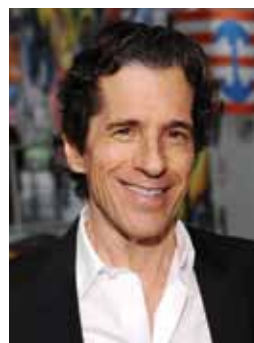




# WHEN I WAS AT MORTON'S

Five years after the fabled eatery closed, Michael Ovitz, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Sherry Lansing and just about every other power broker tell tales about the countless deals, dish and gossip (way yummier than anything you could order) born from those 19 tables **BY SAM WASSON**

**F**OR NEARLY 30 YEARS (BUT especially during the 1980s), Hollywood's big, big money — its new, blockbuster money — converged, with era-defining consistency, on the corner of Robertson and Melrose at Morton's, which Peter Morton opened in 1979 as a grown-up alternative to his Hard Rock Cafes. Come 7 p.m., nowhere else saw as much action: Power was spread out in Manhattan, but in Hollywood in those days, it resided in only one place. With all the deals discussed over those (only) 19 tables — including Eddie Murphy's historic \$15 million deal with Paramount in 1987 (see sidebar) — it's a wonder Morton didn't hire a security guard and call his place an agency. From being one of only three CAA-approved expense-account restaurants to the place where even the maitre d' was a star (Rick Cicetti was cast by Larry Gordon and Joel Silver as a security guard in *Die Hard*), Morton's pulled in an entire universe of movers and shakers — including Barry Diller, Ron Meyer, Alan Horn, Scott Rudin, former Columbia Pictures head Dawn Steel, former Time Warner CEO Steve Ross and former 20th Century Fox owner



**THE OWNER** "I was proud to be part of the community," says Peter Morton of being the discreet host to a generation of Hollywood power players. Morton is the son of Arnie Morton, builder of the Morton's The Steakhouse franchise, and father of Harry Morton, of Pink Taco fame.

Marvin Davis — as well as celebrities (even Jack Nicholson felt comfortable eating at the bar alone). Unassuming on the outside, it had the industry juice to be the signoff to *Spy*'s biting Hollywood columns by the pseudonymous Celia Brady ("See you Monday night at Morton's"), a central location for Julia Phillips' roman-a-bile *You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again* (the writer was banned after it came out) and the subject of New Hollywood lore: It is said that when a man suffered a heart attack and was carried out on a gurney, nobody noticed amid all the dealmaking.

In 1994, when it moved across the street to the intersection's southeast corner, Morton's transformed from commissary to the epicenter of glamour, becoming known as the site of *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter's Oscar party (see sidebar.) While the old guard bemoaned the less clubby feel, the music biz also moved in, rounding out the restaurant's twilight years. Jennifer Lopez threw her engagement party (to Cris Judd) there in 2001, and in 2002, Sony held its post-Grammys bash at Morton's, with Celine Dion, Tony Bennett and Destiny's Child attending. By the time Morton's closed in 2007, says actor-writer Ben Stein, "It had passed its time by five or six years at least." More than

20 regulars, all interviewed separately — including Paul Schrader, Jerry Weintraub, Lynda Obst and, before he died, Richard Zanuck — tell the story.

**STEVE TISCH, PRODUCER** When Peter started construction — it was originally an old interior decor showroom — my offices were literally one building south. I introduced myself to Peter one day in the parking lot.

**BEN STEIN** Peter had already started the Hard Rock, and he knew the powerful people.

**TISCH** It was a hit right away. Word-of-mouth spread. We knew this was going to be our version of The Brown Derby in the '40s or Chasen's in the '50s.

**JOHN PTAK, PRODUCER/FORMER AGENT** You could smell the butter on the wall at Chasen's.

**LINDA LICHTER, ATTORNEY** By 1976, the old places were full of old men in plaid pants and white belts with comb-overs.

**PTAK** When cable television, TV movies and home video started, new money came to town. *Star Wars*, *Jaws* and *Close Encounters* caused people to take notice. The financial world figured out there was money to be made.

