

# Introduction

Top on the list of New York nightclubs for thirty-five years, the Stork Club's legacy continues decades after its closing in 1965. The man behind the club was Sherman Billingsley, a one-time bootlegger who, a few years after serving a fifteen months' sentence in Leavenworth prison, left Oklahoma for the big city of New York where he joined fellow bootleggers in buying up drugstores as fronts for selling booze. Billingsley gave up the drugstore racket and decided to join forces with a mobster with whom he made acquaintances to establish a speakeasy designed for only the most worthy of clientele—which basically meant if you were Black or Jewish you weren't welcome to enter the speakeasy (unless you were a Jewish performer of renown). It should be noted that Billingsley wasn't alone in his shunning of certain elements of society. In fact, only Barney Josephson's Café Society welcomed everyone.

Billingsley's partners and fellow felons soon lost interest in the club (no one knows who thought up the name the Stork Club), and Billingsley was left alone to turn the space into his idea of a clubhouse for the rich and famous.

It wasn't enough to just open a new speakeasy, but one had to find the customers. At first, the richest of the upper class wouldn't try a new club. So, Billingsley decided to open the club to the 500's children. He took out ads in the Yale and Harvard student newspapers. And to pay for the advertising, he gave chits to the staffs for free drinks at the new club. Soon, the younger generation was packing the club and enjoying the free booze. Word was passed up the family trees to the parents of the students and they began their occupation of the club. Most importantly, the parents paid for their drinks, and soon the Stork Club was fully adopted by the Smart Set as their preferred hangout.

Billingsley made sure that the club had something for everyone. So, each of the rooms and each of the floors had their own different experiences. When you first entered the club there was the bar, its own little island in the middle of the room. Then one could go through the cocktail lounge into the main dining room where you could dine, dance and table hop.

After the main dining room was the exclusive Cub Room, Billingsley's private hideout where he could play poker and hobnob with the most elite of guests. One of the habitués of the Cub Room was radio and newspaper personality Walter Winchell who commandeered Table 50 and from which he broadcast his radio show, thereby giving priceless publicity for the club. And Winchell also got his haircuts there. Some wag said that Winchell was "a man without a private life at all, who was always onstage." And Sherman cosseted Winchell because the

reporter was instrumental in putting the Stork Club on the map and keeping it there. What gossip wasn't covered by Winchell was offered by Billingsley to other denizens of the fourth estate.

If you continued upstairs from the Cub Room, you'd find the Loners' Room, designed for unaccompanied guests to eat alone in privacy. And finally, there was the Blessed Event Room (as Winchell dubbed it), which held private parties.

Much of Billingsley's time was fending off gangsters who wanted in, the government of New York, the Feds who wanted to shut him down during Prohibition, and his own employees who wanted to unionize. It was almost a game—a game he sometimes won and sometimes lost.

As you can see from Sherman Billingsley's accompanying memoir of the club, life there was always an adventure. Despite the maelstrom surrounding the club, for the guests it was a welcome oasis from the outside world. The club-house atmosphere extended beyond the Cub Room. The dining room hosted well-dressed and well-to-do patrons with an occasional someone dropping by from the states between New York and California.

Billingsley's largess had a lot to do with the stars' adopting the club as a home base when in New York. Expensive jewelry was bestowed on favored women. Cases of champagne were sent to regular denizens of the club. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor were given two cases of fine champagne. Some received bottles of the club's own perfume, *Sortilege*. Other gift bottles contained various alcoholic beverages of the highest quality (which were illegal for a time). Al Jolson was gifted a vicuna coat; President Eisenhower and First Lady Mamie, Errol Flynn, Cary Grant, Mayor Wagner, and many others received gifts that assured their continued loyalty.

The name Stork Club was recognized throughout the world, a symbol of smart sophistication. And practically every entertainment medium celebrated the club. Winchell had a lock on the radio audience with his broadcasts from the club. Starting in 1950, CBS Television broadcast the series *The Stork Club*, which lasted until 1955. And the club was used as a symbol of the smart set in many movies, most notably in 1945's aptly titled *The Stork Club*. Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Wrong Man* was shot on location in the club, and many others featured the club as a shorthand for high society.

Unlike many bars the club had an extensive menu. Many of the dishes on the *carte du jour* are memories today, such as *Consommé Julienne*, *Jelly Madrilène*, *Vichyssoise*, *Jumbo Poached Frog's Legs*, *Boneless Stuffed Cornish Hen a la Walter Winchell*, *Cherries Jubilee*, *Coupe Nesselrode*, and many others. There was even an entire section of the menu devoted to Chinese food with *Chop Suey*, *Hung Yar Gai Ding* (Almond Chicken), *Pon Care Lot Jill Gai* (Sliced Chicken with Tomato and Green Peppers), and more.

Today, watering holes such as the Stork Club are but a distant memory. The name and reputation go on over a half-century since it closed its doors for good. But some things do remain, such as this reprinting of the Stork Club's bar recipes.

Restaurants and clubs today don't feature exotic mixed drinks. Beer, wine, and fancy cocktails with intriguing ingredients seem to be a thing of the past.

Looking back, those heady days at the Stork Club were a respite from the outside world where crime, wars, and an overall diminishment of culture and class existed outside the walls. Today, life can be difficult in new and different ways. Perhaps just reading this book can offer a respite from the outside world. But think about trying one of these recipes while you sip your drink.