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The most dimly lit secret in Chicago nightlife is tucked away like a dollar in a bustier at the O'Hare Hilton Hotel. The Gaslight Club has been on the ground floor of the hotel since it opened in 1973 next to the busy airport.

It is no flight of fashion.

The main dining room is bordered by red Victorian wallpaper and paintings of cabaret dancers. Leggy "Gaslight Girls" are from Bulgaria and Macedonia. They wear fishnet stockings, black corsets and look like Can-Can girls. A framed picture of vaudeville comic Jimmy Durante with Gaslight Girls hangs on a wall above the piano. He is smiling.

The Gaslight Club remains true to its roots. It was the prototype for the Playboy Club, which has made a comeback in Las Vegas and is now eyeing Mexico and Miami Beach.

"I had a key to the Gaslight," Playboy founder Hugh Hefner said in a recent interview from his Los Angeles mansion. "And we ran an article [in 1959] on the Gaslight. It got a positive response from our readers wanting to know how they could become members. So a Playboy Club seemed like a charming idea with no notion with what it was going to lead to." Hef also expanded on the Gaslight Girl outfits, adding white tails and ears for

his Playboy Club bunnies.

Chicago advertising executive Burton Browne founded the original Gaslight Club in 1953. A dead ringer for Harry Caray with thick black glasses, a bawdy smile and white hair, Browne wanted to recreate a 1920s speakeasy with Dixieland jazz, mysterious slots in the doors and servers dressed in flapper outfits.

The Gaslight Club at O'Hare is pretty much still that way.

A backroom "Speakeasy" that was used for cabaret shows has been remodeled into a dining room. The menu features the Gaslight Steak (prime bone-in rib chop, \$39) and jumbo shrimp cocktail with Gaslight's signature cocktail sauce (\$12).

Browne's first club was a tiny Rush Street joint that featured a back bar inherited from the Everleigh Club brothel (circa 1910). Within a year, the club outgrew its space and moved to a bigger location at 13 E. Huron.

Big shots wandering around the hotel still find their way into the O'Hare club. A couple of weeks ago, singer-actor Frank Stallone (Sly's brother) had dinner and Bon Jovi drummer Tico Torres spent a Valentine's night at the Gaslight. Foodie Rachael Ray recently had a drink at the club while waiting for an appointment.

Gaslight Clubs were private, and members were given gold-plated keys. At its peak, there were 26,000 members. Four Gaslight Clubs thrived in Chicago, one in Paris, Beverly Hills and Washington, D.C. When one opened in New York City in 1956, the in-house Gaslight Gazette headline proclaimed: "CHICAGO BRINGS CULTURE TO THE EAST." Elizabeth Taylor worked at the New York Gaslight that year while filming scenes for her Oscar-winning performance in "Butterfield 8."

Ranko "Ray" Dabizljevic is president of the last Gaslight Club in the United States. The Serbian native opened the O'Hare establishment. Dabizljevic, 56, leases the space from the Hilton Corporation. After more than 25 years as a members-only club, the Gaslight at O'Hare finally opened to the public after 9/11.

"There was nothing going on at the airport," Dabizljevic says before an early evening rush of businessmen. "Business was very slow. We're still under the radar. We don't get reviewed by Chicago newspapers. We were a private club for so many years people don't know about us."

The worldly nature of the Gaslight Club at O'Hare is out of this world. You can drive or

take the L to the restaurant and pretend you're embarking on a distant journey. Hostess Elaine Su is from China. Singer/Gaslight Girl Julie Peterson is from Downstate Pontiac, along Route 66.

"Maybe this is because we are at an international airport," Dabizljevic suggests in his gritty Serbian accent. "They find us through friends. Julie was singing in New York and one of my customers told her to come. Most of our customers are travelers coming through the airport. We only have a few regulars."

The house drink is a "Gaslight Lemon Drop" flamed with Sambuca. It is served by bartender Teri Lynn. She has been a Gaslight Girl since 1979, when the club operated out of the fifth floor of the Palmer House. That Gaslight closed in 1988.

