



# Musical Chairs

The exterior of the new Le Bilboquet

**On East 60th and East 61st Streets, hot restaurants are not only feeding, they're breeding and hopping around like hyperactive rabbits. It's a real estate game in which everyone wins.**

**I**n the heart of Midtown, East 60th and 61st Streets—lined with run-down old houses and full of hyperventilating vehicles coming off the Queensborough Bridge—have long been clogged arteries. But a perverse pleasure of New York is how quickly things can change. On the hinge joining the Upper East Side to Midtown, a glut of new and reborn beaneries is turning a dank corridor into a chic destination.

Le Bilboquet, formerly on East 63rd Street, just opened at 20 East 60th Street, just across the street from Philippe, (helmed by Philippe Chow, former chef at Mr. Chow on East 57th Street), which opened in late 2005. Nearby are Le Veau d'Or, the decades-old French legend, and the girls-in-pearls branch of Village stalwart Il Mulino, which landed late last year. And just across Madison, Daniel Boulud's long-time PR woman, Georgette Farkas, a member of a famous local clan and a Swiss- and French-trained chef herself, will soon open Rotisserie Georgette, next door to Rouge Tomato (est. 2008).

A block to the north, Fabio Granato and Vittorio Assaf's second link in the Serafina chain has moved into the former premises of their Japanese-French fusion Geisha, which will soon re-open a few doors down in a town house that previously housed their defunct Mexican restaurant, Mañana. Finally, following a gut renovation of

Serafina's former space, Jean Denoyer's La Goulue will open—in its third incarnation—in between Serafina and Geisha. “There were always restaurants here,” says Assaf, “but now we're becoming a restaurant destination.”

What's behind this restaurant roundelay? It's all about the real estate, baby.

Jean Denoyer opened the first La Goulue, named for a French can-can dancer, at 28 East 70th Street, in 1973, in a former ice cream parlor. When his 15-year lease and a five-year extension ran out, he found a new home on Madison at 65th Street, where La Goulue and its crowd of Upper East Side ladies, led by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, settled in for 17 more years. “Then everything went into storage and I was looking for a new space for four or five years,” says Denoyer. In 2009, he signed a lease for a town house on East 63rd Street, but, he continues, “There was too much adversity. There was a synagogue across the street. The rabbi gave us permission, but the congregation balked.” Denoyer sublet the space and kept looking.

Meantime, La Goulue had children. In 1978, one of Denoyer's managers, Jean-Francois Marchand, and a partner opened Le Relais two blocks south on Madison. An immediate hit with the era's so-called Eurotrash crowd, Le Relais remained until 1998. Some of its



The new Le Bilboquet by Carolina von Humboldt



The latest Serafina

“I WAS YOUNG, A LITTLE PUSHY, A LITTLE REBEL,” SAYS BILBOQUET’S DELGRANGE, SO WHEN NEIGHBOR RONALD O. PERELMAN OBJECTED TO A PLAN TO ADD SIDEWALK TABLES, DELGRANGE BEGAN GUNNING HIS MOTORCYCLE OUTSIDE PERELMAN’S WINDOWS.



Serafina's bar

denizens followed Marchand to Amaranth on East 62nd Street. Others decamped to Le Bilboquet, run by Philippe Delgrange, who’d started his haute hospitality career at the seminal Eurotrash disco Regine, and then Le Relais, where he stayed until opening the tiny Bilboquet in 1996.

“I had a clientele of young people who were completely wild,” he says. “I was young, a little pushy, a little rebel,” so when an across-the-street neighbor, financier Ronald O. Perelman, objected to a plan to add sidewalk tables, Delgrange began gunning his motorcycle outside Perelman’s windows, “I made him a little angry,” Delgrange admits, and Perelman pushed back.

But, “he was always a gentleman,” Delgrange allows. “When my daughter had an accident and almost died, he came across the street and offered to introduce her to his doctor.” Subsequently, the two men worked out a compromise—no street tables after 7 pm—and Perelman became a Bilboquet regular. When its lease ran out, “I went to see Ron,” Delgrange continues, “and he went out of his way to help me stay,” even trying to buy the building. But after a year and a half, Bilboquet shut its doors last Christmas.

Not only did Perelman then find Bilboquet’s new premises, in the former Dooney & Bourke shop in the Alliance Française building, he also invested (along with longtime Bilbo backer Eric Clapton and real estate man Steve Witkoff) in the new, much larger restaurant. That establishment has been decorated by Carolina von Humboldt with a nod to the old décor: “You can’t repeat the past,” the designer says, “but you can keep souvenirs, translate to the present and adapt to a new location.” The menu, by Ducasse-trained Julien Jouhannaud, “stays the same,” vows Delgrange.

A block north, the former Serafina—and future La Goulue—serves up city history as a side dish. In the 1900s, the building was part of a fine residential district—and in 1928 was sold to Frank

Longfellow Crocker, a lawyer and advisor to Harry Payne Whitney. Crocker subsequently represented Whitney’s widow when she sought custody of her niece, Gloria Vanderbilt. The property was then taken over by Walter Chrysler, who turned it into the Twenty-nine Club, an exclusive retreat founded in 1929 with only 29 members, who included Wall Streeters and industrialists as well as Crocker, who still lived next door. In 1947, the two adjacent houses were sold to Oleg and Igor Cassini, respectively a fashion designer and his gossip-columnist brother.

The crystal ball of real estate predicts that in future, these blocks will keep evolving. In recent months, Zeckendorf Development, builders of the über condos at 515 Park Avenue a half block east, and of 15 Central Park West, has announced plans to erect a 51-story residential tower on a parcel running from 60th to 61st streets behind Christ Church on Park Avenue. That project’s likely success portends future moves for Philippe and Il Mulino, which are housed in a contiguous row of four old town houses assembled by the late real estate tycoon Sol Goldman, and inherited, along with his nearly 250 other properties, by his son and daughter. Jerry Katzoff, co-owner of Il Mulino, says its lease gives his “very savvy” landlords “the opportunity to develop,” though he adds that he’s “comfortable” the status quo will hold “long enough.”

Whatever happens, the micro-neighborhood has blossomed because it boasts “a perfect convergence of three essentials”: says Georgette Farkas. First, she says, is the area’s “extremely-luxurious residential” character, starting from four blocks south, with the new 432 Park. Second are its “very luxurious retail” offerings. And third is “the most prestigious office space in Manhattan.

“This is where our customers live, work and shop,” Farkas says. “Where else in Manhattan do these things converge? My family was in real estate. It just seemed obvious to me.” ♦