a window."

All this attention to detail—though nerve-racking to owners—is important to the baby-boom audience, for whom food is a serious business. Though they may have more disposable income than their parents had, they find it hard to afford the kind of homes they grew up in. They can, however, afford "taste."

"We had a ten-room apartment on Central Park West," says one man, "but my parents were totally ignorant about fine food. I live in a closet these days,



Jams' chef and co-owner Jonathan Waxman



"People want to know where we get our chickens. You couldn't do that in the old restaurants. They were like dining in a church."

but at least I've been to just about every great restaurant in Manhattan."

"Restaurants are the middle-class phenomenon of the eighties," explains Becker. "During the fifties, we were obsessed by having a home and a big car. Now we're looking for a different outward manifestation of upward mobility. Because we live in smaller spaces, our place in life is defined not by where we live but where we dine."

Lang agrees. "You can't remain aloof from the restaurant scene if you have any pretensions of being part of the social scene," he says. "Today, you are judged by the kind of foie gras you eat, and the kind of restaurant gossip you speak. Throughout the ages, the status symbols have changed. There was the library, the swimming pool, and the wine cellar. Now it's status to be a personal friend of a three-star chef. We're living in a restaurant culture."

Thirty-four-year-old Alan Frank, who owns Cross Patch, a T-shirt company, goes to restaurants six nights a week. On the seventh night, he orders take-out Chinese. "I know it's crazy," he says, "but I get very uncomfortable if somebody mentions a restaurant I haven't heard of. It's as if I've committed a faux pas."

Recently, Frank has become so interested in the restaurant phenomenon that he opened Dream Street Cafe in the Tudor Hotel. "When I told people I was going into the restaurant business," he explains, "they all said, 'Wow! That's my fantasy.' A few years ago, everybody wanted to be filmmakers. Now they all want to be restaurateurs."

"It's the new glamour business," says Ed Schoenfeld, who together with co-owner David Keh operates four new restaurants, including Auntie Yuan and Pig Heaven. "It's becoming just like Hollywood. There's a lot of money in it, plus you see a lot of stars. I get them all—Liz Taylor, Warren Beatty, Carol Burnett. Last night, Jeane Kirkpatrick was at Auntie Yuan. I mean, that's cool. Okay, I know what you're thinking—like how did a 35-year-old product of the Woodstock generation get to be like this? Well, *this* is what happened to all the freaky people from the sixties. They opened restaurants."

TWENTY YEARS AGO, FEW educated American men and women wanted to become chefs. "It was something you did if you couldn't get any other kind of job," says 34-year-old Jonathan Waxman, chef and co-owner of Jams. "But in the early seventies, people began to realize that working with food was creative and satisfying. Suddenly, it became okay."

"In the sixties, cooking was a way of going back to the earth," says restaurant

consultant Joseph Baum, who created the Four Seasons and Windows on the World. "By opening a restaurant, you could participate in something entrepreneurial without being involved in 'big business.'"

As clothes became less conservative, so did restaurants: Elegance gave way to a studied casualness. "In the past,

like a dining room on Christmas Day. "I want my restaurant to feel like a home," she says.

Bastianich, who was born in Italy, eagerly plays the mother role, offering discreet advice on food and etiquette. "A lot of times, customers don't know what to do with birds," she says. "They see all the bones and get panicky. They feel so-



Tricia and Jay Mitchell at Lattanzi



"When I'm in the sauna after tennis, what do you think all the guys are talking about? They're talking restaurants."

restaurants were intimidating and all-knowing," says Don Karas. "The old-time French chefs had a take-it-or-leave-it attitude, and if you didn't know the maître d', he'd frequently go through a charade of not being able to find your name. Now people get a warm welcome."

"The feminist and consumer movements had a major impact on the restaurant business," Baum says. "Traditionally, restaurants were extensions of men's clubs. They were dark, woody, and forbidding. A woman couldn't sit alone at the bar, and she couldn't wear slacks. Now they've become light and airy, and generally reflect a society based on professional achievement rather than social status."