**TONY BILL, PRODUCER-DIRECTOR** People stopped wanting to eat crappy commissary food.

**CAROL WOLPER, SCREENWRITER** Right around when *Risky Business* was becoming David Geffen's first hit movie, suddenly Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, Eric Eisner, president of The David Geffen Co., producers Steve Tisch and Jon Avnet and Peter Guber — all these guys were starting to hit. They could hardly keep enough Cristal in stock.

**MICHAEL OVITZ** You had Dan Tana's, which wasn't that popular, by the way; Le Dome, which was a big music crowd;

Scandia, which was a celebratory place; The Palm; the Polo Lounge; Il Giardino. For lunch, there was Ma Maison. **LICHTER** Orson Welles had a corner table at Ma Maison every single day. People would come in just to say hello. Hello, hello, hello, hello.

**DAVID FREEMAN, SCREENWRITER-NOVELIST** He was gigantic then, in flowy caftans and always with his little dog.

**PTAK** New Hollywood needed to be cool and eat well.

**RUTH REICHL, FOOD WRITER/EDITOR** Chasen's was about stars, Morton's was about power.

**LYNDA OBST, PRODUCER** The stars would go with their agents or producers or studio heads, like Rick Nicita would be there with Goldie, Dawn would take Stallone.

**ROBIN SWICORD, SCREENWRITER** Morton's was discreet. It was nothing to look at from the outside. You could drive right by and not notice it, which I suppose was intentional.

**TODD THURMAN, MAITRE D'** It was very California. Pink tablecloths, leather and rattan. Palm trees.

**TISCH** Pretty much from every seat, you could see everyone in the restaurant.

**REICHL** That was sort of the point, right?

**OVITZ** The tables were spaced nicely, so you could talk.

**STEIN** That was conducive to business.

**PAM MORTON, PETER'S SISTER, WHO RAN THE RESTAURANT FOR 20 YEARS** People loved the tuna sashimi, the lamb loin, the Morton's chicken. I don't want to give out the recipe.

**REICHL** Morton's was saying: "It's OK to want chicken and french fries. We're going to serve the kind of stuff you wouldn't drive across town for. This is just for us."

**STEIN** The attraction was not the food.

**TISCH** But that's what made it feel comfortable.

**IRVING AZOFF, MUSIC MANAGER** It was the industry commissary. **PTAK** I think that Morton's was the first restaurant to legitimize noise. You could barely hear the person across from you sometimes, but noise was good at Morton's because it meant action.

**STEIN** I remember thinking, "This place is too noisy, but there were so many cute girls." There used to be a lot of really, really, really sexy girls in sexy outfits hanging out at the bar. They knew where the money was.

**SHERRY LANSING, FORMER PARAMOUNT CHIEF** No one wore ties. It was relaxed.

**PAUL SCHRADER, WRITER-DIRECTOR** It was very relaxed — if you can describe a den of backstabbers and thieves as relaxed.

**OBST** It was bussing cheeks, it was chitchat. It wasn't really gossip unless Julia Phillips was there, and she was often there with her stimulants running from table to table. She was definitely a pot stirrer. In those days, it was a social town, and this was a social and business night, which is so shocking because that doesn't exist now. Now people in power are terribly reclusive. I mean, if Jeffrey Katzenberg didn't talk to you, you would feel terrible. But Jeffrey would talk to you — once you were in, you were in.



The original Morton's (pictured in 1991) even eschewed a street valet.

## What People Did At Morton's Besides Eat And Gossip



Baldwin and Basinger in 1998.

### MAKE DEALS

One of the most historic was Eddie Murphy's \$15 million, five-picture deal — catapulting the actor to the top of the industry food chain — with Paramount's then-head of production Michael Eisner in 1987.

### DATE

Part of Morton's lore is that it was the site of Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger's first date (she was 45 minutes late) and where Ellen DeGeneres and Anne Heche fell in love at first sight (at the 1997 *Vanity Fair* Oscar party, one month before DeGeneres came out).

