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The Age of Opulence

For years, Midtown Manhattan has suffered from an image problem. What was once the nexus of the monied and pedigreed had devolved into a bland corporate pocket that native New Yorkers begrudgingly commuted to. But thanks to a stunning new hotel dripping with crystal and a restaurant scene reinterpreted by Ralph Lauren himself, a newfound energy is returning to these canyon-like avenues. Guy Trebay considers the island's most unlikely hot spot.

Skyline photograph by Hermann Landshoff / Photographs by Peden & Munk



CONSIDER, PLEASE, the butter curl. Regardless of where they are ranked in the restaurant universe, their accumulated stars or shout-outs on Yelp, most contemporary temples of gastronomy routinely send butter from kitchen to table packed in small ramekins and smoothed with a spatula, a virginal paper disk placed on top, symbolically guaranteeing sanctity.

There is nothing wrong with this, exactly, but stand back from the process and you see that it is institutional or, worse yet, suburban. It lacks chic. Or, anyway, that is how Charles Masson sees it. And Masson should know. As the *maitre d'* and the face of his family's fabled Midtown restaurant, La Grenouille, he spent decades analyzing and refining the elements of the dining ritual. Masson is a man who hunted down light bulbs in just the right hue to flatter the complexions of guests not necessarily in the first blush of youth. He is a stickler who can calculate with stopwatch precision the time required to transport a freshly napped *quenelle de brochet lyonnaise* from kitchen to table before the sauce starts to congeal (45 seconds). He is a consummate professional who—having given the matter thought—arrived at the conclusion that the most refined way to present butter to diners is in tight little volutes shaved off a block with the warmed edge of a spoon.

It sounds simple but isn't. For one thing, the butter must be of Goldilocks temperature, neither warm enough to melt nor cool enough to become brittle and shatter. Furthermore, preparing a butter curl is labor-intensive—and yet that is how Masson intends to have it done at Chevalier, a *brasserie de luxe* whose opening he has spent nearly two years preparing for, a debut which coincides with that of its landlord, the Baccarat Hotel, easily the most anticipated Midtown hotel to open in some time.

What, one might wonder, does a butter curl have to do with a development engineered by a man *Fortune* once called “the King of Hotels”? As even many

outside the hospitality business are aware, Barry Sternlicht is the gutsy real estate investor who, riding a bull market in the '90s, took over Hotel Investors Trust when it was on the verge of bankruptcy, renamed it Starwood, quadrupled its stock price, and created the W hotel chain, whose runaway success was largely predicated on the concept that, as *Fortune* noted, “hotel customers will pay a premium for style.” An amateur watercolorist and design stickler, Sternlicht is a man wealthy enough to note offhand in an interview that, after selling his stake in Starwood, he was permitted to take only five employees with him: his head of development, his design director, his assistant, his driver, and his pilot.

“I don't need to do this,” he said on a frigid morning in late winter, seated in the vaulted lounge of a project his Starwood Capital Group spent more than two years constructing. Built—and not without controversy—on the site of a beloved public library on West 53rd Street, the 50-story, 114-room Baccarat Hotel combines 31 floors of residences whose prices top out at \$60 million and 12 floors of hotel rooms that Sternlicht characterizes as state-of-the-art in luxury. “But I wanted to do something that wasn't out there, something the market hadn't seen.”

Concealed behind a 60-foot facade of corrugated crystal, the Baccarat is set mid-block off Fifth Avenue, overlooking the Museum of Modern Art and its roof garden, restoration of whose landscaping he underwrote himself. “This whole thing was a labor of love for me,” Sternlicht said, perhaps a tad disingenuously, given that a little over a week before its opening in March, he sold the real estate housing the hotel to a Chinese insurance company for more than \$230 million while retaining the rights to control the brand and its management. “Today, you have to do distinctive,” the hotelier added.

And clearly he is banking on an ability to woo consumers with his vision of what constitutes “distinctive” in a hotel where nightly rates start at \$799. Is distinctive a sleek rectangular box with a lively pattern of angled fenestration designed by the eminent architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings

Previous page, from left: The perennially arresting skyline of Midtown Manhattan—changing rapidly, as the area becomes the city's next real estate gold mine; a table set with lead crystal and objets in the Baccarat Hotel's Petit Salon, which also has a vintage gramophone and vinyl records. **Right:** A view of the Grand Salon, on the hotel's second floor—like all of the Baccarat, it was designed by Gilles & Boissier.







