

Disco Night at Mar-a-Lago (and Other Tales From Palm Beach's Private Clubs)

Inside the exclusive dinner clubs in South Florida, where money talks and Donald Trump sometimes plays D.J.



The Carriage House is a new private supper club in Palm Beach, Fla. Credit...Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

By Holly Peterson

March 17, 2023

Sign up for the Where to Eat: New York City newsletter. Pete Wells's restaurant recommendations, from new places to beloved classics. Get it sent to your inbox.

PALM BEACH, Fla. — If you plan to dine at a hot spot in Palm Beach this season, pack clothing so bright that it might be radioactive. Why? Sartorial armor is practically required in any exclusive enclave. And Palm Beach is all about fitting in and showing you belong.

The peer pressure is intensifying. During the early years of the pandemic, there was a 20 percent increase in New Yorkers moving to Florida compared with the average of the previous eight

years, according to I.R.S. immigration data. They are chasing good health, sunshine, Florida's no-income-tax status and, for the wealthiest among them, the elusive private club membership.

“No one can get a dinner reservation, so people are focused on joining the clubs,” said Ryan Williams, a public affairs executive and former strategist for Mitt Romney. “There are two types of private clubs that new residents hope to join, with different purposes. The traditional country clubs cater to families with tennis, golf and a beach. The private dining clubs offer no amenities — members come for an elegant locale to drink, dine and dance with people they know or want to know. Both are impossible to get into now.”

Initiation fees for dining clubs are \$10,000 to \$250,000, and mounting as demand rises.

Acquiring a golden ticket to Palm Beach country clubs with golf or tennis can take years: Long waiting lists, piles of required recommendations from members, and persnickety committees drunk on power all slow the acceptance process. But memberships to the dining clubs can be fast-tracked if the applicant knows the owners or key members.

The dining club expansion in Palm Beach mirrors the trend among upper-crust urban sets across the country. At Casa Cruz in New York, San Vicente Bungalows in Los Angeles or the new Carriage House in Palm Beach, members have monthly house accounts and never suffer through a delayed table reservation.

“Think about it, all the New Yorkers who were going to Nell's or Au Bar in the '80s and '90s have kids who've now flown the coop,” said Tom Shaffer, a former advertising executive who has been a fixture in Palm Beach social life for years. He playfully picks his slacks based on the Geiger counter clicks the fabric emits. “These people haven't changed all that much — they finally have time for fun. So why not drink and dance in a fabulous supper club with friends rather than try to book a table in a packed restaurant?”

Mr. Shaffer is on point. The most popular Palm Beach restaurants require a slap-on-the-back relationship with the owner unless a reservation on a distant Tuesday at 5 p.m. in the Siberia section works for you.



This yellow Rolls-Royce is one of Palm Beach's more recognizable cars, often parked on the upscale Worth Avenue. Credit...Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

The One That 'Checks All the Boxes'

This season, the Carriage House popped up as the sexy, white-hottest private supper club. Members, many from New York and Europe, have paid fees of about \$250,000. How to rationalize the six-figure fee for a guaranteed table in a crowded town? "You just had to do it" is a common refrain.

At the entrance to the Carriage House, women in matching blue dresses and gold lizard necklaces escort diners to the blue-lacquered clear liquor bar serving 20 varieties of gin. "The décor is inviting with a British twist," the designer Tommy Hilfiger said. "It's well run, the food is amazing, and the colors are very appealing. It's modern Palm Beach, so it has a tropical flavor and a chic look. It checks all the boxes."

Bars, reading rooms and dining areas at the Carriage House are encased in lacquer or fabric walls, modeled on private dining clubs in London. The preppy paisleys, boho prints and silk velvets meld like instruments conducted in symphonic union. Outside, if not for the banana-yellow Rolls-Royce gliding down the street at a daring 12 miles per hour, you'd think you were on Berkeley Square in London.



Club ColetteCredit...Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

The One That Doesn't Rock the Boat

For those preferring to remember they are in Palm Beach, Dan Ponton is stationed, as he has been for 40 years, inside his Club Colette. His old-time establishment exudes the notion “Sometimes you just don’t need to rock the boat.”

Club Colette is right in town, with a Regency-style white stucco mansion behind a high hedge, and an initiation fee of \$20,000 to \$30,000. It’s Palm Beach pretty inside: Easter egg hues, soft drapes, a sunlit glass terrace room overlooking a latticed garden. By the side, a trellis of ivy and orchids hovers over intimate outdoor tables.

