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Andrew Henderson/The New York Times

Emil Varda, managing partner of the Waverly Inn, with his staff.

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By LESLIE KAUFMAN
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FRAN LEBOWITZ, the New York City society commentator-at-large, tells of dining recently at the Waverly Inn & Garden in Greenwich Village.

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Her companion was [Toni Morrison](#), the winner of the 1993 [Nobel Prize](#) in literature. When the two stepped out onto the sidewalk, the paparazzi who were waiting across Bank Street were stumped.

“Hey, Fran, who are you with?” they screamed.

Ms. Lebowitz is a friend of [Graydon Carter](#), an owner of the restaurant so much so that her likeness adorns the [Edward Sorel](#) mural in the main dining room. Still, she sighed at the state of fame as it relates to restaurant clientele.

“It’s [Lindsay Lohan](#) they want,” she said. No worries. Ms. Lohan has been spotted here, too.

On any given evening the restaurant plays host to some combination of billionaires, movie stars, intellectuals and fashion designers, with a rock icon or sports legend thrown in. In the beginning, they may have been lured by Mr. Carter’s estimable connections as editor of Vanity Fair magazine. But now they are as likely to be drawn by Mr. Carter’s prowess as a restaurateur.

His second career, which seemed like a lark, now looks more serious. Last week, he and two partners bought the Monkey Bar from the Glazier Group, which had struggled to make a go of the place for the past few years. The Glazier family has been in the restaurant business in New York for about 25 years; Mr. Carter started operating the Waverly Inn less than two years ago.

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Robert Presutti for The New York Times

The Waverly Inn & Garden in Greenwich Village.



Andrew H. Walker/Getty Images

HE'LL SEAT YOU, MAYBE Graydon

Carter, an owner of the Waverly Inn, tightly controls who gets in. He now also owns the Monkey Bar.

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Hearing of the Monkey Bar deal, the restaurateur Keith McNally, who has run his fair share of hot restaurants, gave a nod to Mr. Carter's rise: "I think Graydon's done an outstanding job," he said, "at paving the way for more restaurateurs to edit magazines."

There are still powerful folk who would rather dine uptown at the Four Seasons, Michael's or Le Cirque. But for celebrity power deep enough to lure paparazzi night after night, few outposts in New York today rival the Waverly Inn.

Patrick McMullan, a party photographer whose work sometimes appears in Vanity Fair, said, "It is really the only place I can think of right now where they are consistently parked outside."

Or as Emil Varda, the restaurant's impeccably mannered managing partner, puts it, "We have some nights when every table has a guest that is from the pages of 'Who's Who.'"

Restaurant reviews have referred to the place as "Graydon's private club," but the high-wattage crowd actually means that it is much less of a clubby, let's get drunk, swap tables and occasionally throw a punch kind of a place than [Elaine's](#) was in its day.

"It is not a glad-handing, table-hopping place at all," Mr. Carter said.

Edward Menicheschi, Vanity Fair's publisher, who eats there several times a week, has his own description:

"It is theater," he said, "only there is no line between actors and audience."

In fall of 2006, the Waverly Inn began seating guests. Almost two years later, in what is becoming a long-running inside gag, the



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

John DeLucie, the chef of the Waverly Inn.

place is still not officially open. The phone number doesn't work and "preview" is printed defiantly on the top of the menu. Clearly amused by his own cheekiness, Mr. Carter says he does not know when that will change. "Oh, we're still trying to work the bugs out," he said.

Of course, it is all part of the game of calibrating accessibility. So far the balance is exquisite.

One editor tells a story of trying to get into Elaine's during its heyday as arbiter of in-ness in the 1970s. Elaine Kaufman, the restaurant's owner, gatekeeper and, often, its bouncer, greeted the editor at the door herself and blocked the way into the restaurant,

even though it was an off hour and the editor could see that nearly every table was unoccupied. "We are full," Ms. Kaufman explained.

Ms. Kaufman, 79 and now four decades into owning a restaurant that still attracts its share of names, says such stories were never true except that she did throw a trash can at the paparazzi. "I live off the energy of real people," she said.

Mr. Carter, too, insists that he is a man of the people, saying that his place "will seat just about anybody."

Insiders just call Mr. Carter's office directly but it is in fact possible to drop by the reservations desk at the restaurant and book a table for those netherworld hours before 6:30 or after 11:15 p.m., and on weekends from June through August. (The desk takes reservations for dinner, the only time the restaurant is open, just three days ahead.)

Mr. Carter, who lives on Bank Street and likes to pretend that Greenwich Village is still a little Bohemia, has made a special point of being nice to the locals. This includes the decision to store the garbage in a refrigerated room overnight so that it can be picked up at the civilized hour of 10 a.m., instead of the usual 2 a.m.

Marilyn Dorato, president of the local block association and the owner of a brownstone right next to the Waverly Inn, said that in the beginning the neighborhood's biggest complaints was about limos

double-parked and idling, but that the security firm the restaurant hired has greatly improved that situation.

As for Mr. Carter's claim that his neighbors are welcome, she says that is true. "I see locals there all the time," she said. She should know; she eat there once a week herself, at the same table.

Mr. Carter and other insiders describe the cast of regulars known to staff members as "friends and family" roughly as follows:

Mr. Carter's four grown children; [Ronald O. Perelman](#), the billionaire; the Waverly's landlord and his children; [Barry Diller](#), the media mogul; two dozen neighbors who live within a radius of two blocks; [Robert De Niro](#) and [Gwyneth Paltrow](#), the actors; Mr. Carter's next-door neighbors, the fashion designers [Calvin Klein](#) and [Donna Karan](#), often together; and a sprinkling of writers and editors from the [Condé Nast](#) empire.

