

## CHEWING THE SCENERY

THE FOOD TASTES GOOD AND THE ROOM LOOKS GRAND, BUT THE BEST PART ABOUT LEVER HOUSE IS THE PEOPLE WHO SEE YOU THERE

BY JAY CHESHES

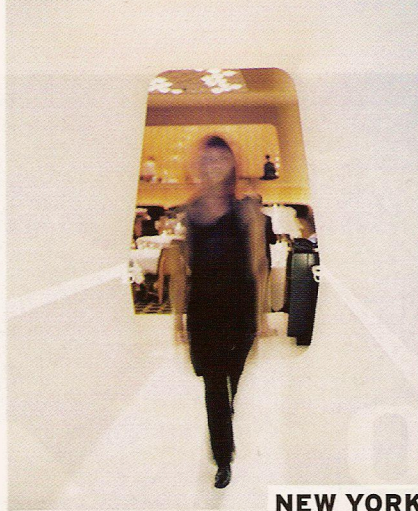
**T**HE FILM STAR sat with his wife in a central booth, sipping coffee under the flattering light. A presidential candidate squiring a slim, striking woman puffed out his chest and strode across the room. Nearby, a Napoleonic magazine executive conspired over lobster with an aging TV news icon. And whispering distance from them, a bejeweled southern heiress, dripping diamonds and opals, picked at a plate of fish.

Beyond the clinking of crystal and the clop of waiters rushing by, a new power restaurant was being born, a beehive alive with preening and catty conversation: the timeless rituals of a certain Manhattan. They poured in that night from the fashion shows, three-piece suits beside leggy blondes, working their way, through Martinis and bubbly, into boldface type in the morning papers.

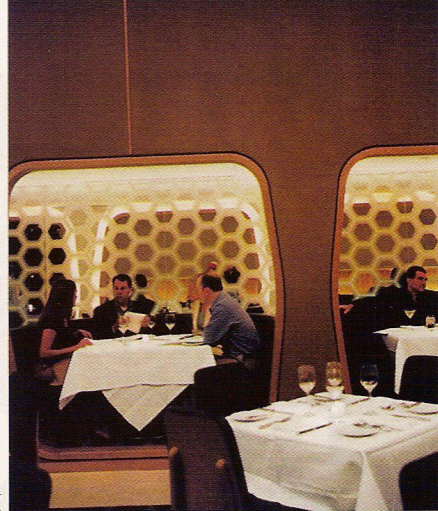
The new **Lever House Restaurant**, which opened late last summer to much gossip-page fanfare, should have arrived decades ago, offering Cold War captains of industry an elite clubhouse in the skyscraper that landed on Park Avenue in 1952 like a Ray Bradbury space-

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ship. J.J. Hunsecker, Burt Lancaster's smarmy gossip columnist, would have felt right at home in a corner banquette. Surely Sinatra would have stopped by, parading his resplendent bride. Even young Hef, newly liberated from a job writing ad copy at *Esquire* and already planning the magazine that would transform a generation, might have rolled in, sucking on his trademark pipe.



NEW YORK



Jetway to the scene: The futuristic entry and retro dining room of Lever House Restaurant. Left: Lobster tempura with tartar sauce.

Instead, the powerful went elsewhere, to The Plaza's Oak Room and "21" and, eventually, the Four Seasons, the Philip Johnson treasure across the avenue that endures even today as the city's peak of power dining.

Latecomer though it is, Lever House already has the aura of a vintage midtown fixture. Even before the restaurant opened, its owners laid the necessary groundwork for bypassing a slow, word-of-mouth ascent. They enlisted design-world darling Marc Newson to imagine the kind of interior that might have filled a pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair, then swiped the maître d'

from Michael's—the media canteen du jour—to ensure that the right people showed up and kept coming back.

Famous names and faces packed the dining room at night. And though the tycoons who rule the Four Seasons Grill Room by day (creatures of habit prostrate before the pampering of impresario Julian Niccolini) may not have ventured across the street, the up-

starts who could never land a table in Niccolini's inner sanctum surely did.

They came for the scene more than for the food, which, as power-room regulations dictate, is always a bit beside the point anyway. In a proper power restaurant, everything on the plate is much better than correct, but the food is not meant to dazzle—its purpose being more to satisfy the cravings and dietary restrictions of the masters of the universe who often dine day after day on the same meal, at the same table, in the same restaurant.

At the Four Seasons, many of the boardroom barons begin lunch nibbling from a silver bowl of crisp crudités. They follow up with Dover sole and iced tea, forsaking alcohol altogether. Wine flows more freely in the art-splashed front room of Michael's, but that media columnist straining to hear the conversation between the high-powered literary agent and the marquee author is probably dining on a very simple, and very expensive, mixed salad—the gargantuan Cobb is a favorite.

Certainly the food at Lever House is the sort you could eat every day. Prepared by Union Square Cafe veteran Dan Silverman, the limited selection runs mostly to very fresh meat and seafood paired with vibrant Greenmarket sides. Tender, unadorned lamb chops explode with farmhouse flavor. Lobster tails, stacked vertically on a toss of fresh corn, wax beans, and cherry tomatoes, have the taste and heft of shellfish cooked live rather than warmed over by a harried kitchen.

Among the restaurant's most understated, and deeply satisfying, appetizers is the Pekin duck breast, a plate of whisper-thin pink slices embellished with nothing more than a syrupy drizzle of intense balsamic and a few plump,



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vinegar-soaked cherries. The Atkins-obsessed will find solace in the monstrous *côte de boeuf* for two, a gorgeously bloody hunk of beef with charred edges rich in melted-fat flavor. And the sides—creamy potato gratin, mint-tinged fava bean, arugula, and Pecorino salad—lend spark without trying too hard.

Right out of the gate, Silverman conquered the greatest new-restaurant stumbling block: inconsistency. The chef never allowed himself to become overwhelmed, despite a hype that quickly reached fever pitch.

**L**UNCHTIME IN THE HONEYCOMBED cavern—a cross between a sound studio and the old TWA terminal at JFK—feels breezy enough to lend the impression that everyone's just wandered down from the offices upstairs. And with such light options as carpaccios, tartares, and straightforward salads, a midday meal here doesn't have to be a two-hour commitment. You can polish off a glass of Sauvignon Blanc with a lovely plate of *vitello tonnato* and still make it back for that 2 P.M. conference call. Or you can linger over pristine salmon ceviche dressed with lime, cilantro, and celery leaves; logs of lightly battered okra balanced precariously on vinegared yellow and green romano beans; or pearly-white lobster tails in that same fluffy tempura batter, brightened with housemade tartar sauce.

Whatever you do, don't rush away without sampling one of Deborah Snyder's desserts, which indulge openly in '50s nostalgia while achieving the same restrained reliability as the rest of the menu. Updated takes on apple fritters, lemon meringue pie, and warm berry crumble function as soothing reminders of a simpler, less tarnished age, before Enron and Tyco and the dotcom bust. For today's kinder, gentler power scene, cookies and milk seem right on target. And at Lever House, the "warm-cookie indulgence"—big and chewy and with a malted-milkshake chaser—is better than Botox for erasing stress-induced wrinkles.

### LEVER HOUSE RESTAURANT

390 Park Avenue

212-888-2700

Lunch Monday through Friday,  
dinner daily. Dinner main courses,  
\$24 to \$42. ☺