Many waiters and bartenders have worked there for decades. “I walk in and see friends that I haven’t seen for a while,” said the philanthropist Sharon Bush, a member and the former sister-in-law of former President George W. Bush. “They are busy during the day, and it’s a great time to gather at night.”

Mr. Ponton said he has figured out the secret sauce of ages and backgrounds. “Now, there is a newer generation moving down that longs to have anchors. Face it, you can’t get a social anchor in Mykonos,” he said. “This is a small town. Colette is private and allows me to mix groups. That’s what I do for a living.”



A New Year's Eve party at Club Colette. Credit...Capehart

The One Where You Just Need to Know the Owner

Down South County Road, a few blocks from Worth Avenue, stands Buccan, a restaurant that has become yet another version of a private club. Word has it that no one gets a table in any season without knowing the owner, Piper Quinn.

Mr. Quinn's father, Tom Quinn, a partner at the Venable law firm in Washington who worked in college on John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign, has zipped up and down the Newport-Georgetown-Palm Beach axis for 50 years. He holds court at Buccan most nights after 8, calmly sipping his pinot grigio. Men slap his back with a little too much gusto, many pretending they are his dearest friends. He quipped: "The S&P may be down, but my bloodline to the owner means my personal stock is up 10x."

The One Where Trump Picks the Music

And finally, the megillah that is Mar-a-Lago offers all of the above and more, and then even more than that. Housed in an estate built in 1926 by Marjorie Meriweather Post, a General Foods heiress, and modeled on the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, it has 118 rooms and sits on 20 acres. With its yellow and white awnings, tennis, golf, pool and beach, Mar-a-Lago is in the country club category, with an initiation fee of \$200,000.

Mar-a-Lago has a far livelier nighttime aura than other clubs, and a veranda overlooking the pool with a boisterous bar on the right, even midweek. Let's call it a country club and a dining club rolled into one. Around town, there is no general conversation about getting in, but some members qualify by saying, "The spa is to die for," or, "I just play golf, and I'm not political." Others stay real: "I like him, and I like the damn club!"

The crowd appears dominated by American men who might be football coaches and their dressy wives who wear darker cocktail outfits than the more common pink and green — they all seemed pumped up and ready for action. A current member who sometimes votes Democratic contends the club is "fun as hell." (So fun that he declined to go on the record for fear of losing his membership.)

Members enter through a front foyer and stroll past an oil portrait of former President Donald J. Trump, soon emerging into a cavernous wood-paneled club room with gold ceilings and Moorish tiling. A white piano fit for Liberace stands in the far corner with a sign advising members not to touch it. Across the room, steps lead to a throne-style area flanked by two five-foot inlaid vases. The doors on the right lead to the dining veranda, where Mr. Trump frequently bids good evening to the ladies and fist-bumps the gentlemen, often exclaiming, "My man!"



Mar-a-Lago, where former President Donald J. Trump has been known to D.J.Credit...Steve Helber/Associated Press

One weekday night, amid 1920s fountains with swans spewing water into the center, Mr. Trump and his wife, Melania, dined at a rope-encircled table on the sprawling deck with two women dressed more appropriately for a school board meeting than dinner in a resort town. Someone at

the bar wondered if they'd won the "Dinner with Trump" sweepstakes that came with a Rambo Trump NFT.

At the bar, an uncommonly extroverted man in a strawberry pink jacket talked to people he didn't seem to know beside him, yammering on and joking. His arms, neck and torso were festooned in jewelry, which he said was from [Jacob the Jeweler](#), known as the "King of Bling." Every ornament on his body was encrusted in diamonds: On his neck, a rope-shaped necklace appeared sturdy enough to secure a Carnival cruise ship at the dock.

Over on the veranda Mr. Trump took out an iPad that is connected to the club's speaker system. First, he played "Wild Horses" by the Rolling Stones, then an Andrea Bocelli ballad. Downstairs at a ballroom off the pool, a professional dancing couple encouraged revelers to "boogie oogie oogie." Women danced in hyperactive bachelorette kinds of groups, while the men in jackets, some in shiny silk shirts, swayed with more adult decorum. There was no ambiguity as to whether members enjoyed themselves as they drank, danced and cavorted until the wee hours of the night.