### SHOWBOAT

Whether getting a new job, a new deal or a new company, Morton's was the place to be seen and celebrate. Case in point: It was Larry Tisch's obligatory stop as the new president and CEO of CBS in 1986.

### SAVE FACE

Or attempt to. After Allan Carr's disastrously produced Oscars show in 1989 featuring Snow White and Rob Lowe, he strode into Morton's with bravado, but unfortunately, he was shunned. Some diners turned away from his table and some extended their lunches, hoping the producer would leave first. As former *Hollywood Reporter* columnist Robert Osborne recalled in Robert Hofer's Carr biography *Party Animals*: "No one wanted to talk to Allan Carr. I hadn't previously seen that so dramatically displayed by so many people in Hollywood as that day at Morton's — like they'd catch something, like it was a disease."



Carr

### HAVE YOUR MEMORIAL

In 1996, the memorial for Don Simpson — the larger-than-life producing partner of Jerry Bruckheimer — was among the most coveted invitation-only events at the restaurant that year. Barry Diller, Michelle Pfeiffer, Will Smith and Warren Beatty were among those who packed in to honor Simpson, who died of a drug overdose.

**PAULA WAGNER, PRODUCER** I had to work my way into Morton's at first. At first you go with some senior executives or senior agents, and then one day you go, "I've arrived."

**RICHARD ZANUCK, PRODUCER** Nobody wants to be someplace more than when they figure they can't get in.

**OVITZ** It was a club that wasn't a club. You felt like you were part of something.

**LANSING** You'd be sitting at your table finishing your conversation, having coffee, and then somebody would come up and join you, just like that. We were all friendly with each other. It wasn't as corporate yet.

**MIKE MEDAVOY, PRODUCER** It was private.

**FREEMAN** If you were in love with your agent, then yes, Morton's was romantic.

**OVITZ** Did I do business there? Oh my God, yes. I never went to Morton's for any other reason except to do business.

**SCHRADER** Whenever someone got a promotion, a green light or a studio deal, Morton's was the first place they would make an appearance.

**BILL** All of us in our business suffer from the out-of-sight, out-of-mind syndrome. That's why everybody has a publicist. Showing up at Morton's was like placing an ad for yourself in the trades.

**SWICORD** In the 1980s, studios were black holes, dense with development projects. A recently fired executive called up every writer and producer he knew and insisted that they take him to lunch at Morton's every day to advertise to both ex and future employers that 1) he was still in the business and 2) he could still get a table at Morton's. This seemed to be the sum total of his re-employment strategy.

**STEIN** There would be nights when every head of every studio and every head of every network were there.

**WAGNER** Taking your client there, he or she could interact with studio heads. Or your director client could see actors. Movies got put together that way.

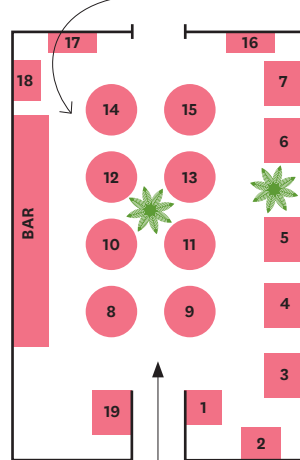
**PTAK** There can be a lot of pressure in a formal meeting. People aren't as relaxed or comfortable as they are in a restaurant. Morton's allowed for a series of four- or five-minute meetings that ended with, "It's nice to see you." In and out, and no big deal, like speed dating. And suddenly you're a friend because you're in this place, so it's OK to call because you met at Morton's last Monday.

**SCHRADER** I was there the night David Begelman [the producer who embezzled money from Columbia Pictures during the 1970s] showed up in the midst of his difficulties.

### Power Seating

Getting the right table was critical—and six mattered. "The closer to the front the table was, the more powerful," recalls Ben Stein. Adds Lynda Obst, "Of course, you could only be on the right side."