*Even the toothbrush glasses are Baccarat.
‘I suspect some Birkin bags will be a
little bit heavier when they leave the hotel.’*



& Merrill; or scores of interior elements referencing obliquely or overtly the alchemical nature of glassmaking and the storied history of Baccarat; or a subterranean “wellness center” with a 55-foot-pool; or an array of opulent materials, like Siberian marble, that are consistent with the expectations of a town whose burgeoning population of sheikhs and oligarchs has increasingly imparted to it aspects of a twenty-first-century imperium?

A discreet sign on the facade of the Baccarat Hotel—not far from a glass-encased fire hose set into a wall—reads “Maison Fondée en 1764.” That was the year Louis XV granted Prince Bishop Cardinal Louis-Joseph de Laval-Montmorency permission to establish a glassworks for the production of mirrors, stemware, and windowpanes in the Lorraine region of eastern France. The implication that the Baccarat Hotel itself is a venerable enterprise is a sly bit of marketing legerdemain. And it masks the more interesting fact that when Sternlicht purchased the centuries-old glassmaking firm, it was all but by accident. Baccarat was just one element of a portfolio of businesses Sternlicht acquired (the Crillon Hotel in Paris is another) when his Starwood Capital Group purchased a fusty French conglomerate called the Groupe du Louvre. Characteristic of his foresight was the decision to use the authentic though faded luster of a traditional French maker of crystal goblets to build a global hospitality brand.

To hear Sternlicht talk about it, integrating an ethos of master craftsmanship into hotel keeping is central to the new undertaking. It is not just a matter of scattering some glassware around behind a facade of prismatic glass. Easily the most successful part of the new hotel’s design, the street-facing wall was a concept its designers stumbled upon. “We were originally going to use a sort of wall of crystal beakers,” said Kemper Hyers, the senior vice president and head of design at Starwood Capital Group. “But when we saw the maquette, it looked like Dr. Frankenstein’s lab.”

The prismatic screen wall, a supersize version of a sample for another project Hyers happened upon in the offices of the hotel’s architects, is merely one of countless variations on the theme of glassmaking scattered throughout the hotel. Tables and custom-designed steel vitrines are used as dividers in the lobby, each stacked with the fantastical and

yet utilitarian crystal articles that emerge from the forges of Baccarat. Immense chandeliers, with their arms and swags and chains and lead crystal pendants, are suspended throughout the public spaces, some slung from ropes in a vaulted bar of wood left unfinished to evoke Jules Hardouin Mansart’s Grande Écuries, or stables, at Versailles.

Small glass cases outside each guest room house specially commissioned artworks—Cécile Meynier’s *Wedding Cake #4*, Gilles Barbier’s *Tender Foot’s Cocktail 2*, and others—each with a classic water goblet as its base. Inside the shiny, minimalist rooms and suites, designed by the French firm Gilles & Boissier (also responsible for the Mandarin Oriental in Marrakech), even the toothbrush glasses are Baccarat. “I suspect some Birkin bags will be a little bit heavier when they leave the hotel,” Hyers said.

YET FOR all its glittering surfaces and shiny aspirations, the Baccarat’s secret weapon in its assault on the luxury market may be something fundamental and, yes, French. “The connection is an old one,” Masson said, referring to a Franco-American intercourse that, as David McCullough points out in *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris*, dates at least to the Revolutionary War and picks up again after Henri Soule introduced New York to haute cuisine at the 1939 World’s Fair. (The restaurant that opened at the fair as Le Restaurant du Pavillon de France went on two years later to become Le Pavillon.)

After World War II, a wave of French refugees from fabled French kitchens began arriving on these shores. The restaurants they opened came to set new standards not only for culinary excellence but also for elegance of service and tone. One routinely encountered Babe Paley, Lee Radziwill, C. Z. Guest, Slim Keith, and all the rest of Truman Capote’s swans embowered by the lavish flower arrangements for which La Grenouille was celebrated. At the highest levels of society as it was then constituted, Manhattan was a far more formal place. It was also a remarkably clubby one.

And while it may sadden longtime patrons who revered La Grenouille to see the once crackerjack kitchen falter and its service become laggard and dull, there may be benefits for the city as a whole. Together with Shea Gallante, a dynamic young chef known for his work at Bouley, Cru, and Ciano,

Left: A view of West 53rd Street, as seen through the hotel’s prismatic glass facade.

