

Goodbye to Hollywood

What made Spago L.A.'s ultimate hot spot? A look back as the legendary eatery closes its doors.

The roof leaked. The chairs were uncomfortable. The decor was oft referred to as “god-awful,” and in the early days it was not unusual to see hookers prowling the parking lot late at night. So what was it about Spago, Wolfgang Puck’s little Sunset Strip pizza joint, that made it synonymous with all things fabulous in Eighties Hollywood?

“It had a very different allure,” says Betsy Bloomingdale, the Beverly Hills society doyenne and a longtime customer of the restaurant, which closes its doors at the end of March after almost 20 years in business. “In a way it was just this funny little dump, but that was what was wonderful about it.” Puck’s first restaurant succeeded beyond his wildest dreams: It was the setting for everything from Irving “Swifty” Lazar’s famous Oscar fetes to Richard Gere and Cindy Crawford’s steamy courtship, and it launched the Austrian-born chef into unprecedented culinary stardom.

Before the opening of Spago (Italian slang for “pasta”), Hollywood’s most popular celebrity watering holes—like Chasen’s and Bistro Garden—had been of a much more serious, formal ilk, characterized by truffle-laden menus and high leather banquettes. “You have to understand that back then the idea of a place where you would wear jeans to dinner was completely new,” Bloomingdale explains. “That, combined with the gourmet pizzas and the

kitchen right there in the middle of the restaurant, was just fabulous—none of us had ever seen anything like it. So, of course, everybody wanted to go.”

That’s exactly what Puck, who left the helm at Ma Maison to create Spago, and his elaborately coiffed, tough-as-nails wife and partner, Barbara Lazaroff, were betting on. “We had this idea of something that would combine money and looks and a casual attitude,” says Lazaroff, who has designed all of Puck’s restaurants. “You know, I always thought of that image of David Geffen with a baseball cap on backward—that’s what we wanted Spago to embody.”

They succeeded. From the day the restaurant opened its doors in January of 1982 (when 21 Rolls-Royces jockeyed for parking spaces along the Strip), Spago was a hit, luring everyone from Billy Wilder, Elizabeth Taylor, Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn to David Hockney, Mick Jagger, Joan Didion and Arnold Schwarzenegger and, shortly thereafter, a nightly mob of paparazzi the likes of which no restaurant in Los Angeles had ever seen.

“It was really a lot like a private club or coming into Wolf and Barbara’s home for dinner,” says Michael Ovitz, who, in addition to being a regular, held numerous birthday parties for his children at the restaurant over the years and commissioned Spago’s legendary maître d’, Bernard Erpicam, to create his wine cellar. “They were both such terrific hosts, and they really made you feel so welcome. It was very light and fun. Everything about Spago was light and fun.”

PHOTOS: MADONNA, JACKSON AND LAZAROFF: PETER C. BORSARI; NICHOLSON AND BROUSSARD: MICHAEL JACOBS; KITCHEN: SIDNEY B. FELSEN



Above from left: Jack Nicholson and Rebecca Broussard make off with centerpieces; Spago’s unglam style; Wolfgang Puck and Barbara Lazaroff flank Madonna and Michael Jackson. Left: Robert Rauschenberg, left, visits Spago’s kitchen.



Including the food. Weary of what he calls “fancy French,” Puck served up innovative California-centric dishes like the Chino Farms Chopped Salad (invented for Ovitz), the world’s first “Jewish Pizza”—topped with smoked salmon, crème fraîche and caviar—and pastry chef Nancy Silverton’s famed dessert sampler tray (often sent as a complimentary consolation prize to those who had to wait for a table). “All that stuff was really unusual at the time,” says the *Hollywood Reporter*’s George Christy, one of the first journalists to write about the restaurant. “From the first week it opened, I said to myself, this is it; this is going to be the hottest spot in town, and by God it was.”

Of course, Spago was particularly hot during Oscar season. In 1985, power agent Swifty Lazar and his wife, Mary, hosted their annual Oscar party at the restaurant for the first time, and from that point on, the names “Oscar” and “Spago” were inextricably linked. The legendary bash lured an eclectic Hollywood crowd that included Jimmy Stewart, Barbara and Marvin Davis, Joan and Jackie Collins, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, Nicolas Cage, Jodie Foster and Bruce Willis and Demi Moore, plus a smattering of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol and financial fat cats like Rupert

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Scenes from Spago: Nicolas Cage and Bridget Fonda; George Hamilton and Elizabeth Taylor; a triumphant Puck; Joan and Jackie Collins; Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise.

Murdoch and Ron Perelman. "The great thing about Irving and Mary's parties," says Lazaroff, "is that they really knew how to mix people. They knew how to put together a fantastic table, and that is a serious art."

"It was the only party in town," says Jackie Collins. "Everybody would turn up for it. And it was always very funny, because they all had to make that perilous walk up the hill in their high heels and fancy clothes, and a lot of times people would slip and end up staggering into the restaurant, but they always put up with it, because it was such a good time."

Famously intolerant of latecomers and gate-crashers, Lazar reportedly spent most of the evening at the front door berating uninvited guests in what Bloomingdale refers to as "his General King Tut fashion," while, inside, Demi Moore displayed her newly enhanced bustline, Madonna sat on Warren Beatty's lap and Jack Nicholson made off with Lazaroff's elaborate centerpieces. "Jack was Swifty's alarm clock," says Puck. "He was always late, so when he finally arrived, Swifty would say, 'Good, Jack is here; now I can go home.'"

