



This page: Nathan Litera; opposite page: Andy Ouitis

# FOR MEMBERS ONLY

PRIVATE CLUBS AND RESTAURANTS  
OFFER EXCLUSIVITY—AND GREAT WINE AND FOOD

Stumble upon the website for WS New York—a private dining club whose name is a nod to Wine Spectator magazine—and exclusivity probably comes to mind. Set on the second level of 37 Hudson Yards in New York City, the swank space is a prime example of an ongoing trend in hospitality: membership-only restaurants and clubs.

“There’s a fraternal nature of private restaurants and clubs, the invitation to join, and the sense of belonging that comes along with it,” says Zack Bates, CEO of Private Club Marketing, a Newport Beach, Calif.-based firm whose mission is to strengthen memberships and improve guests’ experience. Bates believes members of such establishments relish in showing off how they’ve become “part of something exclusive and private.”

Private restaurants and bars are nothing new. Veterans such as the Philadelphia Club and Metropolitan Club of New York have been catering to the elite crowd for decades, some as far back as the 19th century. But today’s members-only clubs take the term “exclusive” to a higher level. Some are by invitation only, and most require deep pockets with sign-up costs in the thousands and expensive monthly fees to maintain membership.

Members join clubs for such a wide and personal set of reasons, says Tom Mackenzie, director of operations at WS New York. “We see a number of members that may know one another professionally, but even more who meet and socialize regularly due to common shared interests.”

The allure is a more individual experience than dining in places open to the public, and for members, that experience is well worth the price. According to Bates, Club 33, located in Disneyland, reportedly costs more than \$30,000 to join. “Cost becomes less of an issue when these establishments continue to focus on exclusivity of their membership,” Bates says.

World-class food and drink are almost always a draw. At Park House in Dallas, the cuisine is globally influenced, focusing on what’s fresh and in season, and the diverse wine program features bottles from prized regions including Napa, Sonoma, Barolo, Bordeaux, Marlborough, and Adelaide. Likewise, the team from Caribou Club in Aspen, Colo., traverses

the world every year searching for inspiration to compile the menu alongside an outstanding wine and spirits list.

At WS New York, haute cuisine pairs with world-class vintages scoring 90 points and above in Wine Spectator magazine, as well as an impressive spirits program.

“Wine is an obvious connector at WS—not just the drinking of wine, but also the educational factor. The ability to share experiences over special vintages and enjoy them with like-minded individuals draws them to the Club,” Mackenzie says. “Having a team that knows how to handle, care for, educate, and consistently deliver on any bottle a member may have or desire to taste is something that can’t be found anywhere else.”

Culinary offerings at members-only restaurants are only one piece of the total package, though. The restaurant and bar at Spring Place in New York City’s Soho, for instance, strikes a chord from the moment you enter. French architect Nathan Litera imagined the interiors as a “home away from home” for club members.

“I thought over the shapes and finishes to make the restaurant an attractive and dynamic venue to facilitate the members’ interactions,” Litera says. The work of legends like Jasper Johns and Edward Wormley helped spur the Mid-Century Modern interiors. Litera-designed furniture and lighting, vintage pieces from the 1960s and ’70s, and other nuances set the tone.

The most discriminating clubs have mile-long waiting lists and vetting processes to join can be extreme. Once someone becomes a member, it’s common to renew, often staying between three and five years, Bates explains. The younger set tends to look for new experiences sooner, and older members stay longer. “The ‘Cheers’ effect goes a long way for some—where everybody knows your name.”



Opposite page: Spring Place, designed by Nathan Litera, is meant to feel like a home away from home for members. This page: The Cellar Room at the wine-focused WS New York.