



Restaurants

Members-only Astor Club touts exclusivity with its Michelin-starred chef

By Ally Marotti



Credit: Astor Club

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The subterranean Astor Club in the Gold Coast is dripping with old-school elegance. There are 24-karat gold flecks in the floors, plush red chairs in the lounge, a pink marble sink in the bathroom. Dozens of vintage wine bottles are on display in the entry, and a 1936 ivory-keyed Steinway sits in the lounge. Member lockers have names on the placards that are recognizable enough that Crain's had

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The test began with the hiring of Michelin-starred Chef Trevor Teich, who took over the kitchen in late June. Teich rolled out a new menu and is preparing special events for members, such as a tasting menu, wine tastings and more. So far, his changes — and his gravitas — are appealing to members. Membership has increased since he started. And, perhaps more notably, members are spending about 40% more each time they visit.

“Many clubs in the city haven’t, I would say, really focused on the food,” said Adam Bilter, who bought the space with his wife Victoria in 2022. “But because we’re literally an old restaurant space — a pretty old, famous restaurant space — we always knew that that was going to be a focus.”

Astor Club exists in the space at 24 E. Goethe St. that for two decades was Maxim’s de Chicago. The spot opened in December 1963 in the basement of what was then a hotel. It was, by many accounts, the place to be. There were parties, near-nightly performances, and eventually, discos. There were celebrities, from Audrey Hepburn to The Beatles. Framed photos on the wall show glimpses of those days.

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Maxim's was a sister of the Parisian mainstay, Maxim's de Paris, which has been open since 1893 in the French capital and has drawn customers such as Ernest Hemingway. The Chicago iteration's Art Nouveau décor mirrored that of its French sibling, with deep red seating, over-the-top trim, nature-inspired accents and gold fixtures. The Bilters bought the space for \$680,000 from the city, which had used it as an event venue after Maxim's closed. It sat vacant for about a decade before the Bilters came along and sank more than \$1 million into fixing it up.



Walking in now, one is transported back to the Belle Epoque. The Bilters worked to keep as many features as possible. A piano in the entry says "Maxim's" just above Middle C. Those vintage wine bottles on display were drained half a century ago. The white tablecloths in the dining room stand stark against the original deep red carpet, booths and wallpaper. The light fixtures are the same, and

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When Teich was hired, he went to Myopic Books in Wicker Park and bought French cookbooks from the 1960s for inspiration. The resulting menu is old-school French with a modern touch that matches the decadence of the place. Appetizers include a seafood tower (\$71 per person), salmon rillettes (\$18) and deviled eggs (\$5 each.) There's Vichyssoise soup (\$12), or diners can pay \$27 and get scallops and caviar added. There's a fork and knife Caesar salad (\$18) and avocado Louie (\$20).



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Three items were on Maxim's original menu: onion soup (\$12), Sole Meuniere (\$42) and Tournedos Rossini (\$65). The lobster pot pie (\$26) is a holdover from Teich's previous restaurant, [Claudia](#). Other entrees include steak frites (\$60) and two burger options, plus a carbonara (\$26) that harkens to the Bilters' days living in Italy.

The poulet roti pour deux (\$85) is prepared tableside. Teich pipes chicken mousse under the chicken skin, adds herbs, then takes it back to the kitchen to be carved up. The result is served with farro and corn risotto.

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Teich said the menu is off to a good start, though he's still gathering data on what's working. The prime beef short rib Wellington for two (\$125) is the star item, and the deviled eggs are quickly becoming a favorite, too.

"We sell tons and tons of deviled eggs with caviar on top," he said. "While you figure out what you want to eat, a glass of bubbles and a couple of those will get you in the mood."



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Members-only spots like Astor Club offer luxury, and people join for the exclusivity, said Alexander Chernev, a marketing professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Having a Michelin-starred chef checks that box.

"You need something which will make you exclusive," he said. "When it comes to food, being able to say, 'I have a Michelin-starred chef,' that's exclusivity."

Just over a year before Teich started at Astor Club, he was [closing his Michelin-starred restaurant in Bucktown](#). The 70-seat restaurant served a seven-to-nine-course tasting menu that stretched over 2.5 hours. It closed for financial reasons.

The cost of dining out has gone up about 30% since 2019, when the pandemic drove up labor costs and inflation set in. Some Chicago restaurant customers are cutting back. It's been a blow to the ~~already low margin industry and the economics of running a restaurant have changed in recent~~

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“We’re still in a time where restaurants haven’t fully bounced back (from the pandemic,) and ... it really seems like the dice is just being rolled on who gets to stick,” he said. “Filling 70 seats for a tasting menu that’s over \$220, it’s a hard thing right now while people are feeling an economic burn.”

Working at Astor Club offered a reprieve from the daily struggle to fill seats. Astor Club, a nonprofit, charges its 350 members a one-time initiation fee of \$4,800 and monthly dues of \$300. (It’s slightly cheaper if a member is under 40 or lives in the building.) Those dues support the club, giving the restaurant a little more wiggle room in what normally would be razor-thin margins.



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For Teich, that means less stressing over filling seats. For club members, that wiggle room means bigger portions and larger pours, Adam Bilter said.

“We have those dues that come in every single month and support the club,” he said. “(They allow) it to function and not have to scrimp and scrounge and try to reduce portion size and scrape by.”

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“My goal for the club is to do things that I couldn’t do in a normal restaurant,” he said. “There are cool opportunities to do some wild dinners. We have a captive audience.”



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Ally Marotti is a senior reporter for Crain's Chicago Business covering consumer products, food, restaurants and retail. She joined Crain's in 2020 from the Chicago Tribune.

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