

# Thanks for the memories

## Romanoff's on the Rocks was fit for Hollywood royalty

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*Everyone has the idea that it's a good chef that makes a restaurant. I know of no greater fallacy. A restaurant is only as good as its owner's personality. The framer of this apothegm is the proprietor of both a good restaurant and an unusual personality. He is the self-styled Prince Michael Alexandrovitch Dmitry Obolensky Romanoff, once a Brooklyn-born orphan boy, who spent half his life amiably panhandling the rich of two continents. But in Hollywood, where Mike Romanoff settled, he finally cashed in on the fact that he is one of the few genuine, 24-carat phonies in a city where thin plating has often been known to pose for the real thing.*

Time magazine, in November 1950, so described the laying of the cornerstone for a new expanded Romanoff's restaurant in Beverly Hills.

Life magazine crowned him "the most wonderful liar in the 20th century U.S." Born Hershel Geguzin in Lithuania in 1890, his widowed mother sent him to America with a cousin at the age of 10, due to his incorrigible behavior.

He ran away from the cousin, worked at various menial jobs, and went to school. After graduating, he worked on a cattle ship bound for England and picked up an accent. When caught impersonating an English aristocrat and throwing a party he couldn't afford, he was jailed for the duration of World War I. Scotland Yard listed him as "a rogue of uncertain origin," which he would remain for the rest of his life.

He lived in Paris and while working at a library he met two Russian gentlemen and decided to affect a new identity of Russian nobility, flung from power by the war. Back in the United States, he played bit parts on Broadway, and made his way to Hollywood working as an extra and pretending modesty about his imperial background. Quickly known as an imposter, it didn't much matter in tinsel town. He became a darling at posh



An undated photo shows Romanoff's on the Rocks in its original form.

COURTESY OF GILMAN STUDIO AND THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Harpo Marx, from left, Jayne Mansfield, Frank Sinatra and Red Skelton in Palm Springs in the early 1960s. COURTESY OF GEORGE AQUINO/PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

parties and elegant eateries.

Financiers, studio heads, Darryl Zanuck and Jack Warner, celebrities Charlie Chaplin, James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, and Robert Benchley bankrolled him and Romanoff's opened in 1942. Bogart sat at the first booth of the five circled around the bar and every day ordered the same lunch of scotch and soda, omelet, French toast, milk and then coffee and brandy.

The menus were oversized, and featured a gossip column on the inside cover written by Romanoff himself. The stars flocked to the restaurant perhaps to ensure the success of their invest-

ment. Bogey and Bacall, Lucy and Desi, Gregory Peck, Van Johnson, George Sanders, Cole Porter, Joseph Cotton, Myrna Loy, Joan Crawford and every producer and director worth any salt ate there. Jayne Mansfield famously fell out of her dress to the astonishment of Sophia Loren there. The fans followed, lingering outside the doors or angling for a table inside anywhere.

But for the stars, Hollywood stock rose and fell based on seating in those choice booths. Being made to sit elsewhere, or drink at the bar was a sure sign a star was fading. The competition for the "dress circle" of booths, and the snobbery upon which it was based, caused the move in 1950. With a \$25,000 donation from Alfred Vanderbilt, Romanoff raised tens of thousands more from his same friends and laid the cornerstone for the newly expanded joint with Ethel Barrymore, Clark Gable, Ann Miller, Ronald Colman and scores of other stars watching.

Time magazine observed, "Apparently they share his conviction that the same old crowd will still flock to the new Romanoff's. Says Mike: 'I'm very good for a lot of people. They feel they are better than I, and people have a desire to feel they are better than someone else. Resentment? I accept it as I do the

weather."

The move was not an improvement and with Bogart's death in 1957 business was in decline. It was then that Frank Sinatra took over as the leader of the Rat Pack and Romanoff then began spending a lot of time in Palm Springs.

In January 1957, The Desert Sun printed an article about a new restaurant coming to Palm Springs for the season. It had been the site of Laury's Steak house, purchased from Raymond Cree himself. The new \$400,000 project was designed by A. Quincy Jones and Frederick E. Emmons and Associates with the interiors impeccably designed by Billy Haines.

In 1959, the paper noted its actual opening "The little guy with the big smile and the big menu opened his rock rimmed restaurant... last night with the usual run-of-Who's-Who on hand to help make things festive. Onetime film extra Mike Romanoff unveiled his Romanoff's On-the-Rocks ... with no fan fare, no frills just the unimpeachable decorum that has marked his restaurants here and in Beverly Hills. The little prince made a point of explaining that he had no immediate plans for entertainment in the huge and severe dining room and bar that overlooks the Palm Springs region. The words were scarcely out of his mouth before diners Sammy Kahn (sic) and Jimmy Van Heusen were seated at the Romanoff's piano."

Frank Sinatra was regularly there. Lauren Bacall came. Dean Martin and Sammy Davis hung out. The old Hollywood guard, now mostly forgotten, retired to the desert and dined. Romanoff booked top talent including Paul White-man, the "king of jazz," and Red Norvo "Mr. Swing" to head the house band.

Stars were no longer dining at the Beverly Hills restaurant, and the fans no longer had a reason to go there either. Ironically, on the rocks, it closed in 1962. The Palm Springs location would have its own ignominious end after Romanoff's death in 1971, eventually being turned into a nightclub called Pompeii and burning down as the result of arson.