**SIBERIA**  
Woe to those placed behind the palm trees. "If you were there, you were in bad shape," says former maitre d' Todd Thurman. Some (including Barbara Walters), though, liked the privacy afforded in the back.



**TABLES 1 AND 2**  
Prime spots for Jeffrey Katzenberg, Michael Ovitz, Paul Schrader and Julia Phillips. From there, "you could see the whole restaurant," says Thurman.

**TABLES 3 AND 4**  
A power move was getting a reservation for just two at these coveted four-tops.

**TABLE 5**  
While Jerry Weintraub claimed this table as his own, Lew and Edie Wasserman also were fixtures.

**TABLE 9**  
The only A-list round table, favored by Marvin and Barbara Davis. Because the hefty Marvin required a bigger chair, his driver always brought in one of Davis' own wingbacks. "When people saw that chair, everybody knew he was coming in," says Thurman. "If it wasn't there, everybody was like, 'Where are the Davises tonight?'"

**THURMAN** A lot of nights you'd step back and go, "Wow, look who's here. This is unbelievable."

**STEIN** The only star I remember seeing there on a consistent basis was Stallone. Probably the most haunting memory of a famous person was one rainy horrible night when hardly anyone was there. Sinatra was sitting there with his wife and two bodyguards and not a single person [in his party] said a single word the whole night.

**JEFF WALD, FORMER MANAGER** The thing that sticks out for me is producer Barry Josephson and Anna Nicole Smith having dinner, and the two of them making out at this very visible table. His tongue was so far down her throat. She was having fun, and Barry was the man. It made him a stud for a minute.

**STEIN** People were extremely concerned about which tables they got. There was very much a hierarchy.

**WOLPER** People used to get hung up on, "Are you in the big booth up front?" Steve Ross [former Time Warner CEO] preferred a table in the back, which was sort of cool because when you've got that much power, you don't want to be in the first booth.

**WEINTRAUB** The best table was *my* table. It was strategically placed right in the middle of the restaurant. It had a plaque placed over it that read, "Jerry Weintraub's table." That plaque kept disappearing, and we kept making more and screwing them back onto the wall. There must have been 50 of them that we ultimately remade. Twenty-five years ago on my 50th birthday, I had a fantastic birthday party. My invitation said, "Don't come without a gift." So I got terrific presents including cars and Rolexes. The best present of all was from Frank Yablans, who was chairman of the board of Paramount. He gave me a huge box with a big ribbon. When I opened it, there were all the stolen plaques.

**WOLPER** Don Simpson's memorial was at Morton's on a Monday night. Jerry Bruckheimer had organized the whole thing. They had a list, as you would imagine, and it was like a club that night. If you weren't on the list, you didn't get in. This person wanted to get in, the sort of a girl who was a dilettante who wanted to get involved in the business. She actually snuck in through the kitchen. She crashed his memorial, and somehow I think he would have approved of it. Don was a guy from Alaska, and he had to do whatever it took to make it in Hollywood. She was obsessed to get into that service to network. That's Morton's.



Marvin Davis and his philanthropist wife, Barbara, held court at a central table in Morton's in 1986. Recalls Barbara: "Everyone in the movie business was there. We loved it."

**JACKIE COLLINS, AUTHOR** The problem with memorials in this town, everyone wants to be seen at them.

**ALAN LADD JR., PRODUCER** You always knew where you stood, and they were always up to the minute. One night, Frank Yablans had the hot table, and the next Monday night, I was given the hot table, and they put Frank in Siberia. It could get pretty scary.

**THURMAN** We read *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety* every day. We got it delivered to our doorstep and read it cover to cover.

**FREEMAN** I remember a waiter once congratulated me on a deal—before I told my wife I made it. My wife was at the table.

**BARBARA BOYLE, PRODUCER** Pam Morton, Peter's sister, was the crucial element. She was a guard and goddess, polite to everyone. She brought a kind of tranquility when you

walked in. No pushing and shoving with Pam.

