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# At Rao's in Los Angeles, Red Sauce and Rivalry

By ADAM NAGOURNEY JAN. 21, 2014



At the Los Angeles branch of Rao's, the East Harlem restaurant, Lou Farber, the captain, pours wine for guests. Axel Koester for The New York Times

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LOS ANGELES — Seward Street runs through a patch of film production studios and empty lots in Hollywood. It is dimly lit, usually deserted and a little spooky at night. But the other Friday

evening, the red glow of a neon sign splashed across the road. A security guard and a parking valet stood out front, and a steady stream of people walked into what is, as it turns out, a restaurant, a Rat Pack outpost of dark wood, red leather booths and twinkling year-round Christmas lights.

This beacon of activity on a remote street is reminiscent of what one might find at, say, the corner of 114th Street and Pleasant Avenue in East Harlem. No surprise there. Rao's, the New York restaurant that built its reputation on being impossible to get into (given the standing weekly reservations for celebrities, politicians, labor leaders and a tabloid-worthy lineup of organized crime figures) has come to Los Angeles, its owners seeking to recreate [the cachet of the original](#), in all its mysterious and slightly ominous glory.

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The executive chef, Nicole Grimes, prepares meatballs.  
Axel Koester for The New York Times

Since its opening in September, Rao's (pronounced RAY-ohs) has become the biggest test yet of just how interchangeable restaurants are between Los Angeles and New York, at a time when the cities' food

rivalry is bristling. There are few things that scream New York and old-fashioned southern Italian cooking (or at least an idealized vision of the two) as loudly as Rao's. That said, the original place is less a restaurant and more an event, the ultimate celebration of velvet-rope exclusivity, open just five nights a week in a once-desolate location that seems to have been chosen to make the trip there feel adventurous. That it is almost impossible for mortals to get a reservation makes it that much more desirable. And shouldn't that same formula work in Los Angeles?

"I'd be honored if we could achieve that," Frank Pellegrino Jr., the soft-spoken co-owner of the restaurants, said over a steaming cup of espresso as he sat in a T-shirt on the restaurant's outdoor patio in the warm sun. (Try that in New York these days.) "It's off in that direction, but that's something I don't think anyone has control over. It has to happen on its own."

This is not the first time that Rao's, with its [line of spaghetti sauces and cookbooks](#), has moved to capitalize on its reputation. Seven years ago, it opened [a branch in Caesars Palace](#) in Las Vegas. But that is a theme park version of Rao's with 260 seats, nearly five times as many as in East Harlem. It is as exclusive as a slot machine, a place for people who want to be able to boast that they have eaten at Rao's.

The Los Angeles outpost has 96 seats — not as small as East Harlem's, but small enough. It is also open five nights a week.

As similar as the two restaurants are, though, they exist in very different places. And the ceaseless sniping between the cities has been fired up recently by a [Huffington Post essay](#) arguing that Los Angeles has become a better restaurant town than New York, and a [New York Times review](#) positing that New York tacos are as good or better than those here.

So Rao's may find some obstacles in its cross-country adventure.

"People in the business here tend to look at people who come in from in New York and say, 'Let's see if you get it,' " said [Evan Kleiman](#), who owned Angeli Caffé during an acclaimed 28-year run here, and is the host of a food show on KCRW, a public radio station.





The dining room at Rao's in Los Angeles. Axel Koester for The New York Times

Many Los Angeles diners, like those in New York, enjoy old-fashioned gloppy-red-sauce Italian restaurants, and do not blink at spending \$40 for a main course at dinner. But they are much less likely to be impressed by anything that hints of white-tablecloth formal; this is, after all, the place where the food truck movement really took off. Angelenos are more likely to head out to all corners of the region to check out the latest hot restaurants (and given the spread of this city, they have little choice). As a rule, they don't dress up for dining out the way New Yorkers do.

"I would say that the greater majority of Angeleno eaters — people who really love food — have pretty high expectations now," Ms. Kleiman said. "They are going to be less impressed by themes and frills if it isn't delivered at the table."

Los Angeles already has a sort of local version of Rao's: [Dan Tana's](#) in West Hollywood, with its platters of red-sauce Italian food and a very loyal clientele of a certain age.

Still, the early signs seem promising. Rao's was bustling during my two visits there, with shoulder-to-shoulder tables, diners shouting over a jukebox playing, appropriately enough, "[L.A. Woman](#)" by the Doors, and rounds of "Happy Birthday" breaking out every 15 minutes. There are already a handful of standing reservations, including one by a pediatrician who had an every-other-Friday-night booth behind us.

And there has been a scattering of early celebrity sightings in the

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restaurant's opening months — Sharon Stone one day, Owen Wilson another — though Rao's hardly seems to be shaping up as another celebrity haunt. Not that it would matter that much in this town; the appearances of Drew Barrymore and Marisa Tomei drew the West Coast equivalent of a Bronx cheer in a decidedly unfavorable [LA Weekly review](#) of the restaurant that signaled the challenges Rao's faces.

“This is a city where catching a celebrity at dinner is pretty common,” the review said, adding that Rao's was charging exorbitant prices for unexceptional food.

A lot of the New York choreography has been transplanted here, but not all of it. This Rao's greets diners with a printed menu (the original dispensed with that formality years ago, under the assumption that members of the club know their kitchen), though Mr. Pellegrino said he hoped to phase it out here.



Frank Pellegrino Jr. is an owner of both the New York and Los Angeles restaurants. Axel Koester for The New York Times

“Do you mind if I sit down?” he asked, squeezing into our booth with a suggestion-that-could-not-be-refused to leave the ordering to him. The manager, Patrick Hickey, insisted on picking out our wine, a 2007 Brunello di Montalcino from Castiglione del Bosco.

“I’ll drink it if you don’t like it,” he said. (Not necessary, thank you. Following Times practice, we also paid the bill.)

The food is as brassy as what I remember from New York: steaming platters of linguine covered with a mountain of clams; penne bathed in an ocean of tomato sauce with chunks of spicy Italian sausage; meatballs as big as baseballs; and veal Parmesan hanging over the sides of the plate. All of this comes at prices that might draw a double take from even the flushes of mob bosses.

The New York pedigree is essential. So far the regulars include patrons of the original Rao's, like Zenia Mucha, the [former Republican operative](#) in New York who moved here 10 years ago to become chief communications officer for the Walt Disney Company, and Bo Dietl, a former New York police detective and now an actor.

“They did a great job,” Mr. Dietl said. “They made it identical to the

Rao's in New York.”

The walls are covered with many of the same [celebrity photos](#), among them — incongruously enough, given his distaste for Los Angeles — Woody Allen's. The dining room is shrouded in the kind of squint-inducing low lighting that is just dark enough that you can't quite make out any faces. Everyone looks famous.

Mr. Pellegrino, who is 44 and started working at age 12 bussing tables at the original Rao's, said he spent two years looking for a space before settling on a century-old, one-story building with an outdoor patio that was once the storied location of the Hollywood Canteen. In recent years, it had been used as an after-hours rave club. In short, a perfect spot for Rao's.

Ms. Kleiman, the food-show host, said she had not even bothered visiting the Rao's in New York.

“I heard you couldn't get in, so why would I try?” she said. But she predicted that the new outpost, with the kind of food that is becoming increasingly hard to find on both coasts, would do fine.

“Who doesn't like red sauce and a cheese bomb?” she said.

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