



Adam and Victoria Bilter in Maxim's, in the lower level of the former Astor Towers hotel, which is now being reborn as a ritzy private club. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

# Is Chicago ready for another ritzy private club?

Well, the Astor Club is coming to the former home of Maxim's



Rick Kogan

On a recent sunny morning Goudy Square, the small park in the heart of the Gold Coast at Astor and Goethe streets, was alive with dozens of little children in the company of their parents, grandparents or nannies.

You could hear their carefree and playful noise across the street, where Adam and Victoria Bilter were standing and talking. A sincere and passionate duo, they live on the top floor of the building at 1300 N. Astor but are busy bringing back to life the 8,120-square-foot space that occupies the basement.

"We want to preserve the history of this special place," said Adam. "We are both deeply appreciative of the past and want to be part of the future."

This building rose in 1962, the work of revered architect Bertrand Goldberg, who is most famous for creating that iconic structure that is Marina City. This was the Astor Tower Hotel, where The Beatles, among many famous folks, once stayed.

The basement space became a restaurant through the efforts of the architect's bright, 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.

It served meals that earned it a place on Life magazine's list of the top six gourmet restaurants in the country. But it also housed what was then the city's first discothèque, and as late as 3 a.m. some nights you could find people playing backgammon in its Bagatelle Room.

It was very popular and a gossip column staple — thanks to high-profile guests and customers, including Hollywood royalty and local high-society figures — until closing in 1982. It carried on for a few years as Nancy let other restaurateurs move in, including the late, hard-to-forget George Badon-sky. Nancy died in 1996, her husband the following year, and in 2000 their heirs gave Maxim's to the city of Chicago.



The interior of the famous Chicago restaurant Maxim's, now being reborn as the Astor Club.



Sweeping stairway at Maxim's.

It became Maxim's: The Nancy Goldberg International Center. And that's where I came in about a decade later when Lois Weisberg, then the city's commissioner of cultural affairs, got the idea to present a series of events in the place. She called them "Conversations with Extraordinary People" and asked me to host.

Over five years I did so. These talks were broadcast over the city's cable network and often drew a standing-room-only crowd, and why not? I talked with such interesting people as Studs Terkel, Carol Marin, Corky Siegel, Bob Falls, Karen Abbott, Martha Lavey, Dennis DeYoung, Audrey Morris, Judy

Roberts ... the list is long, the memories pleasant. The room was also used for private parties, and by the time it closed for keeps around 2015 it had begun to look a bit bruised and threadbare, though it retained enough of its distinctive grandeur to wow first-time visitors. A couple of years ago the Bilters, who then lived a few blocks away, were walking their dogs and "We wondered what was beneath that revolving door, down that spiral staircase," Adam said. "We researched, the more we fell in love with the idea that we might be able to bring this



Original dishes at Maxim's.

place back to vibrant life." He is a child of Oswego, where he grew up on a small horse farm before becoming a marketing/advertising executive, real estate developer and hospitality business investor. She was born in Ukraine, the daughter of a nurse, and was living in Bellagio, Italy, when she met and fell in love with Adam. They were married in Grant Park and had their reception at Gibsons. Flash-forward a bit to earlier this year, when they became the space's new owners (at a cost of \$680,000). They have since been in the process of turning it into the Astor Club, a private club scheduled to open later this year.

They already have a member list approaching 100 people. A few of them are famous and some I know, some I don't, but the Bilters are not naming names — to them private is private. "Many of the members are from the neighborhood," said Adam. "We have been doing a lot of outreach so that everyone knows what we are doing." The couple has many ideas for their club: live music, guest chefs and mixologists, charity events, cooking classes, fashion shows, guest speakers, art events. "We are always thinking of something new that we might try," said Victoria. Will this work?

That's difficult to say. This is still a city of venerable private clubs, such as Saddle and Cycle, the Casino, Racquet Club, Chicago Yacht Club, Union League and others. The Bilters have visited most of them and are encouraged by the conversations they have had with their operators and staff. "I think they are happy to have a new club coming to the city," said Adam. "They have shared good thoughts and many ideas." Their enthusiasm is not dimmed by their knowledge that some private clubs have not been successful. The Playboy Club is long gone. Arnie Morton's Zorine's vanished. Barely remembered is Huckleberry's, a flashy Oak Street club owned by Barbara Eden of "I Dream of Jeannie" fame, and her then-husband, Sun-Times executive Chuck Fegert. The Standard Club recently sold its Loop building. The Bilters remain optimistic. Walking with them through the space last week, one could see the care they are taking. The massive kitchen has been remade, the other spaces polished and refurbished. They show a visitor the plates and silverware that remain from the past and lovingly display some of the photos, menus and other materials they have received from former patrons. "It has been so nice to learn how much people loved Maxim's," said Adam. Change comes hard to this neighborhood, the city's wealthiest and arguably its loveliest. Just to the west of the Astor Club is what was once the Ambassador East Hotel and its Pump Room restaurant, arguably the city's most potent star magnet for decades. But even famous hotelier Ian Schrager was unable to remake or capitalize on the legends of the past. The hotel is now part of the Hyatt chain; the restaurant went through numerous iterations but still exists as the Ambassador Room. Leaving the Astor Club, the Bilters proudly showed off one of their two cars. It is a fully restored 1923 Ford Model T. It runs and they sometimes drive it through the neighborhood at top speed: 35 mph. "We call it 'Daisy,'" said Adam. From the park across the street came the sounds of little kids at play. "Those children, maybe one day they will be old enough to come to the Astor Club," said Victoria. Her husband smiled and said, "Why not? We plan to be here for a long, long time."