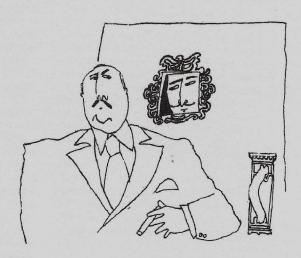
Cadwalader Sent Me



BY BARBARA ROSENBERG

Downtown Philadelphia is dotted with a variety of private dining clubs suit every taste and pocketbook. They all provide the security-blanket comfort of club membership (although some of them run strictly on a cash rather than charge basis), serve booze on Sundays and election day, but most don't necessarily require accident-of-birth as a qualification of joining—at least if you are white and male. Knowing someone who belongs and letting him know you'd like to become a member will generally do the trick, unless it's one of those that are oversubscribed.

The Vesper Club has been around for a long time and still only gets \$10 a year for membership—a bargain these days when hardly anything still costs only \$10. Only it's tough to get in. There's a long waiting list. At least they tell you there's a long waiting list, and there probably is, but if you've got the right connections, the list has been known to dwindle miraculously.

Vesper is one of the dining clubs that still clings to its male-members-only policy. Membership is issued in the man's name and he has to be there to lay out the cash (this is one of the ones that doesn't allow for charges). If a member's wife wants to go, she's welcome to tag along, but nix on her using the club for her own entertainment.

Vesper turns out a passable meal in reasonably comfortable, if not

plush, surroundings. Lunchtime is frantic—lots of elbow-bending, with scarcely a feminine face in the crowd. Dinner is more leisurely—business entertaining interspersed with couples, mostly middle-aged.

Food prices are moderate and compare favorably with downtown restaurants. The menu offers varied enough choices for every taste-not fancy but more than adequate. Drinks are hearty, and the members and their guests quaff them with great gusto. Wine is another matter. The list is nicely bound and presented but the selection is pretty pedestrian. You begin to get the message that maybe people here dig the sauce more than the grape. However, if you decide to sample the club's featured Irish coffee, be forewarned that they're much more generous with the coffee than the Irish.

So the Vesper ain't got what you'd call real class. But it's a convenience, it's in a good location, between Walnut and Locust on Sydenham, and what do you want for \$10 a year?

Then there's Le Coin d'Or—a dining club where food really is king. This is one whose membership is unified only by its respect and love for French cuisine and wine. It's situated in a charming little house at 251 S. Camac St., and the overall ambience is delightful, rather like an Early American-style French country inn, although if you look closely you'll see evidence that it's running down at the heels,

getting a bit frayed and worn.

The tariff here is \$50 a year, and the club rolls only include about 200 members. Based on the rate of use, they could accommodate 500, according to one of the club officers. He says the only criterion for admission is that prospective members must be the sort of people "one would invite to one's home"—whatever that means. In any event, you have to be proposed and seconded.

The food is marvelous, beautifully prepared and attractively if not elegantly presented. The basic raw ingredients are impeccable, whether imported (like the Belgian salsify) or purchased locally (like beef from Pierce and Schurr at the Terminal) and prepared with the finesse and devotion of a French chef.

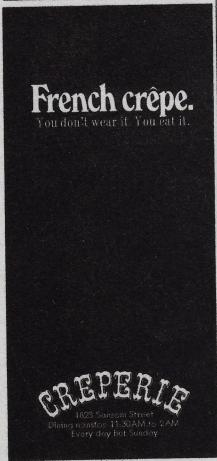
It's an interesting operation. To insure consistency the club hires a couple on contract and provides them with living quarters on the place. While her husband does the cooking, the distaff side of the present pair runs the dining room, acting as greeter, waitress and sommelier.

Dinner is fixed price at \$7.50—although three of the five entrees carry an extra charge of about \$2, so unless you stick to basics, better figure on at least \$10 a head. And it's worth every penny

it's worth every penny.

