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DEPARTURES

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**STANLEY
TUCCI**

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A new social scene is emerging behind closed (and very controlled) doors, as a host of membership clubs aim to become the most exclusive, most refined, and—essential in these modern times—safest way to mix and mingle.

by TONY PERROTTET



Opposite and above: Fasano Fifth Avenue is discreetly located on the Upper East Side.

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A few steps from a busy highway in Lower Manhattan lies the dreamy beauty of the Venetian Lagoon. At least that's how it felt when I stepped onto the rooftop terrace of the new Casa Cipriani, which has revived a historic ferry terminal on New York's waterfront, the 1909 Battery Maritime Building. Dusk was falling over its gilded cupolas and onto the shimmering blue waters of the harbor, where an array of vessels sliced parabolic arcs to distant islands. Six stories below, antique ferries eased into slips flanked by wooden pylons decaying in the waves. Admittedly, there were some reminders that this wasn't La Serenissima. In one direction, the sun was peeking from behind the Statue of Liberty; in the other, the lights of the

Brooklyn Bridge were twinkling over the East River. And when one of the Staten Island Ferries blasted its horn, the low, rich bass suddenly transported me back to New York's raunchy maritime heyday of Whitman and Melville.

"The horns go off between 7 A.M. and 7 P.M.," said Jan Henrik Gudmundson, the club's dapper Swiss-German managing director, as we gazed across the river. "We have double-glazed windows, but if members leave them open at night, it will be like an alarm clock."

Casa Cipriani's privileged perch is a fitting spot to contemplate the new wave of private clubs that blur the traditional boundaries between hotel, restaurant, and members-only club in an effort to reenergize a model that has been around for decades—even centuries. It's a collective mission that is being refined ever

more by the needs of a pandemic world, as club-hoppers have become wary, to say the least, of uncontrolled mingling.

The most ubiquitous modern-day form of the members' club is perhaps best embodied by Soho House, which opened its first location in London in 1995. The key to its success was its informal, arty atmosphere, overturning the traditional stuffiness that had become associated with older, more clichéd institutions devoted to yachtsmen, hunters, or college alumni—dark, dusty chambers haunted only by aged (male) members who could tolerate the grim boarding-school cuisine. It was a breath of fresh air when Soho House opened in New York's meatpacking district in 2003, luring younger members from the arts, media, and fashion worlds to its chic spaces. Its success inspired competitors, including the co-working NeueHouse, the

business-oriented Core, and quirky one-offs like the Norwood, as well as more niche clubs like the women-only Wing. But Soho House ultimately became a victim of its own popularity, with so many international members floating through that a sense of anonymity crept in; the New York branch lounges could sometimes feel like airport terminals. Who *wasn't* a member?

In response, an upper echelon of clubs began experimenting with the old format, establishing limited membership and higher fees to create more exclusive





Above and right: The Britely's bar and lounge area, designed by Martin Brudnizki. Opposite: The dining room in one of Fasano Fifth Avenue's private duplexes.

spaces. Then the pandemic hit, and with it came a new sense of urgency. As safety became paramount, private clubs could control their environments in a way that regular hotels, bars, and restaurants could not, effectively offering curated guest lists and the comforting sense of a social “bubble”—a closed pool where members might recognize one another from day to day, and where such novelties as easy contact tracing, for example, were built into the system. Planning for this spring’s new clubs began several years ago, but COVID-19 has made their gravitation toward exclusivity an even more enticing part of their allure, creating unique holdouts of urban sociability.

To make a splash in the crowded club field, the new arrivals have made serious investments. In the case of Casa Cipriani, the landmark status of the Battery Maritime Building meant that restoration was on a level so painstaking and wildly expensive that few would dare attempt it. (More than \$100 million has been poured into the site.) The interiors were designed by Thierry Despont—a satisfying return to the waterfront for the French architect, who first made a name for himself in the U.S. by restoring the Statue of Liberty in 1986. The style evokes the golden age of the transatlantic cruise liners that once docked nearby, with polished mahogany, maritime blue paint, and Art Deco touches throughout.

The Fasano Fifth Avenue, meanwhile, is quietly planning its Upper East Side debut on a stretch that was dubbed Millionaire’s Row during the Gilded Age. The first U.S. foray for the Brazilian luxury hotel brand Fasano, the club remains the very picture of moneyed discretion, limiting itself to an undisclosed number of invitation-only members, selected after CIA-level vetting. It’s no accident that you can walk past its portals without ever noticing it. The sliver of an edifice is 17 stories tall

but only the width of the modest 1871 townhouse it replaced, like an ornate version of the city’s ultra-skinny pencil towers. Fittingly, the ambience resembles an extended family home rather than a rowdy social club. Although there is a bar-restaurant decorated with images of old New York, there are few other shared areas. Instead, seven suites and four duplexes will allow members the luxury of their own personal club spaces. Also designed by Despont, these have a tasteful minimalism enlivened by retro Jet Age furnishings, like love nests for a modern Don Draper.