And while Mr. Varda insists the restaurant is too small to keep empty tables available, there always seems to be space for regulars, especially regulars of a certain heft. The film producer [Harvey Weinstein](#), for example, lives nearby and, according to Mr. Varda, frequently arrives for dinner without calling ahead to reserve. "He is family," Mr. Varda said, "so we make room anyway."

That said, Mr. Carter, who remains intimately involved in the room's nightly seating plan, does have a view of who is not welcome.

He said he tried to avoid "any stars of reality TV and hedge fund managers. For that reason, we screen calls from the 203 area code," he said, poking fun at chateau country in the Connecticut suburbs.

That's not all: "I don't like people who are rude to our waiters," he said. And he is keeping track.

The reservations system has miniprofiles on clients: the number of times they have eaten at the restaurant, (Mr. Menichesi, the publisher, supposedly is near the top of the list with more than 200 meals) whether they complained about the food, whether they yelled at a waiter or ever wrote an unflattering word about Mr. Carter. No, not really on the last one.

Has anyone been blacklisted? Mr. Carter won't say, but Mr. Varda admits that there is one group. "B-list stars who call the paparazzi from inside the restaurant," he said. "They are not invited

back.” (Privacy is so sacred at the Waverly that Mr. Varda says he has stopped a major film star from photographing his own family at dinner.) Also, waiters have been dismissed for being overly attentive to celebrities.

The Waverly, as observers are fond of pointing out, is the very sort of establishment that Mr. Carter would have happily eviscerated when he co-edited the humor magazine “Spy” two decades ago. If the magazine had published one of its snidely annotated seating charts for the Waverly, it would have had three clear zones: the bar, the main dining room and the garden room, otherwise known as “Siberia.”

There is also a tiny outside area out front with tables in summer, but that is irrelevant one frequent diner called it “tragic.”

At the entrance to the brownstone is the bar, which acts as a collection and filtration system. It is here that the treatment is roughest and least predictable. After 9 p.m. it is also jammed with leggy model types and junior investment bankers (their bosses being home in Connecticut). The average age here is about 20 years younger than in the main room.

That is, except for the bartenders, who appear to have been mixing drinks since the Boer War. The good news is that they are exceptional with a litchi martini. The bad news is that they are accountable to no one. There are six stools at the bar and even when one comes open it may be reserved for a preferred customer.

The dining area is a different story. Mr. Carter likes to say, “It’s not all that easy to get in, but once you are, we try to treat you like royalty.”

Royalty is a bit of an exaggeration, but this reporter got in simply by asking at the front desk and found service mostly attentive. Although on another visit, she and a friend did have to flag waiters to get wine glasses refilled.

And there is still the problem of the covered garden in the back, open year round, which Mr. Carter and Mr. Varda continue to insist is as good a place as any to sit.

No one is buying it. Hamilton South, a former Vanity Fair editor who now runs his own public relations firm, said Siberia is not that bad because the restaurant is so small.

“It is Siberia, but it is only five minutes from Beverly Hills, and you pass through Beverly Hills to be seated,” and, he noted, on the way to the restrooms.

However, Mr. South, who says he eats at the Waverly Inn twice a month, feels compelled to add, “I’ve never been seated there.”

The central dining room is dark and low. The amber lighting, which is very flattering, particularly to aging faces, gives the whole room a perpetual ambiance of fall or winter, a complement to the menu, which includes creamed spinach and chicken pot pie even in August. The chef, John DeLucie, does have some more modern offerings, like quinoa [risotto](#) with green curry sauce. Mr. Varda says this was added at the request of the rap impresario [Russell Simmons](#), another regular customer and a vegan.

The food is beside the point. The question is theater. Center stage is undoubtedly Mr. Carter’s booth, one in from the end, against the west wall. A guest gauges his or her importance by seating distance from that epicenter.

By his own estimation, Mr. Carter is at the restaurant about two days a week. Regulars say it is less than that. He is, after all, expecting a baby any minute with his wife, Anna Carter. And now there is the Monkey Bar, which he hopes to reopen in about a year, after renovations. He has said he plans “a small place, low-key.” He is positioning it as a local place, similar to the Waverly Inn but for an uptown clientele.

Mr. Carter’s partners in the Waverly Inn say they are not concerned. “We certainly haven’t called a partners meeting over this,” Mr. Varda said.

These are uncertain economic times to open a restaurant, but so far, by all accounts the Waverly Inn has been lucrative. No one will say how lucrative, of course. But the Waverly’s prices can be precious, the \$55 macaroni and cheese with truffles being the most notorious example. Ever cautious, Mr. Varda says that the downturn has been felt even in his hallowed halls. “Instead of paying \$4,000 for a bottle of wine, people are paying \$500,” he said.

Still, it is not so bad that the restaurant feels compelled to actually open and get a phone number? Mr. Varda just smiles and shakes his head.

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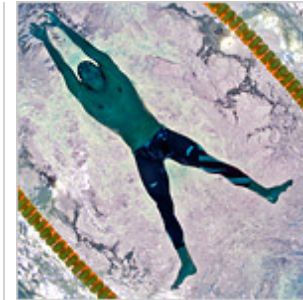
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