
Why feminists should picket
Washington's fancy restaurants.

Which Of The Following Can't Be Found In Fancy Restaurants?

- a) Salmon With Dill
- b) Dom Perignon
- c) Waitresses

by Marianne Szegedy-Maszak

The tuxedos. The soft, diffused lighting that makes almost anyone look attractive. The power lawyers and power politicians, the power journalists and power lobbyists with power money sitting at that discreet table right near the pictures of the Redskins. (*"He'll never get confirmed," he whispered.*) The perfectly timed courses. The best wise-cracking waiters at the Palm. The ones with the Yves Montand accents at Maison Blanche. The Icelandic Arctic Char special. The all-male fleet of waiters that makes you wonder whatever happened to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. That's what eating in most of Washington's power restaurants is all about.

It's so much a part of our culture as not to be noticed: the fancy restaurant that has everything except waitresses. Every city's got one, especially Washington, where you won't see waitresses at the rough-and-tumble, meat-and-potatoes enclaves like Joe and Mo's, Duke Zeibert's, Mel Krupin's, Gary's, or the Palm. They're not on the menu at

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the hushed and exquisite Le Pavillon or Maison Blanche.

But you can find women working the tables at places like the Kozy Korner Restaurant, right around the corner from the Palm. There you can have your steaming, roast turkey special (\$5.75 including stuffing, potatoes, vegetable, roll, and butter) served up by Bernice ("but everybody calls me Bonnie") Stone, a waitress "in town for 46 years this August 12." She's quick to tell you that she sometimes makes \$40 a day in tips for four hours of work. That plus her paycheck of about \$25 a week will bring her just under \$12,000 a year.

Tommy Jacomo, the manager of the Palm, is a little more reticent when the subject of money comes up. He estimates that his guys bring home "somewhere-around-sevneighthundred-a-week but I really can't discuss it." That plus a minimum wage salary, health benefits, a pension plan, and profit sharing makes the Palm, in Jacomo's words, "a dream job for a waiter. Utopia."

A dream job for a *waiter*. The power restaurants are not Utopia, but they undoubtedly offer good jobs. First, there's the money. While 86 percent of the 1.5 million people who wait tables in the United States are women, there aren't that many women who can make the \$40,000 a year that waiters can take in at the Palm. No wonder a Labor Department study found that waiters across the country earned an average of \$237 a week, while waitresses took home \$168. For those graying and distinguished gentlemen who wait in the power restaurants, \$237 can be the tip on a dinner for eight even if their customers pass up the Martell Napoleon with their Baked Alaska. "They make more than your boss," said Michael Bartlett, editor-in-chief of *Restaurants and Institutions*.

And these jobs are attractive for reasons besides the big bucks. The flexibility, the different shifts to accommodate children and family is there as it is not in most office jobs. And of course there's the cachet that draws all those Senior Partners to the corner tables in the first place. These are beautiful places, whether it's the studied casualness at the Palm or the deep banquettes at Lion d'Or. There's the chance to mingle with the power types in the evening or take home a little of that Icelandic salmon after hours. You could do a lot worse, and most women do. The question of why women haven't moved into the top restaurant jobs doesn't rank with suffrage, but it's a problem nonetheless. And it's one that offers a few insights not only into class and culture but into the women's movement as well.

Bonnie's biceps

Why aren't there women at the power restaurants? Washington restaurateurs insist they don't discriminate on the basis of sex, which would be a violation not only of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act but the 1963 Equal Pay Act and local civil rights ordinances. But the reasons they offer for the lack of women are so unsatisfying that one wonders. They explain the absence of women with reasons ranging from the Freudian ("women can't cope with the pressure [of working in a French restaurant] as well as men," one told the *Post*) to the almost semiotic logic of the Palm's Jacomo. "Certain personalities of a restaurant can carry it, others can't," Jacomo says. "I would wonder if I went to the Playboy Club and saw a guy wearing a rabbit's outfit." And as Garth Weldon, manager of the Prime Rib told *The Washington Times*: "All our

applicants are male. I don't know if wearing a tuxedo bothers [women] or what." A frequent refrain is that "women can't carry the trays." Tell Bonnie, who has hauled turkey platters for 40 years, that she doesn't have the muscles to carry pheasant.

If one wants proof that women can handle the demands of the top restaurants without dropping the silver, one need only look at those top restaurants that do have them. Walter Mondale and Elizabeth Taylor do not refuse to go to Dominique's because it has waitresses. Is New York's powerful 21 Club less powerful because it has waitresses? "They are absolutely wonderful," said Walter Weiss, the 21 Club's maitre d' and a man who is happy to answer questions. "They are absolutely great," Weiss said. "They are attentive, they are responsive, the public does not complain, they like them. The most important thing is that they must know their business and they do." But what about the elegance, I asked. "Young lady," he replied in his German accent, sounding like the bartender in *Casablanca*. "This is not the Stone Age."

