



Jackie Kennedy Onassis enjoys a cigarette during a power lunch, 1971.

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Failure to Lunch

Even though the power-lunch era is over, the rules around the ritual are worth remembering

BY TRACEY JACKSON



In 1978, shirts were optional at Ma Maison, in Los Angeles.

I don't know when I stopped making lunch dates and substituted them with meeting people for coffee. Time lines post-pandemic all seem to blur. But there is no question that at a certain point I stopped asking people if they wanted to have lunch and replaced it with "You want to meet for a coffee?"

I am not alone. I did a survey on my scantily used Instagram page and asked people, "Has meeting for coffee replaced meeting for lunch much of the time?" One hundred percent responded, "Yes."

A new era, not only the end of the power lunch but the end of most lunches, has descended upon us. Boomers didn't create the power lunch, but we certainly perfected it. At the age of 18, I moved to Los Angeles to be an actress. Within a brief period, I ended up dating Patrick Terrail, the owner of one of the most iconic power-lunch places of all time: Ma Maison. I learned young the power of the power lunch. I also learned the rules, and, boy, were there rules.

First off, have one spot you go to all the time. Be a regular. You will always have a table when you want one. I learned this from Terrail.

Power lunchers tended to go to the same restaurant every day. Dinners were more “Let’s try that new place we just read about.” But if you ever walked into any power-lunch spot, you were sure to see the same faces day in, day out.



David Hockney's illustration for Ma Maison's menu.

In the Ma Maison years, your lack of power status was emblazoned on your forehead if you could not get a table there. The only exceptions were young, pretty girls. Young, pretty girls get a ton of entrance exceptions.

In New York at that time, and up until Michael's took off, the Russian Tea Room was the spot to be seen. Re-watch *Tootsie*, if you doubt me.

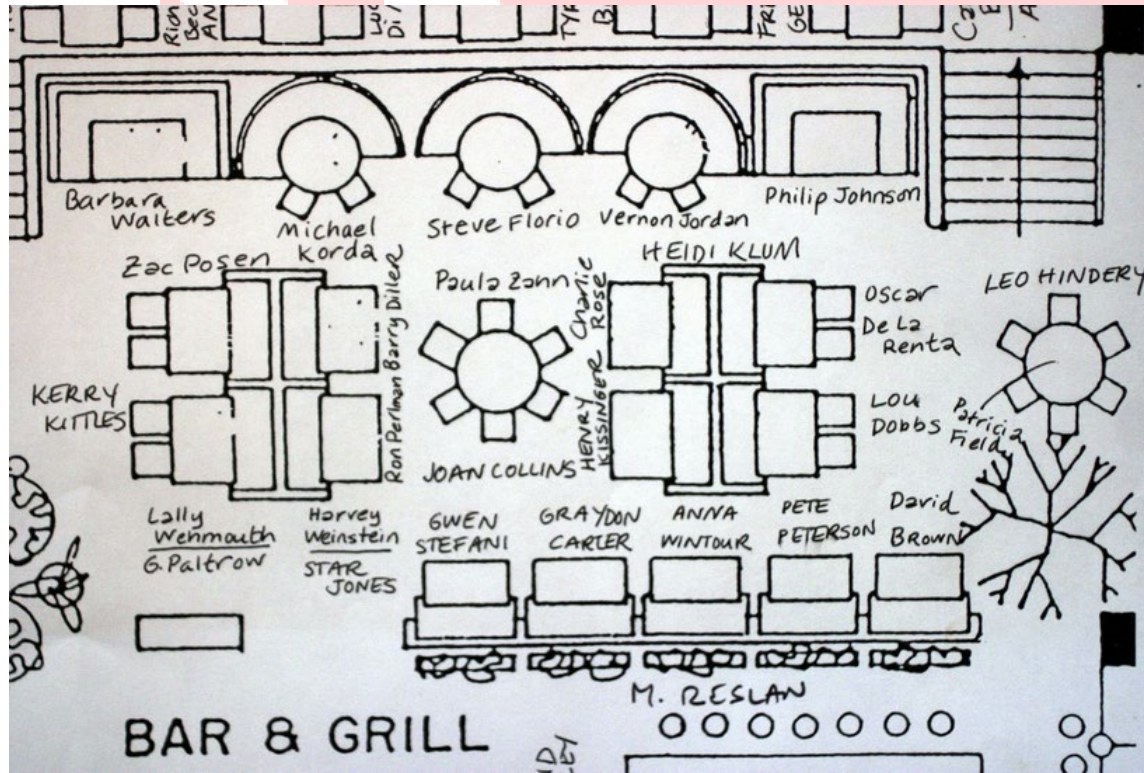
These places were media “hot spots,” as they were once referred to. And hot they were. On any given day, you could walk into one of these restaurants and not only would you see the same faces but all were powerhouses in their industries.