Lidia Bastianich, who owns Felidia on East 58th Street, is particularly conscious of making her clients feel comfortable. The restaurant was designed by Antonio Morello, and reflects Bastianich's sense that customers are looking for "cordial elegance." Small and intimate, it projects warmth and festivity,

cially inept. So I go over to them and say, 'Pick it up. Use your fingers.' Once I tell them it's okay, they relax and have a good time. Americans are so afraid of making mistakes with food."

But any view of American *cuisine* as unadventurous would be badly outdated. Just as U.S. designers have come into their own in recent years, American chefs, led by Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, have revolutionized American cooking. An adaptation of nouvelle cuisine, the New American Cuisine uses high-quality home-grown ingredients, stressing freshness and a simple, straightforward preparation.

Waxman, a Waters disciple, uses many of her cooking principles at Jams. Baby vegetables, glossy and crunchy, are exquisitely presented. Fish is often grilled over mesquite in a large open kitchen at the back of the restaurant. "It's all very relaxed and easygoing," says Waxman, who was out until 11 p.m. the night before, tracking down the "best" lobsters on the East Coast. "Peo-



THE NEW INDULGENCE IS DESSERT, NOT SEX.

ple feel free to wander back into the kitchen and poke their noses into the food. They want to know where we get our chickens, and how we make our desserts. You couldn't do that in the old French restaurants. They were like dining in a church."

RECENTLY, THE NEW AMERICAN Cuisine has spurred interest in a variety of regional specialties: Tex-Mex, Cajun, Creole, and all manner of barbecued ribs. Bill Devens, who co-owns the Yellow Rose Cafe with chef Barbara Clifford, says he is "astounded" by the reception to their pork chops, buttermilk-batter fried chicken, and hand-mashed potatoes. "Everybody tells us the food makes them feel happy," he says. "In many ways, good mashed potatoes are like a fine wine."

This interest in American foods is even being reflected in restaurant décor. There's a new place called America, on

East 18th Street, that features a huge wraparound mural with such patriotic symbols as the eagle and the Statue of Liberty. "Food tends to be associated with political phenomena," says Barbara Kafka, "and a whole new chauvinism is manifesting itself in our eating habits. There's a kind of America firstism in the air, and we're beginning to think that our food is just as good as anybody else's."

As Americans become more secure about their culinary heritage, however, they are adopting a more European attitude toward restaurants. Lidia Bastianich interprets this shift as a move from "eating" to "dining."

"Americans are caught up in the ceremony of food," she says. "They're finally learning to enjoy its pleasures—the way it involves your eyes, nose, taste buds, ears. Certain foods crackle like music. It's a very sensual experience."

It is no coincidence that just as society's preoccupation with sex has abated, people are discovering the joys of eat-

ing. The new indulgences are not one-night stands but "Sinful Chocolate Cake" and "Topsy Trifle."

"Today, people are looking for a volcanic orgasm to erupt in their palates," George Lang says. "For so long, Americans have been cursed with the Anglo-Saxon embarrassment toward any sensual experience. They've finally overcome their guilt, and now there's a kind of frenzied excitement in the air."

Christian Petrossian of the French caviar firm calls this "the birth of refined taste." He's hoping that the current food explosion will extend to the high end of the scale, and that people who don't know their caviar will educate themselves at the opulent restaurant he and his brother, Armen, run in the Alwyn Court on West 58th Street. Decorated like a czar's dining room, it features pink-and-black-granite floors, mirrors that sparkle with Deco-inspired designs, and a banquet covered in real mink. Customers sit at tables set with damask linen, Limoges china, and silver caviar *presentoirs* made by Christofle especially for Petrossian.

"There's a real revolution in this country," he says. "People are eager to educate their palates. We introduced caviar in France 60 years ago, but up until 5 years ago, New Yorkers weren't ready for this type of restaurant. They were too caught up in the eat-and-run. Now business people can sit at the bar and have a little caviar and a glass of champagne. People need to fantasize. They need to have the right partition between work and pleasure."