“
At Ralph Lauren's Polo Bar, sleek beauties in Valentino dresses can be seen cozying up over Vesper martinis with gentlemen wearing Brunello Cucinelli cashmere.
”

Masson intends to promote at Chevalier, his Baccarat restaurant, a manner of comfortable semi-formal dining that is having a comeback.

People are again dressing to dine out after years in which even a sartorial taskmaster like Julian Niccolini was grudgingly forced to admit Masters of the Universe when they showed up for dinner at his Four Seasons without either jacket or tie. And at Ralph Lauren's brand-new Polo Bar—located two blocks from the Baccarat Hotel, in what was once another French dining landmark, La Côte Basque—sleek beauties in Valentino dresses can be seen most nights cozying up over Vesper martinis with gentlemen wearing rolled silk ties and Brunello Cucinelli cashmere. If the Polo Bar is not exactly, as the *New York Times* called it, “a place where the Earl of Grantham might repair for a porterhouse and a brandy after a brisk woodland romp,” it is unquestionably the gathering spot for the well heeled and well connected who pass for American aristocracy. Or, as celebrity chef Bobby Flay said recently, “an instant club for a certain demographic of people.” That it was almost instantaneously successful is itself a positive sign for an area of Midtown that, despite its iconic status, went through a prolonged spell during which fashion passed it by.

The Baccarat's arrival coincides with what optimists see as a new period of twenty-first-century opulence in Midtown, marking a return to an age when the neighborhood was better known for its elegance and formality than for the crass commercialism of the years when Disney clamped mouse ears on the facade of one august Fifth Avenue building (the same place currently tenanted by Lauren's Polo flagship); when Diesel jeans covered the streetside facade of a building with a layer of rusted steel; when it looked as though the plug-ugly Trump Tower might overshadow its more distinguished neighbors both symbolically and actually.

IN THEIR way, both the Baccarat Hotel and the Polo Bar signal a modest but welcome revitalization of this part of Midtown, which has seen a construction boom of late. They also provide an excuse for looking anew at a scene Holly Golightly might have viewed from a taxi on her way to Tiffany. Hurling through the city along Fifth Avenue, one can easily

take for granted the not-infrequent elegance of the architecture assembled along what *Forbes* once ranked the most expensive street in the world. Slow the pace, though, as you stroll from Rockefeller Center to 57th Street and the 1940 Tiffany & Co. flagship, and it is surprising how much of what you see would be recognizable not only to Golightly but to another American adventuress and Holly's literary antecedent, Countess Ellen Olenska, the protagonist of Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*.

Here, for instance, is the French-style structure Harry Winston first moved into in 1960 with \$35 million in jewels, its once-sooty travertine walls cleaned and honeyed, its awnings looking just as they might in a depiction by painters like Guy C. Wiggins or Everett Shinn. Here is the Florentine palazzo of the University Club, designed by McKim, Mead & White to trick the eye into seeing six stories as a more domesticated three. Here, too, is the newly opened Valentino flagship where, using acres of nougat terrazzo, the architect David Chipperfield initiated a subtle conversation with the Club—its neighbor across the avenue—echoing its scaling by replacing the dowdy facade of the former Takashimaya department store with a glass-and-steel grid and fitting behind its six-story height a three-story emporium of covetable luxury goods. Here, along one four-block stretch, are clustered the jewelers and watchmakers whose names, if recited—Bulgari, Piaget, Mikimoto, Omega, Breguet, De Beers—fall on the ear like a magical incantation for conjuring privilege and wealth.

And here, amid the others, is the elegant jewel box of Henri Bendel, a snug structure whose upper stories frame a series of large windows depicting intertwining Art Nouveau flowers and vines. Commissioned by the perfumer François Coty from the glassmaker René Jules Lalique, this facade, with its 276 separate etched panels, perhaps appeared to the pedestrian of 1912 as the Baccarat Hotel facade does to this one today—as a minor urban miracle created from base materials to ornament the streetscape of this emblematic new-world city, by old-world craftsmen far across the ocean in France. ♦

For more photographs of the Baccarat Hotel, download our digital edition or visit cntraveler.com/travel-intel/hotels.

Opposite: With its Jouffre silk-covered walls, coyote-fur armchair, parquet floors, and Baccarat crystal chandeliers, the Grand Salon—seen here from the hotel's entrance—channels an elegant Parisian drawing room.