Power restaurateurs *can* point to the dearth of applications from women. Paula Callacappa, the director of personnel for the 21 Club, said that only one in ten of their applicants are women. "I'd hire them if I could," explained Mel Krupin, "but nobody applies." The idea that *no* women apply to top restaurants is nonsense, says Judy Goldsmith, former president of the National Organization for Women. But she acknowledges that the applications haven't been rolling in. "It is not surprising that after years and decades of trying to get in, women have ceased trying," she says.

That's certainly true of Gail Larocca. In her early thirties, she's waited tables for more than ten years in Washington and New York. "I don't want to waste my time," she said. "It's a foregone conclusion that they don't hire women because you go into these places and you see only men. It doesn't make any difference if I can do the job or not." In those rare cases when women do apply, two things often happen: They are either told that there are no openings, or their applications are taken and they never hear back from the restaurant again. The waitresses simply try another place, with no proof that they have been discriminated against.

You might be thinking that there's simple legal recourse. "I think that waitresses should begin to organize and then start filing more aggressive class action suits," says Betty Friedan, as if ex-

plaining for the thirteenth time how to make scrambled eggs to a hapless male. But that is not so easy. Sure, there have been a handful of successful lawsuits against power restaurants, but their numbers are few. In 1974, the New York Civil Liberties Union won a lawsuit against 11 premier New York restaurants, including such venerables as Cote Basque, 21 Club, and Lutece, forcing them to hire the plaintiffs. More recently, the Women's Legal Defense Fund (WLDF) filed a class action suit on behalf of two waitresses against Ridgewell's, the toney D.C. caterer, claiming that the company employed women only in food preparation, not food service. The company denied discrimination, but settled out of court for an undisclosed sum, said to be close to \$1 million as dozens of women were compensated for back pay. In the Martin's Tavern case in Washington, the WLDF beat the Georgetown restaurant, forcing it to let seven women become waitresses and receive back pay.

Only a few waitresses can have the benefit of pro bono attorneys fighting for their rights. As a group, waitresses generally don't have a lot of time and money to be running to court. Any waitress that wanted to would have to apply for the job, then file a complaint at the Equal Employment Opportunity Office, and cross-file the same complaint at the District's Office of Human Rights. If, after a preliminary hearing, it was decided that the case should be pursued, there would be an investigation lasting four to six months.

Depending on the results of the investigation, there might be yet another hearing four to six months later. That's a lot of tips forsaken for a hunch. The OHR reports that of the 21 complaints brought against area restaurants between 1985 and 1987, ten were brought by women, but none led to a reinstatement.

"Generally, few people bring employment discrimination claims, not because there is no employment discrimination but because it is a big hassle to carry them through," said Donna Lenhoff of the WLDF.

Don't mourn, feminize

And it's not just legal barriers that keep women out of the top restaurants. There's the Catch-22 of skills: You need them to work in the top restaurants, but you can't get them without having worked in the top restaurants. What's the difference between a Dom Perignon and a Tait-

tinger? How do you filet a Dover sole a la French Service? What's the proper wine with mako? "The problem is circular and it's as true for blacks as it is for women," said Phyllis Richman, a restaurant critic for *The Washington Post*. "They need experience to apply to these restaurants that they can only find in the restaurants that won't hire them in the first place." This was echoed by Ann Hartley, a co-owner of Maison Blanche. "We have a great deal of faith in the ability of women. If women had the talent and training that we require, they would be among those that we hired."

And in an odd way customers are to blame since they fuel the slow turnover that keeps openings few. They'll come in and ask for a particular waiter—sometimes because they expect to be entertained, in other cases because they wish to impress a client, in other cases because these are *extremely busy people* who would just as soon not have their *extremely valuable time* taken up with inconsequential things like saying "I would like a Perrier" rather than "the usual." No wonder turnover remains incredibly small. Mel Krupin's has waiters who have worked there for ten years, the Palm for 14 years, Maison Blanche for nine years. Why the attachment? Who knows what subconscious ghosts in us cry out for a male waiter? Cathy Enz, a business professor at the University of Indiana has a theory: "It is almost as if we operate under primitive notions of who is to provide food. Women are so often attached to providing food that when a man is doing it, it is, well, kind of awe inspiring."

One would assume that with the chance to get rid of some of that awe and to tame an all-male setting, feminists would go after the power restaurants with glee. But the issue is not in the forefront of their raised consciousness. When I first asked Betty Friedan about the absence of women at the top restaurants, she said: "You know, I never thought of that." I suspect that this simple obliviousness may explain much of why the movement doesn't make more of an issue of the dearth of women in power restaurants.

To be sure, some feminists have taken them on. The WLDF, plaintiffs' attorney in the Martin's Tavern case, even puts out *The Waitresses Rights Handbook* complete with an introduction from Rhea Pearlman, who plays a feisty waitress on "Cheers." But other feminists are rich with reasons *not* to put the power restaurants high on the agenda. One reason is the The Eighties-Self-Reliance line: Waitresses have to rally themselves. Both Friedan and Goldsmith say that the days

of the women's movement parachuting into a particular sector and organizing are over. "Outside organizers simply can't do it," Friedan says. While self-reliance is a trait to be encouraged in each of us, it doesn't seem like the best cry of the women's movement which, in the tradition of the civil rights movement, has gone ahead and helped those who can't help themselves, whether they're rape victims or single parent families. Waitresses are obviously not in the same predicament, but neither are they flush with cash and time to organize themselves.

