

The Great Outdoors

los angeles

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THE HIPPEST RESTAURANT YOU'LL NEVER GET INTO

BY PATRIC KUH

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BY ARIEL SWARTLEY

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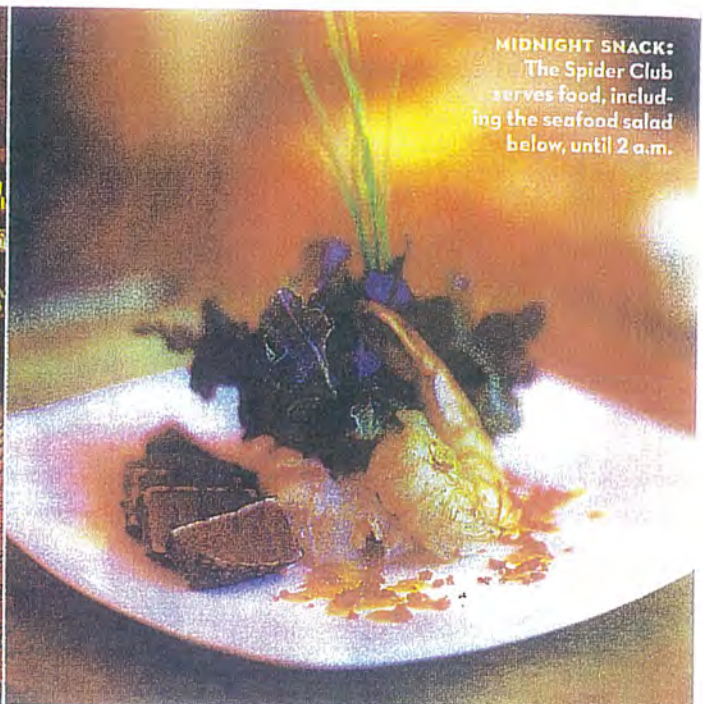
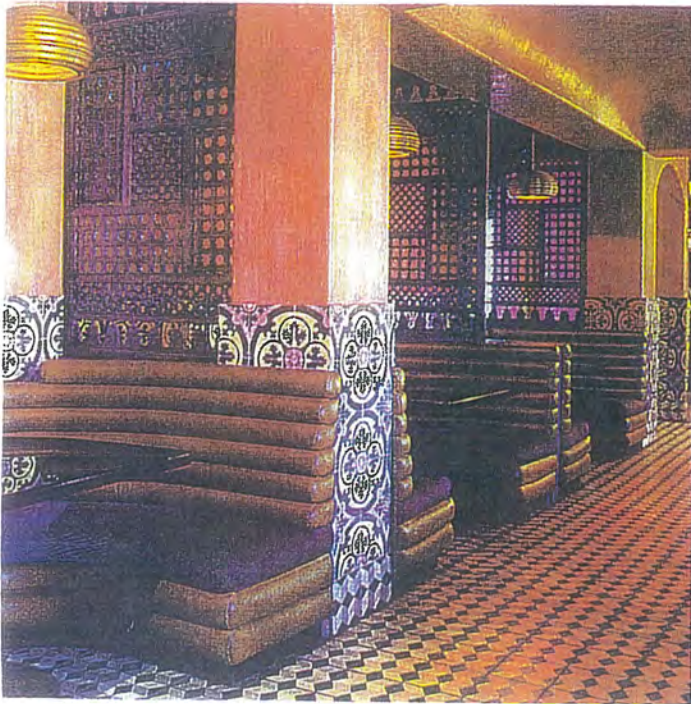
BY ALEX HALBERSTADT



JULY 2004

\$3.95

RESTAURANTS



MIDNIGHT SNACK:
The Spider Club serves food, including the seafood salad below, until 2 a.m.

