

ENTERTAINMENT

Chicago's new and swanky private Astor Club opens for business in the heart of the Gold Coast

By Rick Kogan
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Astor Club co-owner Victoria Bilter descends the entry stairwell of the restaurant on July 6, 2023. The Astor is a private members club. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

It has been a long time since people gathered for dinner in the basement space of the building at 1300 N. Astor Street in the heart of the Gold Coast, arguably the city's wealthiest and loveliest neighborhood. But that was the case over the weekend as the private [Astor Club](#) opened for business.

"We were quite pleased, very gratified," said Adam Bilter who owns and operates the club with his wife Victoria. "I think it is encouraging that nearly 70% of our members live within four blocks."

Mike Ditka did not show. He's a member. Jim Belushi's a member too and he was here, playing the harmonica on stage one night last weekend.

"He played the blues with our pianist," said Victoria.

Most of the club's more than 250 members — who have paid a \$4,800 one-time initiation fee and will continue to pay \$300 a month, in addition to what they spend on food and drink — were not at the Astor Club over the weekend. Summer is vacation time.

But those who dined and drank on opening weekend were raving.

"It is just stunning," said club member [Denise Tomasello](#), dining with her friend Paula Borg. "It is beyond gorgeous and there has been such great attention paid to the history and style of this room."

She makes a fine judge. For decades a fixture on the local cabaret scene, Tomasello started her career with a five-year-long stint at Sage's, a posh nightclub housed in a building a block to the west. She knows the Gold Coast, living only a few blocks away, and she knows the neighborhood crowd. "There is a sophistication here and they have been so very thoughtful about bringing back its original beauty," she said. "This is my kind of place and I expect to be here two, three nights a week."

They studied the history, discovering that the building rose in 1962 as the Astor Tower Hotel, the work of architect Bertrand Goldberg and a place where The Beatles would stay.

“That’s very nice to hear,” said Adam Bilter. He is 43 years old, originally from a small farm in Oswego, and is a marketing/advertising executive, real estate developer and hospitality business investor. His wife Victoria is 33 and originally from Ukraine. She was living in Bellagio, Italy, when they met and fell in love. They were married at a ceremony in Grant Park, and settled into a Gold Coast life. One afternoon a couple of years ago, while walking their dogs, they passed 1300 N. Astor and convinced the building engineer to show them around.

In the basement, they found a relic, a shabby and dusty 8,200 square feet that had once been among the chicest spaces in the city. It would change their lives because not only did they buy an apartment on the highest floor of the building, they also bought the lower level space (at a cost of \$680,000) and began transforming it.



Astor Club co-owners Victoria and Adam Bilter sit at the bar at their newly opened private club. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

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In 1963 the basement space became a restaurant through the efforts of Goldberg's ebullient wife Nancy, who opened Maxim's as an homage to Maxim's-de-Paris in France, which had opened 70 years before.

It was as opulent a restaurant as this city has ever known, a stylish Art Nouveau-inspired space, all dim lighting, plush furniture and artful design. Its kitchen produced meals that earned it a place on Life magazine's list of the top six gourmet restaurants in the country. It also housed what was then the city's first discothèque.

Maxim's closed in 1982 but the space carried on for some years under other restaurateurs. Nancy died in 1996, her husband the following year, and in 2000 their heirs gave Maxim's to the city of Chicago.

It became Maxim's: The Nancy Goldberg International Center and was operated by Lois Weisberg, then the city's commissioner of cultural affairs. It was used for private events, including "Conversations with Extraordinary People," a monthly series that I hosted, interviewing such people as Studs Terkel, Carol Marin, Corky Siegel, Bob Falls, Dennis DeYoung, Judy Roberts ... and many more.

That ended around 2015 and I hadn't been there again [until last summer](#), when I first met the Bilters and they told me of their lofty but sincere ambitions, which were to "preserve the history of this special place. We are both deeply appreciative of the past and want to be part of the future," Adam Bilter said.

The future arrived over the weekend.

"It's a warm and inviting space. In a word, spectacular," said 25-year-old Madelynn Blank, a Chicago native and former server at Luxbar who now works in finance in Boston.

She was there with her parents, Renee and Jim Metcalf, who live nearby, and said she would return, "anytime I am back home."



Madelynn Blank, left, and her parents, Renee and Jim Metcalf, have drinks before dinner at Astor Club in the Gold Coast neighborhood

In between greeting and chatting with club members and their guests, the Bilters showed some details of the space, such as plates and silverware from the original Maxim's; photos, menus and other items they have gotten from former patrons and new members; framed editorial cartoons by the Tribune's three-time Pulitzer Prize winner Jeff MacNelly, one featuring Harry Caray; a 1895 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec drawing; 1936 Steinway piano; 1800-era fireplace; and what can be persuasively argued as the two finest phone booths in this city of vanishing phone booths.

They praised their chef, Andrew Spagnola, who comes from running the kitchen at Fig & Olive, and their general manager, Luis Serrano, whose resume includes the 22 years he was director of member services at the nearby Racquet Club.

Yes, there are other private clubs here, the Racquet, Union League, Casino, Saddle and Cycle and a few others. But this can be a tough private club town and there is a graveyard filled with many that could not make it. Anyone remember Huckleberry's? Zorine's?

“We are in this for the very long haul,” said Adam Bilter, who then told of plans for entertainment, charitable events and special events. Fashion shows, guest speakers ... He and his wife are in an anything-goes mood because this opening weekend has given them a jolt of optimism. They await, with members eating and drinking and talking all around them, the future.