Obviously, not everyone can afford beluga caviar at \$25 an ounce. But a growing number of people have come to appreciate the dining ritual as an antidote to the pressures of city living. When illustrator Juan Suárez moved to New York from Spain, he was "shocked" at the way people ate their meals. "I was used to sitting down at the table with my family," he says, "but in America, they just grabbed things and stuffed them in their mouths. People work so hard in New York, and they don't even take a break for lunch. They run out for a salad and bring it back to their desks. It's a crazy way to live."

Suárez eats every meal in a restaurant, usually with friends. He says he prefers "small, funky places" in the East Village, where they have "good, honest food. I like restaurants that are still part of the old communities," he says.



"I get very uncomfortable if someone mentions a restaurant I haven't heard of. It's as if I've committed a faux pas."

**Alan Frank
at his Dream
Street Cafe**



"Some of my favorites are little Eastern European family operations that don't cater to the gentrified crowd. That way, I keep life in New York in perspective. I believe there's a time for work and a time for eating. When you go to a restaurant, you have to take the time out to enjoy your food. At the end of the meal, you feel humanized again."

For Daniel Scheffey, a New York producer of *Entertainment Tonight*, restaurants are also a necessity. He works from 8 A.M. until 7 P.M. and, after that,

dinner free. Countless meals are written off as business expenses. Melvyn Master, co-owner of Jams, estimates that expense accounts make up at least 50 percent of his dinner business. "If they were ever outlawed," says Sherman Wildman, a former CBS executive, "at least half the restaurants in New York would file for bankruptcy."

"When I was an associate, we'd always try to work late so we could have dinner on the firm," says a Manhattan lawyer. "After a while, you get used to

Whiteman, who works for the Joseph Baum Company, "because they can't socialize with their friends in tiny one-bedroom apartments."

"Every time I walk in the door," says Juan Suárez, "my apartment virtually screams, 'Get out.' It's so small I only use it to sleep. Basically, I live in restaurants."

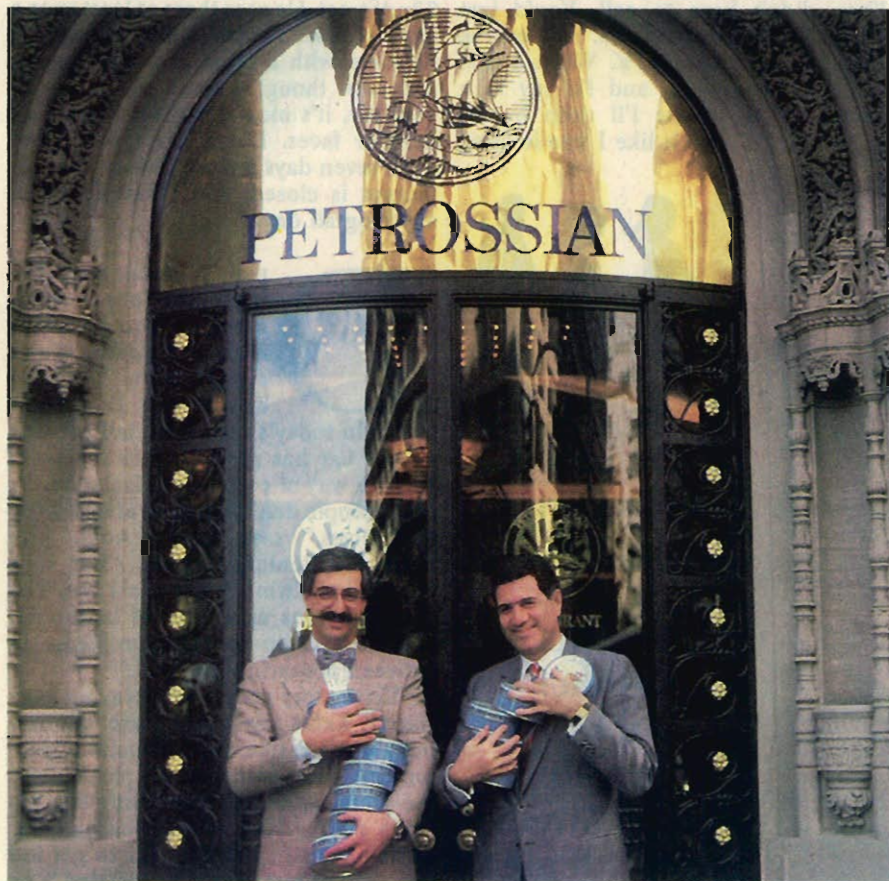
IN THIS RESPECT, NEW YORK IS becoming much like Paris, where living space has traditionally been tough to find. "Parisians have always spent a lot of time in restaurants," says Barbara Kafka, "because they had such tiny apartments. As living quarters diminish in size, public spaces take on a greater importance. In a restaurant, we want the scale of space to be different from the space in which we live. Today, small, intimate places remind us too much of what we already have at home."

