

REVIEWS

AND CRITICISM



NEW YORK: MIRACLE ON 52ND STREET

CAPTURED ON FILM MORE THAN ANY RESTAURANT IN THE CITY'S HISTORY, THE '21' CLUB IS A MOVIE STAR IN ITS OWN RIGHT. WE ALSO RECOMMEND THE FOOD **BY JAY CHESHES**

ON MY FIFTH TRIP to The '21' Club, I graduated at last to a prime spot near the kitchen, seated at the very table favored in the '30s and '40s by first lady of American theater Helen Hayes. Earlier visits to the fabled midtown canteen had seen me escorted right through the Bar Room, sloughed off in what longtime patrons refer to as farthest Siberia. Though the two sections are vi-

sually identical, a seat in the inner sanctum of '21' can mean all the difference between a meal that's merely charming and one that's time-capsule transcendent.

Among the boisterous regulars—a few of whom can still remember when Steinbeck and Hemingway caroused at Table 7 and Sinatra held court over at 14—the service sparkles. From our Table 1 perch, we watched busboys and waiters lavish handshakes and smiles on fa-

miliar faces, and, sipping mint-sprigged South Sides, chuckled over sights like the octogenarian fellow hobnobbing through the alcove and the businessman tackling his hot fudge sundae with the relish of a 12-year-old boy.

There's something wildly incongruous about the Bar Room at '21,' surely the least formal place in the city to require dinner guests to show up in jacket and tie. The red-checked tablecloths and

The ever-buzzy Bar Room has hosted a string of celluloid strivers, from Eve Harrington and J. J. Hunsecker to *Wall Street's* Gordon Gekko.

rec-room décor put you more in mind of a glorified pub than of a luxe venue for seared foie gras with shaved truffles and English peas. In fact it's just this playful collision of highbrow and low, along with the air of Ivy League mischief that clings to the walls, that lends '21' so much of its enduring allure. In this rich man's playground, under a ceiling festooned with tycoon-bequeathed toys, it seems only fitting to order a monstrous burger and accompany it with a decanted grand cru.

By the usual gauges, The '21' Club (which celebrates its 75th birthday this year) isn't exactly the sort of restaurant that ought still to be going so strong. The city is littered with the rubble of its swank brethren—former neighbors like El Morocco, Toots Shor, and the Stork Club—but only the former speakeasy at 21 West 52nd lives on, thriving in its stout town house even as new skyscrapers block out the sky.

Adapting to the mores of each generation, '21' has not only survived but consistently lured the city's most illustrious crowds. The restrictive door policy that began as a necessary by-product of the restaurant's outlaw status during Prohibition has endured over the years, so that by the 1950s the place had become, in the words of dapper gourmand Lucius Beebe, the "hardest restaurant in the world to gain admission to."

The only way most New Yorkers ever made it past the iron gates was via the silver screen. Enshrined in film more often than any other Manhattan restaurant, '21' has, since its 1950 debut in *All About Eve*, become a movie star in its own right, cast in one dark morality tale after another to embody the catty decadence with which it's been associated for so long.

To visit '21' today (now open to any-

one with a thick enough bankroll) is to enter a place you already know—to wander, like Mia Farrow in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, onto the screen and off again. There in the lobby, near the Remington paintings that still cover the walls, Anne Baxter's Eve Harrington paraded to dinner in full public view, making it plain that she'd at last become a star. Viewers don't get to follow her into the Bar Room, but I always imagine Harrington ordering a '48 Lafite-Rothschild (to be brought up from the vast cellar that still hides beyond a false wall) and then looking on, glass in hand, as a dotting waiter prepares steak Diane at her table. (They still do that today.)

The Bar Room is where Burt Lancaster's J. J. Hunsecker conducted business in *Sweet Smell of Success* and Rock Hudson's Mitch Wayne joined Robert Stack's table of swells in *Written on the Wind*. You need only catch a single frame of *Wall Street*'s Gordon Gekko instructing his young protégé to order the steak tartare to know exactly where you are. (Although he famously said "Lunch is for wimps," Gekko nevertheless dined at '21.') His table near the brass railroad bell is still the ideal spot to enjoy this ultimate carnivore's delight, perfectly appointed with chopped egg, lemony capers, and jabs of horseradish and Tabasco.

Though the kitchen has been in the hands of freewheeling talent Erik Blauberg since 1996, those old menu staples have undergone little change since the early days. The management recognizes the aptness of such masculine classics as a gargantuan veal schnitzel and a rich chicken hash. But that's not to say Blauberg doesn't have any fun. His updated take on mixed wild game, for example—an artful selection

that includes plump duck sausage, earthy boar bacon, and pheasant breast enrobed in foie gras—would have made a fine meal for the rugged, plaid-shirted gent played by Hudson in *Written on the Wind*. And had Hitchcock been shooting today, Grace Kelly might not have delivered broiled spiny lobster to Jimmy Stewart's rear window but Blauberg's intoxicating Thai shellfish stew—fragrant with green curry and coconut and dancing with lobster, shrimp, scallops, and clams—instead.

BLAUBERG'S GIFTS so impressed the owners of '21' that two years ago they rewarded him with his own dining room, a more sober restaurant within a restaurant where he was given free rein to strut his stuff. In a refurbished room that had for years been used only for private parties, Upstairs at '21' debuted with great ambition and considerable fanfare, offering lofty multicourse menus featuring entirely different food in a starched, elegant setting.

When the crowds failed to embrace the new space, however, preferring mostly to stick to the Bar Room below, the experiment was subtly reined in. Today, Upstairs at '21' is more of an adjunct restaurant than a separate entity, showcasing more refined versions of the same dishes you'll find downstairs. Blauberg's most rarefied creations—his delicate tuna tartare with ginger dressing and shaved hearts of palm, for example, and his lovely crisp-crust black bass blanketed in Champagne sauce—are just the sort of lithe confluences of old and new for which the room seems perfectly designed.

Like new real estate in a landmarked neighborhood, though, the Upstairs experience feels too carefully manipulated to transport you to a bygone era. Faded murals and piped-in standards capture mid-'30s New York, but the paintings are actually brand-new, and the oft-empty room exudes a lonely air of stage-set artificiality. It's only downstairs, surrounded by real history and by all those silver-screen ghosts, that the original '21' feels so bracingly alive.

THE '21' CLUB
21 West 52nd Street (between Fifth and Sixth Avenues)
212-582-7200

Dinner and lunch Monday through Friday, dinner Saturday. Dinner main courses, \$30 to \$45. ☺

Upstairs (right) or down, Erik Blauberg's talents shine in dishes like seared foie gras with peas.