Fran Lebowitz at the Russian Tea Room, in New York City, June 1988.

And if you were lucky enough to sit with one of them, well, that made you powerful by lunch association.

Different groups had different places. The big-money guys and Real Masters of the Universe used to go to the Four Seasons in New York. There was a time socialites (they, like everyone else, seem to have been replaced by influencers) used to go to La Grenouille.



A 2003 sketch of regular customers' go-to tables at the Four Seasons Grill Room, in New York City.



Pierre Bergé, Yves Saint Laurent, Diane von Furstenberg, Bianca Jagger, and Marina Schiano outside La Grenouille, in New York City, 1974.

Union Square Cafe was the go-to for publishing people. For 15 years, if you walked into Union Square Cafe at lunchtime, you would find my husband, at his corner table. After he moved offices, he could be found at table No. 2 at Michael's.

Young, pretty girls get a ton of entrance exceptions.

This was another rule of the sadly departed power lunch: you *had* to have your own table.

And if you didn't get it, hissy fits ensued. Nothing like a Master of the Universe stomping his foot and getting red in the face because someone deemed more important was sitting in his chair, at his table. Having your own table was not arbitrary. Your own table was essential both for your ranking on the power meter and for other power players' ability to find you. If you didn't have the same table, people who "just happened to run into you" would not know where to wander on their way to the bathroom.

Power lunches could make your career. And you had them almost every day. I'm not sure how we all got so much work done—stopping at 11:30 or 12:00, getting to the power spot, eating the lunch, trying to get others to notice you so you could maybe close the deal. Getting back to the office. This was a chunk of your day. But the payoff at that time was so big you did it.



Nancy Reagan heads home after lunch with socialite Jerry Zipkin at La Grenouille.

Pre-cell phones, I think we all had a lot more time for activities that helped us on our journeys.

When I moved back to Los Angeles in the 90s, I was a working writer in both television and movies, and was considered a good lunch date myself. By then, there were several spots to go to. There was Le Dome, for the music people. There was Citrus, for the Paramount people. The days of one lunch spot were over. And Los Angeles, being so spread out, demanded far too much time to drive anywhere.

So I was thrilled when I was given an office on the Twentieth Century Fox lot and had access to the commissary. At that time, nothing was more powerful than saying, “Meet me at the commissary.”

This obsessive lunching was not all about ego. You really felt that if you were seen out, people would be reminded of your existence. You would walk by a table, say, “Hi, we have to get together,” and maybe that person had a job you were right for. Or the brief encounter gave you an excuse to pick up the phone and call them later that day. Yes, we did that—we picked up our phones, that sat on our desks, and we phoned people.

It was all so direct and personal, and it led to jobs, other opportunities, and socialization. And we all had the talent of social skills, conversation, listening to the person we were with, as we did not have one eye on our phone. O.K., one eye might have been cruising the room to see if there was someone more powerful than the person we were with. But for the most part it was social, and quite helpful in terms of the future.

If the power lunch had not been an essential element to your career, they would not have created a whole wardrobe around it. Remember the power suit? If not, re-watch *Working Girl*.

Yes, millennials, we dressed up every day. We looked good. We did not wear jeans and sweats and sneakers between nine and five. But unlike you we had to go prance our power over lunch. And nothing said power as loudly as big shoulder pads.

There are many reasons for this seismic midday-meal shift. Most people have not returned to their offices. And if they do go in, many are there three days a week. Taking a two-hour lunch break is not time well spent, especially if most of the other power players are not around.

For millennials, cost is a huge factor. Inflation has made the tab for lunch as much as the cost of a pricey dinner. And if no one else is doing it, then there is no reason to spend all that money to accomplish something you can get done over Zoom.

And, like most everything else, it's tech that's really changed the way we do lunch.

Lorraine Fox, who was a big player in tech and finance, told me that Andy Grove, the renowned C.E.O. of Intel, used to say, "Eat lunch or be lunch."

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