Spider Bite

Getting in is half the battle at a new Hollywood restaurant. Is it worth it? by Patric Kuh

IN THE INTEREST OF historical record, here's what a bouncer at a hot L.A. nightclub looks like in 2004: He stands at the foot of the stairs. He does not fold his arms across his chest in the power stance. He does not even wear black but instead olive drab cargo pants, a long-sleeved tee, and a sports cap. A wan smile crosses his face occasionally. He does not wish to come across as being taken by his own authority, and yet authority is part of his job—indeed its requirement. Rather than being overtly physical, he lets his voice carry weight. One gets a sensation as he says “sorry” to people not on the list that he is speaking with a lower pitch than normal and that if one were a friend whom he met while running errands

in the afternoon, his greeting would sound quite different. Perhaps this vocal control is due to years in acting classes. If so, he displays no bitterness that the stairwell leading to the Spider Club is the stage where he puts his skills to use.

The Spider Club is the latest big thing in nighttime Hollywood. It is located on the second floor of a building with Spanish colonial windows that stands across from the Capitol Records tower on Vine. You might remember the spot as the Palace, the famed concert hall where everyone from Frank Sinatra to Snoop Dogg has played; today it is called the Avalon, one in a chain owned by John Lyons and Steve Adelman,

who first made their mark by refurbishing the fabled Limelight, a Manhattan church turned nightclub. The impresarios have a business plan for the Avalon: They book all the acts through Clear Channel, the broadcasting and concert-promoting behemoth, and have positioned the Spider Club as host to a succession of postscreening parties, fashion shows, and Industry bashes. In addition to being nightclub owners, Lyons and Adelman also see themselves as restaurateurs. The Spider Club, which might be thought of as something akin to the Avalon's VIP section, has a chef, menus, food runners, and all the accoutrements of a restaurant. It was the wish to experience this mutation of dance club and diner, party pad and nest, that found me among the supplicants at the foot of the club's stairs.

Gaining access involves negotiating a series of hurdles and tests from which few can emerge unscathed. It begins when you attempt to make a reservation. In ten calls to 323-462-8270 at different times of the day and evening, I never got a person on the line and only once heard an answering machine voice say, “Memory is full.” Having the

SPIDER CLUB

1735 N. Vine St.
323-462-8270



DETAIL WORK: Chef Keith Silverton oversees the Spider Club kitchen

phone number—the insider's number—is a form of currency in L.A., and calling a number that doesn't pick up is proof one isn't even C-list material. Listening to the endless ringing, I started to picture the phone I was calling as having a sign blinking on its receiver that read SCHNOOK LINE, DON'T TOUCH. When I headed to the club anyway, I found that the parking system on either side of the building was opportunistic. The attendant asked me for \$15 to park, but when I balked, he lowered it to ten. Whether people get into the Spider Club is not his concern, and it leaves a bitter taste in a person's mouth to pull back into traffic having paid a few bills for a total of ten minutes in a parking lot.

HAVE BEEN THAT person who was not on the list for the night, who was not deemed suitable material for the evening, who was rejected at the door and all but pointed back to my car, but I have also been the recipient of that midnight mitzvah, that longed-for nod, which sent me up the stairs to the room that, after enough time logged under the club's yellow-and-black awning, I had come to think of as a promised land.

Perhaps Lyons and Adelman don't trust their instincts outside of business affairs, because they've taken on as creative direc-

tor (which must be the new name for "front man") Donovan Leitch Jr., sometime actor and indie director and the son of the man who sang the '60s hits "Mellow Yellow" and "Hurdy Gurdy Man." His vision for the Spider Club is that of a Moroccan retreat. The associations this niche conjures run from *The Paris Review* to *Paris-Match*, from Paul and Jane Bowles, the renowned Tangier-based writers, to sometime Marrakech refugees Yves Saint-Laurent and Catherine Deneuve. However, because of Leitch's musical heritage, I am tempted to say this version of the Moroccan retreat is anchored in the Brian Jones—era Rolling Stones, who collaborated with the master musicians of Jajouka, a village in the Rif Mountains. The tiles, arches, and banquettes might indeed put you in mind of a room where Keith and Mick may have banged the tam-tam, but there's nothing trancelike about the service, which can start out overtly hostile. To my request for a Scotch from the well the waitress answered, "We start at Glenlivet." When I asked the chef's name, she flared a nostril and replied, "I just call him Keith." Fair enough, I thought, finally someone not taken in by the hype of the place. The bouncer with the Boy Scout manners, the

