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Tasting Rao's: America's Toughest Restaurant Reservation

BY: Forbes Magazine

Trendy restaurants come and go, generating lots of media buzz and remaining impossibly crowded and difficult to get into immediately after opening. But then, usually just a few months later, the fickle hip crowd moves on to another new find and the place suddenly has too many empty tables.

However there are a few timeless classics, restaurants so eternally popular that it is always tricky to get a reservation, even though they have been open for years or decades.

But then there is Rao's, in a class all its own. It is simply the single toughest restaurant reservation to get in the United States, bar none.

This East Harlem New York institution is just barley what would be considered a public restaurant, more akin to a private dining club, and it is notoriously difficult to get into, even for the most socially wired New Yorkers. I spoke to a high-profile, well-known, well-liked New York billionaire who told me he is "lucky if I can get in there once a year." They routinely turn away newspaper critics from as high up the food chain as the New York Times – in fact I don't know another food writer who has eaten there (Google it, you won't see any modern reviews). The only shortcuts to a table are to be one of the Empire State's highest elected officials or a beloved New York sports icon, preferably from one of the city's two baseball teams. Rao's has long been popular with governors and the city's mayors, including Bloomberg. The simple truth is that Derek Jeter can get a table at Rao's but you can't.

The original New York restaurant's single 10-table dining room has been recreated in Las Vegas - twice!

What makes Rao's so exclusive is the fact that while it was once just another neighborhood Italian joint with a popular local following, it got too popular for its own good, and the owners decided that rather than turn away longtime customers who could not act fast enough to get a reservation, they would dispense tables on a subscription basis, not much different from timeshares or fractional ownership, minus the equity. Another way to look at it is like a partial season ticket plan to a stadium. Regulars might have their table one Wednesday night per month, or if they really love Rao's once a week (among their many idiosyncrasies, they are famously closed on weekends). While New York celebrities like Woody Allen have famously held standing tables, most of the customers are far from famous, they are just loyal and were in at the right place at the right time. On the occasions I have eaten there, I have never seen a celebrity, other than in the dozens of photos of customers on the wall. Instead I have seen repeat guests who are regular folks from the suburbs who make their regular trips to the single small dining room at Rao's a highlight of their social schedule.

Rao's has many other quirks: there is no menu and no wine list, they only take cash, and while they have signature standards like their ultra-light and fluffy meatballs, lemon chicken, and seafood salad, they are basically Italian grandmothers who will make whatever you want. "Veal? You want that roasted, fried, sautéed? What kind of pasta? What kind of sauce? You like marinara? Wine? How about a nice Chianti?" Far from fancy, Rao's is homey and hearty and has reliably good fresh food, but it is not breaking culinary boundaries – it's the timeless atmosphere and camaraderie folks come for, starting with the traditional pre-dinner cocktail served a tiny stand up bar, always by longtime bartender Nick "The Vest," named for his collection of over a thousand vests, and even the most regular Rao's customer never sees a repeat performance. New eateries boast of their "mixologists," but Rao's is perfectly content with its classic old school bartender, and customers love Nick.

RAOS:

The huge but ultra-light meatballs, always served as a pair, are a Rao's signature dish at both locations.

Okay, realistically, unless you are among a very small group of properly connected people, or buy a table at a charity auction (just the right to eat here, without food, has gone for thousands of dollars), you cannot get into Rao's and there is no secret I can tell you that will work. You can try calling but most of the time they don't answer and when they do the answer is always no.

So how can you taste the food and experience the atmosphere of the famous place?

Go to Las Vegas. I just returned from a dinner at the Rao's outpost in Caesars Palace, and was pleasantly surprised. It is the real deal, owned by the same two cousins who own the original, not franchised to a third party, and one of the key members of the family is always here making sure the place runs smoothly. They take turns spending a week at a time in Sin City, with the same attention to detail and the same classic recipes. They even built two full-size recreations of the 10-table New York dining room, complete with the same pictures on wall, and these are called the "Rao's Rooms" in Las Vegas which is a little incongruous since the whole place is Rao's but never mind that, ask to be seated in one, unless you want to eat outside, which is not an option in the Big Apple (the Vegas one even has an outdoor bocce court).