This attitude accounts for the current popularity of the "grand cafés," such as Ernie's, the Gotham Bar and Grill, Café Seiyoken, and Café Un Deux Trois. With their cavernous rooms, they attract customers who are looking for something more than food. Jane Becker compares the current café-society mentality to *La Belle Epoque* in Paris. "At the turn of the century, the bourgeoisie had more disposable income than ever," she says, "and they wanted to display their new economic status by showing up in 'certain' restaurants. Today, the grand cafés are filled with bright young business people, who are equally proud of their professional accomplishments."

Not surprisingly, many of the new restaurants have glass façades. In 1966, there was only Maxwell's Plum. "When I first told people I wanted to build a glass café, they thought I was crazy," says the restaurant's creator, Warner LeRoy. "They said, 'Suppose nobody comes.' But I felt the time was right for restaurants to create a whole new spirit of openness."

Since then, more and more New Yorkers have felt compelled to seek out public places. More women are working and leaving their children in day-care centers. Thousands of people are exercising together in health clubs. And street life is more exciting and vibrant than ever. Columbus Avenue, which was filled with dilapidated storefronts a decade ago, has become the equivalent of a Parisian boulevard, and its central focus is food. "People create an entire evening out of walking along the street," says Michael Whiteman. "They have drinks before dinner at one place, eat sushi at another, have gelato somewhere else, and then wind up drinking cappuccino at a sidewalk café. It's a very European approach."

And yet at the root of restaurant mania is an immutable human need, a



Armen and Christian Petrossian in front of their restaurant



"People are eager to educate their palates...to fantasize. They need to have the right partition between work and pleasure."

usually goes to the gym or to a screening. "Scheduling my life is bad enough without factoring in food preparation," he says. "I always eat in restaurants, because I couldn't handle anything else."

Although designer Willi Smith of WilliWear has his own cook, he doesn't like to eat at home because it ruins his momentum. "I work real hard during the day," he says, "so if I had dinner in my apartment I'd probably fall asleep after the meal. Going out with friends allows me to maintain my high energy level."

For some, it also allows them to have

having somebody else pay for your meals. And the more successful you are, the easier it is to do. These days, a friend will take me out, and then I'll take him out, and we'll both find a way to write it off. Believe me, not many people are shelling out \$200 from their own pockets to eat at places like the Quilted Giraffe."

While expense accounts provide an economic cushion, the low vacancy rate in Manhattan is forcing people into restaurants because they can't afford bigger apartments. "Real-estate prices are driving people outside," says Michael

