

Confessions of a Balthazar Reservationist

By Rachel B. Doyle for the *New York Resident*

We all do things to make money, some more excruciating than others. My worst job, by far, was taking reservations for 1990s hot-spot Balthazar for two dreadful months this year. After only two weeks of sitting in small, stuffy office talking to disconnected voices for eight hours at a time, surrounded by similarly down-on-their-luck creative types, I began to genuinely despise humanity. There's only so much anonymous abuse that one person can handle, before losing their mind. I started having nightmares about phones ringing and food poisoning, and answering personal calls with "good afternoon Balthazar, can you hold?"

Here's the thing that people don't understand: no matter how charming one is on the phone, there's absolutely no way to get a 7 p.m. reservation at Balthazar unless you're a member of the restaurant's triple A-list. Balthazar doesn't care if it's your birthday, or if your mother is visiting from Boca Raton, or if your new boyfriend will go into diabetic shock if he has to eat one minute past 8 --- it doesn't matter, so stop taking it personally.

Everyone acts like reservationists are vindictive, but the truth is we are merely helpful robots that get paid \$12 an hour to sit in a cage and put up with high-strung people, most of whom think they're far more important than they actually are. We roll our eyes each and every time you announce your affiliation. Unless you're personal friends with owner Keith McNally, working for *Working Mother* is not going to help.

Balthazar has three separate levels of A-list, and that first tier is very small. It includes *Vogue* editrix Anna Wintour, writer Joan Didion, *New Yorker* scribe Adam Gopnik, Bill Clinton, *Vanity Fair* Editor-in-Chief Graydon Carter, all members of Keith McNally's family, his ex-wife, and a few of the restaurant's investors. These people get whatever they want, at any time. The only member of the AAA list that regularly dines there is Ms. Wintour, who once requested that a hedge be built around her corner table for, um, privacy.

The second tier, Double A, get what they want most of the time too. These are the people who get their assistants to call, and then pick up the phone and scream at them in the middle of making the reservation. I'm sure they have stock portfolios worth millions, but they are the absolute worst. I don't know exactly why they are special, but they get reservations at 7:30 p.m., unlike those with only a single 'A' to their name (mainly fashion publicists and frequent-diners), who can sit between 8 and 9. Regular diners are pretty much out of luck. The only tables they will ever be offered are at 6, 6:30, 9:30, or 10 p.m.

Out-of-towners seem to have this warped impression that famous New Yorkers like Woody Allen often go to Balthazar for dinner and that non-famous New Yorkers still go there at all. The truth is, legitimate celebrities rarely show their faces there after breakfast. You're much more likely to spot meta-celebrities, like Miss USA Tara Conner

(who almost lost her crown for doing coke and making out with other beauty queens) or various socialites. Visiting celebrities (Bono, Gérard Depardieu, Sienna Miller) go there sometimes, but that's only because their publicists recommended it.

It's sad to say, but the restaurant's gleaming, shiny moment was definitely over 10 years ago. Most of Balthazar's calls now come from non-212 numbers: lots of women from Texas, tourists from Ireland, or old Floridians. This is fitting, as Balthazar is a lot like Miami. You either love it, or you hate it. There's no grey area, and if you haven't been, you undoubtedly know someone who has. You can go and try it for yourself, but you'll probably have to eat at 10 pm. Just don't blame the person taking your reservation.