Then there's the It's-Not-A-Big-Enough-Deal approach, the contention that federal legislation like abortion rights and alimony reform are where the attention should be. The hot issues right now, for instance, for the National Women's Political Caucus, are the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Act for Better Child Care—not waitresses. There seems to be the feeling that if the payoff isn't big, it's not worth pursuing. "It takes extraordinary interest in an issue to bring that issue to public attention," said Goldsmith. "The issue must be widespread, nationwide, coherent, and in the public eye over a sustained period of time for that issue to take hold."

But maybe not. The power restaurants of Washington are a battle ground where the women's movement just might be able to score an easy victory. A few well-placed pickets, a couple of press releases, and you would have TV cameras and klieg lights on K Street. That would not only get the word out for more waitresses to apply for these jobs but, more importantly, it would shame those liberal politicians and reporters who eat at the power restaurants. And then things would start to change. Would Ethel Kennedy, Eunice Shriver, or Ben Bradlee, regular patrons of *Maison Blanche*, still eat there if there was a women's protest outside? Could you still look inside the Palm and see Martin Peretz, owner of *The New Republic*, or Mel Krupin's and see Donald Graham, publisher of *The Washington Post*? Would those Professional Democrats, Bob Strauss and Charles Manatt, still throw an arm around Mel if the cameras and the protestors were there? Liberals would buckle, and I suspect that GOP diners wouldn't be exempt from becoming red in the face either. Nancy Reagan couldn't risk the embarrassment. In the face of that, restaurant owners would finally feel the pressure. The heat's on anyone who joins an all male club; it singes anyone who mutters a sexist syllable. Turn up the flame, and get the women into the Palm. □

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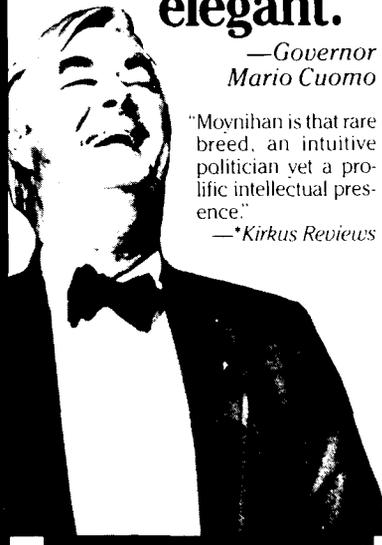


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Is Margaret Thatcher a Woman?

No woman is if she has to make it in a man's world.

by Polly Toynbee

Among world leaders, Mrs. Thatcher stands out in the crowd. In a row of suits, the eye is drawn to the single dress among Western leaders. Love her or loathe her, she isn't ignored. Women who succeed are twice as admired, because no one really thinks a woman can do it. As Dr. Johnson cruelly said, "The wonder is not that they do it well but that they do it at all."

So has she been a good thing for women? Most feminists say unequivocally, No. For her catalog of unsisterly sins is long, and growing.

The only prime minister since the war to appoint no woman to her cabinet, she has given fewer government jobs of any kind to women. Conservatives overwhelmingly predominate in the House of Commons, and the small number of women in Parliament is in large part due to the failure of the Conservative party to select women as candidates in any but the most hopeless seats.

She is a Queen Bee and she likes to stand out alone. In cabinet photographs, she doesn't want some other woman diverting the eye. The longer that there are no other women at the top in politics, the more remarkable her success looks.

However, the only reason she rose to such power herself was as a token woman. Edward Heath, the Conservative leader she eventually deposed, admits having appointed her to his cabinet as secretary of state for education only because he needed a statutory woman. After Heath lost the 1974 election, certain elements in

the Conservative party were determined that he should go. Mrs. Thatcher, by a stroke of opportunism and daring, offered herself as a candidate against him when others demurred. She toppled Heath on the first ballot. It was a remarkable coup. Most of the Conservative members of Parliament had thought she had little chance. They only wanted to give Heath a fright. Imagine their horror when they found that, overnight, the most dominantly male, reactionary, and anti-woman party in the land had voted itself a right-wing woman leader and future prime minister.

She would probably not have made it to the cabinet if she hadn't been a token woman, for her politics were not in tune with the leadership of that time. She would never have made it to leader, albeit accidentally, if she hadn't been a woman. She has experienced nothing but advantage from her gender.

Once Thatcher was leader, everyone, or nearly everyone, said she could never be elected. The country was not ready for a woman prime minister, they said. The British were not accustomed to more than the occasional token woman in public life. As education minister, Mrs. Thatcher herself said in a television interview that she thought there would never be a woman prime minister in her lifetime.

According to feminists, we still haven't got a woman prime minister—not a real one. Mrs. Thatcher is only a surrogate man. When she first won the leadership of her party, she pronounced clearly to her press officer that she would never give interviews on the basis of being a woman.

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