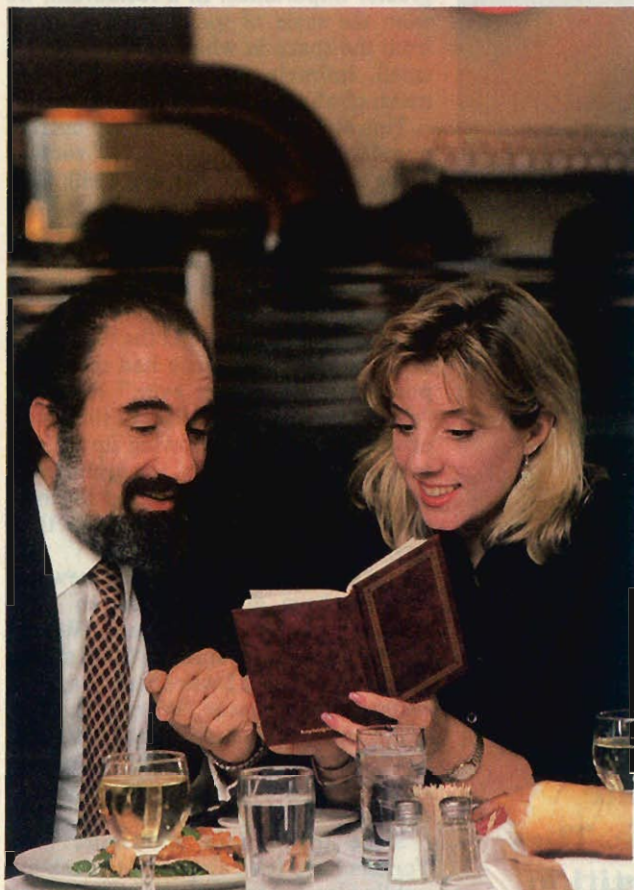


SMALL APARTMENTS MEAN BIG RESTAURANTS.

deep longing for community. Just as churches once brought people together, and architects designed cathedrals with stained-glass windows and vaulted ceilings, restaurants are now filling a critical social gap. Isolated in apartments, with families spread across the country, people need to be brought together somehow. "What better way," says Becker,

York is the informality of the Midwest. "When I was growing up, I'd drop over to people's houses all the time," he says. "You didn't have to call. You'd just come by for a cup of tea, and maybe play cards or watch TV. When I first came to New York, and I'd say to a friend, 'Well, maybe I'll drop by tonight,' they'd think it like I was inviting

Jeff Eckert, a divorced steamship broker, feels the same way about the Yellow Rose Cafe on Amsterdam Avenue near 82nd Street. He goes there at least once a day. "It's like a home to me," he says. "I sit there with a book or a newspaper, and even though I don't really talk to anybody, it's nice to be surrounded by familiar faces. I only wish they were open seven days a week. Today, the restaurant is closed, and I haven't eaten anything all day."



"I'm much more impressed by a date who asks me to dinner than by one who says, 'Wanna go with me to Limelight?'"

Amy Shoenberg and Dad at Odeon

"than by sharing a meal. Our childhood memories are woven around the simple images of our mother at work in the kitchen. The concept of sitting around a table, with people we love, strikes a deep, resonant chord in all of us."

Sam Surprise, scheduling director of United Satellite Communications, grew up in the Midwest, and still misses having breakfast with his father at the local diner. "All the farmers would go there before they dropped off their feed," he says, "and they'd discuss politics and drink endless cups of coffee." So powerful is this memory that Surprise has found an old-style diner in New Jersey where he eats breakfast every weekend.

Another thing Surprise misses in New

York is the informality of the Midwest. "When I was growing up, I'd drop over to people's houses all the time," he says. "You didn't have to call. You'd just come by for a cup of tea, and maybe play cards or watch TV. When I first came to New York, and I'd say to a friend, 'Well, maybe I'll drop by tonight,' they'd think it like I was inviting

myself to move in. They'd tell me, 'Make sure you call first.' I thought that was the rudest thing I'd ever heard." Surprise has solved the problem by "dropping in" at his favorite restaurant, Les Douceurs de Paris on Waverly Place. He's been a regular for several years, and now he commands the house table. "Usually, I'll go there at six and stay until eleven," he says. "I'll have a bottle of wine, read the newspaper, and slowly eat my dinner. Sometimes the owner will sit down with me, or the cooks will come by between breaks. It's cozy and comfortable. The nice thing about the restaurant is that whenever you go there they're always glad to see you."

DESPITE SUCH MARKET-ing innovations as Soup-for-One and gourmet frozen dinners, many single New Yorkers don't like to eat at home. In today's restaurant culture, the singles bar has given way to the sushi bar as a way of coping with isolation. "A lot of people don't like to sit at a table by themselves," says Rocky Aoki, who owns the Benihana chain. "But they don't mind sitting at the sushi bar. The chef functions as a kind of bartender, and he'll listen to their problems in between preparing the food."