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trippy decor, all the fake laid-back shtick of the Spider Club comes to a screeching halt, thankfully, when you're placing your order with a character as hard-boiled as a Jim Thompson grifter in a jam.

"Keith" is Keith Silverton, who last worked at Dominick's, the storied West Hollywood spot best known for good burgers and martinis. Here he has fashioned a bistro-ish menu. It's a short docu-

ment, which might make you think it offers nothing but bar food. Reading it, however, the eye is caught by words like *Dijonnaise* and *au poivre*. A classicist here? Yes. And one who follows through on the plate. The level of care and delicacy he brings to his duties is pleasing. Both the baked goat cheese and the crab cakes are crunchy outside and warm and creamy inside and placed on a few sprightly salad greens. The macaroni and cheese has the ideal consistency. Capers give the sauce of the chicken Dijonnaise a good acidic touch. Tuna is cut in an interesting way, not as the usual steak but in long strips known as *aiguillettes*, which are dusted with just the right amount of cracked pepper. Silverton also does a fine steak, charred and served with french fries, and miniature burgers in small brioche rolls.

I would have liked a wider selection of garnishes. A vegetable or two might be in order. And I suspected that the carrot cake was bought. Despite those reservations, this is solid cooking, not an attempt to force gastronomy on the already-loaded web that is the Spider Club but the work of a chef who clearly understands that details such as crispness, temperature, and freshness are what make a dish work.

DOES ANYONE have any interest in the food, though? Not that young man scrolling through his messages by the bar. Not the table of young women furtively smoking. Not the couple reclining on the wrought-iron bed by the tiny dance floor. As individuals they seem preoccupied with anything but what the kitchen might be offering; as a group they render their own disinterested indictment of the place. A restaurant requires more than menus and a chef—it needs customers who engage with the food before them. A busboy who refills glasses and the runners who bring the plates from the kitchen do their best to maintain the pretense that this is a restaurant, but for that to be true requires the cooperation of the diners. Lacking this, the Spider Club is revealed for what it is: neither restaurant, supper club, nor nightclub but a blank space, an amorphous venue fashioned for an evening to suit the demands of the publicity-generated event.

It is hard to head back into the night after a dinner at the Spider Club without thinking about what Hollywood is quickly becoming. The place was always as much an idea as an actual city. Those who looked for it, however, always found something; a moment of discovery that may have been both as fleeting and resonant as a hot wind blowing down the Cahuenga Pass. The new version of Hollywood traffics in its name like no version has before. Cleaned-up, sporting mixed-use developments and national-brand stores on its prime intersections, it is well on its way to becoming our incarnation of the new Times Square—no longer a place with a theme but, and this is the crucial distinction, a themed place.

Still, Hollywood will occasionally uncoil a knowing finger and part the curtains, allowing us into that realm of structured emotion on which its fame was based. The last time I left the Spider Club, a band called Story of the Year had just finished a concert at the Avalon. Nice name, I thought. One you could easily pin on a biting screenplay by Ben Hecht. I walked with some of the audience down Vine toward the Boulevard, and at the traffic light we stopped. On the opposite sidewalk a large wreath of flowers stood above the star of an actor who had

died that day. Wisping around it was that thick marine air of nighttime Los Angeles some mistake for fog. I crossed the street and paused long enough to see who had sent the flowers. It was Johnny Grant, keeper of the pavement's stars, the man charged with kneeling for photos with new inductees in the day and with honoring in the darkness the fallen soldiers of an art created by sprockets, frames, and light. **L.A.**