The club used to be open routinely for lunch and allowed for a delightful two-hour interlude in the middle of a hurly-burly day, but evidently





too many of its members couldn't afford two-hour interludes, so now lunch is "by special engagement only."

The wine list is beautifully selected, with more extensive choice than routinely offered. The vintages are young and with more age would undoubtably be remarkable, but are unfortunately served before they're really at peak, probably because of the price factor. Lovers of Nuits St. George will find it here, among other beautiful burgundies. If you insist, you can have wine by the glass, but that's the domestic type.

If you're hooked on Gallic goodies, you'll find them here in unique (for Philadelphia) atmosphere, among people who are also into this bag. By Philadelphia standards it's definitely three-star food with one crossed knife and fork thrown in for good measure.

And then there's the arty scene. Two clubs enter this sphere and offer their members the toniness—and tax deduction—of joining not only a club, but a venerable institution as well.

The Peale Club at 1819 Chestnut Street costs \$100 a year. That is, you make a donation to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts of \$100 a year, and you more or less automatically are extended Peale Club's privileges.

This means you not only get to go to openings at the Academy, you get to have cocktails in the smashingly contemporary Club lounge, surrounded by representative selections from the permanent collection, and eat in the mirrored and red plush dining room, vaguely reminiscent of a 1930s night club (did someone say speakeasy?). You can also get married here, or give parties for whatever reason strikes your fancy.

Generally there's an animated group here, not necessarily bound by their common love of art but more often attracted by the comfort, convenience and better than average food. Mr. Dino, ex-Philmont maitre d', rules the club firmly, instructing his chefs that the food must reflect the taste of its clients.

Aside from half a dozen or so "continental" specialties, which rely heavily on sherry for their continental flavor, the food is strictly American, straightforward and ample.

Here, too, lunch is noisy. One of the members brightly announced, "I'm sure there's one special table wherepeople can hear each other talk, but I haven't found it yet." Except for Friday Orchestra days, the luncheon crowd is heavily male, but there are tables of women and even some couEvening is usually quieter. Diners are pleasantly greeted with a sauce dish of tasty marinated mushrooms, lovely to nibble with drinks or serve as a starter course. Most entrées hover about the \$5 price range, with steaks spiraling upwards.

Maybe you won't write home about it, but you won't moan and groan

either.

The other "arty" one is the Art Alliance, which runs a members-only dining room amid its art galleries in a magnificent mansion on Rittenhouse Square.

It's old Philadelphia—or what's left of it. Little old ladies in funny hats (and tennis shoes?) seem to adore this place. And there's a special group of very chic guys who dig it too.

It must be the atmosphere and the Alliance's arts program that attract them—it certainly isn't the food. Or maybe it is—like the patrons, the food is genteel and dainty. If old Philadelphia ate this way, it's a wonder it survived. But the drinks are a different story—so maybe they got their staying power from the bottle. Who knows?

It is charming and attractive and like a good address it makes an impression. Tariff here is \$72 a year (plus \$20 initiation fee), which includes all varied club activities. They're open for lunch and dinner and it's never noisy.

There are more variations on the theme, but you get the picture. You can eat and be elegant, you can eat and be arty, you can eat and be comfortable, you can eat and drink, or you can just eat. One expects that some Philadelphians even use their dining clubs as drinking clubs. But where is it written that a dining club can't be a drinking club too?

CITY DINING

Because of limited space, we are obligated to confine our dining listing to those restaurants that have indicated a desire to reach the Philadelphia Magazine audience by becoming advertisers. Prices and hours subject to change.

PHILADELPHIA

(Center City)

Arthur's Steak House, 1512 Walnut St. (PE-5-2590). This meaty eatery is one of the best restaurants in town and a tastefully decorated haven for beef gourmets. It also has one of the most enticing bars around; the martinis are Philly's wickedest. Some scafood and fowl specialties. L—11-3 (\$1.25-\$3.50); D—3-11, Sat 4-1 (\$3.50-\$7). Closed Sun.