"Since more people are delaying marriage," Kafka says, "they are increasingly using restaurants as social opportunities. But restaurants, particularly the grand cafés, dissipate intimacy. So while people have a real yearning for community, they don't want to get too intimate, or else they'd be married." As one single man put it, "When a woman wants to cook me dinner, I know I'm going to get the 'commitment' speech. I like restaurants because they're neutral territory, like Switzerland."

With the trend toward what Joe Baum calls "the restaurant as a party" mentality, the grand cafés are eclipsing the popularity of clubs. In fact, several of yesterday's club owners are today's restaurateurs. Jerry Brandt, who once ran the Electric Circus, now runs Jerry's in Chelsea. Howard Stein, formerly co-owner of Xenon, is about to open Prima Donna on East 58th Street. Stein, who is fond of saying how he went from "discotheque to bistrottheque," views his career as a minihistory of past and current trends. "Years ago, I used to produce rock concerts," he says. "Then I opened Xenon and got involved in the whole disco movement. Now I'm into restaurants, because they're the hot thing."

Like clubs, restaurants have extended their hours until early in the morning to



FROM SINGLES BAR TO SUSHI BAR

cater to the late-night crowds. (Some places, like the Hard Rock Cafe, even give membership cards to special customers allowing them to get inside without standing in line.) And many have a discolike atmosphere. Bright and noisy, the grand cafés throb with a pulsating energy that gives the impression of people eating inside a pinball machine.

"When you appeal to a hip, youthful crowd, the atmosphere has to have some electricity," says architect Adam Tihany, who designed Xenon, Club A, and the restaurant Tucano. "People are staying out at restaurants a lot later, and they'd fall asleep in a quiet, dimly lighted place. Today, eating out is like going to the old Studio 54. It was loud and uncomfortable, and by the time you got home, you felt like you'd survived a war."

Howard Stein attributes the restaurant trend to the maturing of the baby-boomers. "People are much more work-oriented," he says. "They can't go dancing until five in the morning and get to the office by nine anymore. A late night means 2 A.M. But they're still looking for excitement. They want to eat, plus they want to party."

And since they want to do it all in one

place, the restaurant becomes the evening's main source of entertainment. "If you know what you're doing, you can stretch out the experience for at least three hours," says Suárez. "First, you sit at the bar before dinner, then you go to your table, and then you wind up the evening back at the bar."

EVEN COLLEGE-AGE PEOPLE seem to be adopting this attitude. Twenty-year-old Amy Shoenberg, a student at Parsons School of Design, says she much prefers restaurants to clubs. "I'd rather have a nice, relaxed meal," she says, "than rush through dinner and head off someplace else. I do too much rushing in my everyday life as it is."

"Besides," she says, "meeting people in a restaurant is much more legitimate. At a club, everybody is standing around trying to look cool. At a restaurant, people are more pared down, less phony. I'm much more impressed by a date who asks, 'Would you like to have dinner?' than by somebody who says, 'Hey, wanna go with me to Limelight?'"

Shoenberg, who says she "grew up" in Parma on Third Avenue, often eats din-

ner with her father, an investment banker. "Our refrigerator is always empty," she says. "So we go off to Odeon, Quo Vadis, LeVeau d'Or, Texarkana. Last week, we went to Pizzapiazza, and my father *loved* it. I mean, he was *so* excited."

"I guess you could say I'm kind of a restaurant kid," she says. "All in all, I've been to practically every place in the city. I write down the names of the memorable ones in a little red-velvet book. It comes in handy. When I was going to school in Colorado, my New York friends would constantly call me up and say, 'Amy, I've met this new guy, and I'm looking for a nice, romantic place with good pasta and a quiet atmosphere.'"

"People want everything from a restaurant," says Joseph Baum. "They want it to be fun, and they want it to be fulfilling. They want good food, and they want to have a party. But most of all, they're looking for something they can't easily articulate. At the heart of it, there's something timeless. We're talking about comfort, warmth, sharing... a candle in the darkness."

"Without this," he adds, "it's merely 'Trivial Food.'"



"Since more people are delaying marriage, they are increasingly using restaurants as social opportunities."

Ending a meal
at Pig Heaven