But most everyone else stayed on into the wee hours. "People don't play the way they used to anymore," says ICM agent Ed Limato. "Now everybody has to get up early and go to the gym, but the Eighties were the days when you had five people going to the bathroom together." It was in this wilder, bygone milieu that Jackie Collins had a glass of champagne thrown in her face by a producer who'd taken offense at a thinly veiled portrayal of him in one of her novels, here that Buddy Hackett whacked a foe over the head with a pepper shaker and here that Madonna made her famous appearance in the glittering white "Marilyn" dress, escorted by Michael Jackson.

Then there's the fabled exchange that George Christy overheard on the night Elizabeth Taylor and Audrey Hepburn were seated together at one of Lazar's parties: "Elizabeth was wearing these enormous jewels," says Christy, "and Audrey looked at her earrings and said, 'Ah, Kenny Lane,' and Elizabeth said, 'No, Mike Todd,' and then Audrey looked at her necklace and said, 'Ah, Kenny Lane,' and Elizabeth smiled and said, 'No, Richard Burton.'"

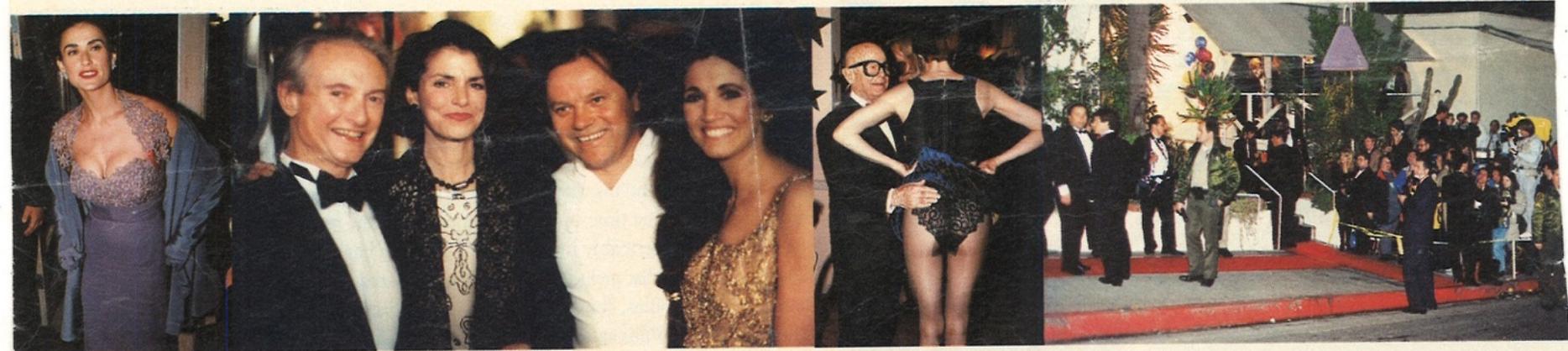
"That was why you went," continues Christy. "It was like entering another country for a night." And there were an awful lot of people who wanted a visa. The 200 invitations that Lazar sent out each year were so coveted that Lazaroff claims a customer once offered her \$50,000 for one. "Irving wouldn't hear of it," says Lazaroff. "You could never buy your way in."

At least not on Oscar night. When it came to securing a prime table on an ordinary evening, however, the rules were slightly more flexible. "Money came into play to some extent," admits former Spago maître d' Jannis Swerman of the restaurant's seating arrangement, which was famed for being more stratified than the court at Versailles. The coveted front section was limited to 12 tables, including five crème de la crème window tables and the most sought-after table of all, the "Billy Wilder Table," named in honor of the director who was one of the restaurant's most devout fans. "But to be honest, money could only get you so far," continues Swerman, who is now Puck's publicist. "There were nights when we had Jimmy Carter, Lionel Ritchie and Jessica Lange all standing on the stairway for an hour waiting for a table."

Indeed, Jackie Collins remembers that whenever Oprah Winfrey came to town, Collins would inevitably get a call from her regarding Spago. "She'll never admit it, but the first thing she'd ask me was, 'Jackie, can you get me a reservation?'" Collins says with a chuckle.

Lazar's death in 1993 was a turning point for Spago, which went dark on Oscar night and inevitably lost some of that irresistible allure. Many of its habitués simply migrated to Spago Beverly Hills, which opened in 1997. Puck and Lazaroff decided not to renew their expiring 20-year lease. "I thought, why ride it into the ground? Why not ride it into the sunset?" Puck says. Puck and Lazaroff, who will continue to operate four Spagos around the country, are busy planning a restaurant and catering business within the new Hollywood and Highland Complex (the site of future Academy Awards ceremonies), and they insist that they will not mourn the original Spago's passing. "We have our flagship in Beverly Hills," says Lazaroff. "That's enough Spagos for one city." —KIMBERLY CUTLER

CAGE AND FONDA: HAMILTON AND TAYLOR, JOAN AND JACKIE COLLINS: LAZAR AND CAMPBELL; MICHAEL JACOBS: TRIUMPHANT PUCK; KIDMAN AND CRUISE: M. BORSARI; LICHTENSTEIN WITH PUCK AND LAZAROFF: SIDNEY B. FELSEN



From left: Demi Moore and her décolletage; Roy and Dorothy Lichtenstein with Puck and Lazaroff; Irving "Swifty" Lazar with guest Nell Campbell; the scene outside.