**COLLINS** Peter was more behind the scenes. People would love it when he did stop by their table. Maybe he would come over, maybe he wouldn't.

**LANSING** Certain restaurants, part of the trick is to make you feel small. Certain maitre d's do that. Not Pam. Not at Morton's.

**JEFFREY KATZENBERG, DREAMWORKS ANIMATION CEO** For 10 years, Michael Eisner and I had dinner at Morton's every Monday night, just the two of us—we did our business there for a decade. To be more precise, the 10 years that I was at Disney until I was fired. Then we stopped

having dinner at Morton's.

**OVITZ** Monday was the night. It was an odd thing. I really don't quite understand how it happened. People just started showing up.

**WAGNER** If you were there on Monday nights, you could do more business than you could all day.

**STEIN** The restaurant was not open on Sundays, and they used to call Friday and Saturday nights "Valley night."

**PTAK** So then the restaurant goes across the street ...

**LADD** The second Morton's didn't have the same attraction. They didn't have Monday nights. It wasn't a little club anymore.

**FREEMAN** I think the new room was too big and spread out.

**WAGNER** I was an agent then at CAA, and let me tell you, it was a different business. We had car phones, but we didn't have cell phones. So deals were made with a lot more face time over lunches and dinners. That's not done so much anymore. Now phone business is everything.

**LANSING** People don't even phone anymore! It's e-mail. "Is Brad Pitt interested? No? OK, thank you."

**WAGNER** Those were the days of the handshake. Your word and handshakes meant more than any piece of paper. If an agent said you have a deal, you had a deal.

**LADD** At that time, it was really a people's business. Hollywood was a community where everybody knew everybody. Now everybody hates everybody.

**FREEMAN** When the place closed in 2007, I remember hearing Peter Morton was getting held up by the landlord for a preposterous sum.

**PAM MORTON** The last day was the 22nd of December, 2007. I remember [manager] Bernie Brillstein getting up and giving an impromptu speech. How wonderful it had been. For all these years.

**OVITZ** It hasn't been replaced here by anything that I know of. **VIII**



An Oscar party ballot book from 2006; a Morton's ashtrey.



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## VANITY FAIR AT MORTON'S

During the 1970s, the toughest ticket in town was agent Swifty Lazar's Oscar party at Spago. After Lazar died in 1993, both producer Steve Tisch and *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter had the same idea: continue the party, but at Morton's. "It was the seminal power restaurant in L.A.," says Carter, "and Monday was when the powerful assembled there. Oscar Night was on Mondays, so Morton's seemed a serendipitous choice."

Tisch and Carter combined forces, with A-listers increasingly clamoring to get in. Then, in 1996, Carter went solo. Recalls Tisch: "I was relieved. People would threaten, 'If you don't get me on the list, we won't do business.' It took a lot of the fun away."

The night's unique mix of power players and topical names was encapsulated by "watching Monica Lewinsky and Sir Ian McKellen chatting it up" at an early party, says the editor. Another year, he says, "Courtney Love complained to me that her manager was stuck at the door. 'Graydon, you've got to let him in. He's got my money, my keys and my drugs.' I told her to take it up with VF's Sara Marks, who runs the party. When Sara didn't accommodate her, she stood before a wall of cameras and said, 'I've got an announcement. Sara Marks is a c—!' " Famous for its tight guest policy, the party still is the place to be seen (and see a sea of golden statuettes) on Oscar Night.

- 1 In 2005, Oscar party celebrant Dennis Hopper played red-carpet chronicler.
- 2 Kevin Spacey (left) and Nicolas Cage, with then-wife Patricia Arquette, in 1996.
- 3 Ellen DeGeneres (left) with then-partner Anne Heche in 1999; the pair met at VF's party two years earlier.
- 4 John Waters (left) and Jake Gyllenhaal in 2006.
- 5 In 2002, Angela Bassett (left) and Oprah Winfrey.
- 6 Matt Damon (left) and Ben Affleck in 2000.



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