That intimacy has already proven to be a powerful lure. “I grew up going to Fasano properties and have known the family for years,” says one charter member, a young





From left: The rooftop at Casa Cipriani; the club's maritime-inspired interiors by Thierry Despont; a guest room at the club.

Brazilian entrepreneur. “So when I heard about the club opening in New York, I was naturally excited. I was invited to a dinner, where they showed me the property and asked me to join.” That personal touch will be a strength in the club setting, he adds. “The staff really get to know their guests and call them by their first names. Luxury hotels are great, but it’s not the same. They’re too formal.” And the promise of a home away from home will be attractive to those who (even during a pandemic) globe-trot constantly. “You can leave your ski gear there when you go to Brazil, and it will be waiting for you when you get back.”

A few blocks away in Midtown, the Aman hotel group’s New York debut is nearly as welcoming. The first Aman Club is set within the renovated Crown Building, a Jazz Age temple from 1921 that has impeccable Manhattan credentials as the original home of the Museum of Modern Art. Aman is playing its cards close to its chest with finer details, but members will have access to an indoor swimming pool, a rooftop garden with views of Central Park, and minimalist interiors designed by Jean-Michel Gathy. (Aman is still sorting out details of how membership will work when it opens later this year.)

The desire for a controlled environment has also pushed established top-tier hotels to embrace the club model. The most publicized is L.A.’s Chateau Marmont, the fabled refuge for Hollywood A-listers, which announced that it will become members-only in the near future, shocking many Angelenos. André Balasz, the owner since 1990, told *Variety* that he had been mooted the

club concept for several years but made the leap as guests demanded stricter seclusion during the pandemic. It will be an easy step: For years, almost all the Chateau’s guests have been repeat visitors, creating a self-perpetuating VIP ambience.

Soho House has gotten the message too. Many of its U.S. venues were closed in 2020 and reopened with occupancy limited to 25 percent because of the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, members so relished the sudden gift of space and privacy that owner Nick Jones sent out a circular saying that new admissions would be limited to maintain the more “intimate atmosphere.”

While others vie for a privileged few, the new Britely is going another route, insisting on the social value of camaraderie that has defined members’ clubs since the very beginning. The L.A. newcomer—located in the same building as the soon-to-open Pendry West Hollywood on Sunset Boulevard—aims to prove that, even with a handpicked membership, a club (CONTINUED ON P. 134) →

KEY TO THE CLUBS

scene is expected to flourish again in 2021. *From \$2,800 per year; thebritely.com.*

Aman Club

Members will have access to all the amenities of the Aman New York hotel in Midtown Manhattan. They include a three-level spa, a 65-foot indoor swimming pool, an extensive wine library, a jazz club, and Italian and Japanese restaurants. Rates have not been disclosed. aman.com

The Britely

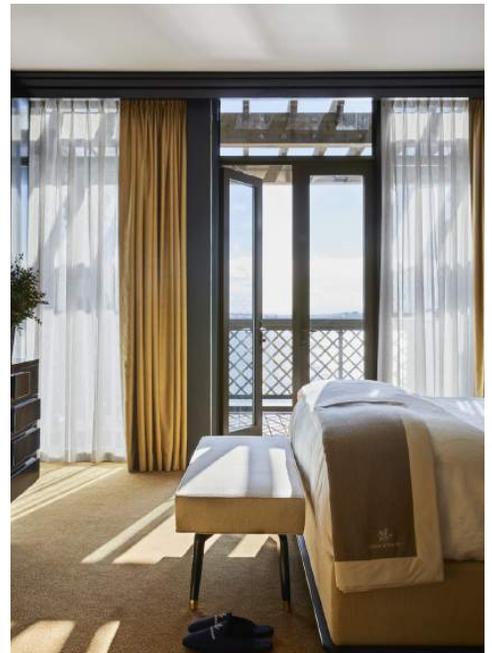
Facilities include a screening room, a 24-hour gym, a swimming pool with views over Sunset, and two restaurants overseen by Wolfgang Puck. It also has a bowling alley and a live music venue, where L.A.'s entertainment