"I'm from the South [Pikesville, Ky.], and when I went into the Palmer House and saw the lobby ..." Lynn says during a break. "Oh, my! I always wanted to be a Playboy bunny. I was cleaning house for this lady and she said, 'Playboy bunny? Why wouldn't you want to be a Gaslight Girl?' I started at the front desk and moved up to waitressing. Back then, people said I looked like [Playboy bunny/Hefner gal pal] Barbi Benton."

The Longhorn Room adjacent to the open kitchen features vintage photos of Gaslight Girls. Dabizljevic is in the center of one 1986 photograph that was used as the backdrop of a Gottlieb pinball machine manufactured in Chicago. Lynn is also in a 1986 photograph of Gaslight Girls that hangs in a Longhorn Room booth.

Perhaps the most magnificent characteristic of the Gaslight at O'Hare is the huge crystal chandelier that Browne imported from a German castle. It is the size of a large meteor. Dabizljevic looks up at the art work and says, "It was in pieces. We put it together when the club opened. We strung all the crystals together. There's lots of chains behind it."

Few staff members know of the history behind the Gaslight Club:

†In 1974, the live LP "Bill Bachman Plays (and plays and plays and plays and plays)" was recorded at the Gaslight O'Hare by trumpet player Bachman. A 1961 Gaslight Club studio LP featured trumpet player Joe Kelly, who became known as one of the best racetrack buglers in America for his work at Arlington Park.

During the mid-1980s, former Playboy playmate Jo Collins managed the Gaslight Club at the Palmer House. Parts of the Paul Newman-Tom Cruise smash "The Color of Money" were filmed at the Palmer House Gaslight.

The club even had its own Reader's Digest-size magazine for members. A 15th anniversary edition published in 1968 features a throwdown with Bears owner George Halas, Sen. Everett Dirksen and Ray Bolger (the Scarecrow in "The Wizard of Oz") at an invitation-only "Anti-Superstition Party" held on Friday, Sept. 13, at the Gaslight Club, 13 E. Huron. Members had to duck under 13 ladders to gain entry.

That type of fun just doesn't exist in the 21st century.

Violeta Dimova, 25, of Macedonia says, "This club has been here for 30 years and we still have customers who come from back in the time. That's a rare thing to see in other bars." Peterson, 29, has worked at the restaurant for a year. "You hear a bit of history you wouldn't know," she says. "One time, we had a guy come in whose father had key No. 11. People have connections to this."

Peterson sings jazz and show tunes with piano player Billy Pierce (not the White Sox legend) and also as a singing server.

"It's not an open-mike place," says Peterson, who has a master's degree in opera performance from the Boston Conservatory. "But we do have songs people like to sing along to. The Billy Joel, Elton John stuff. [Neil Diamond's] 'Sweet Caroline' earlier in the evening."

Pierce has been playing piano in Chicago area joints for 50 years. He has been at the Gaslight O'Hare on and off for 23 of those years. "You can be eclectic," he says during a break. "Someone will be in from Texas and they like country. Someone from New York wants to hear show tunes. I can play ragtime. The 1970s are big; 1980s, too."

Drew is a 48-year-old west suburban resident who works in the insurance industry. He is off in a corner with an open briefcase and piles of paperwork. He declines to disclose his last name. He says, "I've been coming here a long time. It's a place to wait out some traffic. It's a throwback. It's a sanctuary."

So, what happened?

"I'll tell you what happened," Dabizljevic answers. "In the late '80s and '90s, this era was going down. People didn't enjoy the Roaring Twenties. Now, people walk in and they're impressed. Look at the Playboy Clubs. They're all gone and now they're coming back. And their era was after ours. I'd love to open up another Gaslight."

In the background, Peterson is singing Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein's "Can't Help Loving That Man of Mine" to no one in particular. The Bulgarian women wonder aloud why all American women don't look like Pamela Anderson.

Dreams never go out of style at Chicago's hidden secret.