Casa Cipriani

Capped at 1,500 members, the New York club features an array of lounges and bars, along with a jazz café, a 15,000-square-foot health and wellness floor, a rooftop terrace, and 47 hotel rooms and suites. *From \$3,600 per year; cipriani.com.*

Fasano Fifth Avenue

With a highly selective membership, the club has limited facilities (a bar-restaurant, a small gym) in favor of private duplexes and suites, which can be booked for long-term stays of up to 12 months. Membership is by invitation only and rates are not disclosed. fasanofifthavenue.com



(CONTINUED FROM P. 99) who's had his wings clipped by quarantine, the show offers the added somewhat-surreal layer of watching Stanley Tucci do what I typically do for a living, only more dapper and in fluent Italian.

In an episode on Rome, Tucci travels to a local trattoria to unpack the history of spaghetti carbonara. He takes a bite of the pasta and turns to hug the elderly owner in gratitude. I nearly wept. Because the pasta looked so good, and because I miss Italy and traveling and talking to chefs in packed restaurants and hugging anybody.

"It was incredible, too!" Tucci says, a little cruelly, of the pasta carbonara. "I wasn't pretending."

Why, I ask him, do we do this? Why make such a fuss over what we eat?

"In the food of every country is the story of that country," Tucci says, now not just doing my job better than I do, but also explaining it more eloquently. "It sounds like a cliché but every dish tells a story. That's probably why you and I love it. You're not just talking about it or reading about it—you get to eat it too. You get to eat the history. You're eating somebody's life! It becomes a part of you. Then you can pass it on. To me, this is the greatest part about cooking."

"THINK IT does add up," Tucci is saying. We're talking about the enthusiasms and interests we accumulate in the course of a lifetime. We're talking, I guess, about getting older.

"It's an education," he says. "I didn't really have a college education. I went to a conservatory for acting. I had like the opposite of a college education. So you

become an autodidact, which is kind of cool. Because it's, like, What attracts you? I like art, I like clothes, I like food. And I want to know about them. You learn to ask: What makes me comfortable? What makes me comfortable is a really nice suit. Does it look nice? Yeah, sometimes it looks okay. Would I dress in a suit every day? Yes. Even when I was a kid I always wanted to be very sort of stylish and dress well—but you have to make sure it's the right style for you. What suit is really right for you? What glasses are really right?"

With everything going on right now—the meal making and cleanup, the full-time parenting, the plotting where to travel to eat next—is that a level of image management he's willing to allocate time for?

"Oh, absolutely. I'll spend hours in an eyeglass store. I mean literally hours, trying on every pair. I'm fascinated by it."

I'd had it in my notes to ask him if it felt strange to find himself an unlikely Internet sex symbol just as he'd grown into a role like Tusker. Now the question seemed irrelevant: Tucci is clearly enjoying this moment. Being a beloved familiar face, admired at 60 for his fitness and style, indulging his passions and driving the Internet mad with displays of domestic suavity—this is the role, or roles, Stanley Tucci has been training for his whole life. It adds up.

"I don't want to be the same person all the time," he says. "That's the beauty of acting—and it's also the beauty of what we were talking about. Which is that as you get older you're educating yourself, you're learning more and more. And that forces you to use different parts of yourself and to become different people in a way." ☺

(CONTINUED FROM P. 132) can still be a fabulous place to mix and mingle.

"Our goal is to find people who really want to participate," says managing director of lifestyle Estelle Lacroix, whose job it is to connect Britely's members through parties and events. "The focus will be on shared culture. All the programming will have a social component, like a drinks meetup before a talk, where conversation and interaction is encouraged." (Of course, nobody can predict how the ongoing pandemic will delay full social lubrication in 2021.) And unlike Soho House or L.A.'s celeb-filled San Vicente Bungalow, whose members are—in theory, at least—arty types, "Britely members will include like-minded people from every walk of life," Lacroix adds. "You are not defined by what you do, but by who you are."

Of course, who you are is largely determined by what you like, and at the Britely, that means a membership of those who enjoy a certain kind of defiant whimsy brimming with colorful lacquered walls, animal-print upholstery, giant pink feathers (as in the lounge), and a private bowling alley. British interior designer Martin Brudnizki is to thank for the postmodern buffet of aesthetic delights; the look is reminiscent of the deliriously eccentric scene he created for another private club—London's Annabel's—just a few years ago. At the end of the day, says the designer, "it's all about fantasy. When you walk into a private club, you know you are going to have the best time ever. The noise, the people, the clink of glasses—it's incredibly evocative and exciting." ☺