

# Inside the luxe club where the 1 percent drop \$3,000 for a shot of liquor

By [Kirsten Fleming](#)

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Cocktail server Alicia Buxton pours "liquid gold" at Rarities.

Photo: Gabi Porter

You'd be forgiven for walking right past the locked, gilded door on a landing off the landmarked lobby of the New York Palace Hotel.

After all, that's what the door's key-holders intended.

But beyond this mysterious, unmarked portal sits a dark, sumptuous room with stately furnishings and rich plum fabric walls seemingly made for the decadent exploits of a pre-crash Bernie Madoff.

In the center of the sprawling space, which still boasts its original 19th-century millwork, towers a glass case with locked compartments containing some of the world's most precious and exclusive liquor.

Here, discerning masters of the universe can choose from an array of liquid gold — Louis XIII de Rémy Martin Rare Cask cognac (there are only two bottles in the Big Apple), perhaps, or a rye whiskey distilled before Prohibition.

The semi-private drinking den is aptly named Rarities — and if its walls could talk, they'd get arrested for insider trading.

"I like that there is no sign," says a Manhattan-based businessman who asked to remain anonymous so as not to flaunt his wealth or dealings. This modern-day Mr. Big, who works in investment management, brings his international clients here instead of the Four Seasons Grill for the intimacy it affords.



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The back room at Rarities can be reserved for private parties.

Photo: Gabi Porter

"It's never packed. It's very genteel, and my clients are absolutely blown away [by the space]," he says. "I get a lot of work done, and was doing a \$250 million deal with Mexican clients this week. We spent four hours together just hammering it out."

To gain entry, there are two options. You can join the club, which comes with an entry key and an annual fee of \$15,000. Membership includes 12 bottles of rare wine or Champagne and up to 12 nights in the hotel's Tower suites.

The other option is to call for reservations and bring your checkbook. Spirits range from a relatively democratic \$25 Gordon & MacPhail Linkwood 15-year-old Scotch to \$3,120 for a glass of Louis XIII de Rémy Martin Rare Cask cognac. They are served by a gorgeous redhead, alongside perfect spheres of custom-made ice etched with the hotel's crown logo by New York-based Okamoto Studio. Each drink is placed on a linen coaster, accompanied by a glass of water that rests on a leather one. If you're a beer drinker, you're out of luck: No suds are served here.

There is enough seating for 25 people, and key-holders are asked to make a reservation. Members and guests in the Tower suites are given priority.

Rarities opened in November as part of a major \$140 million revamp of the historic Palace Hotel completed this past summer. It's meant to hearken back to the days when railroad and newspaper tycoon Henry Villard, who owned the Madison Avenue mansion that now houses the hotel, used to broker deals in his grand salons.

Mr. Big became a member almost immediately after seeing it this fall during the grand reopening party for the hotel. "I come from Los Angeles and have nine siblings, so we have a steady stream of family coming into New York. I get a number of free rooms that I'd buy for my family anyway."

The concept is the brainchild of David McCaslin, president of Northwood Hospitality, which owns the hotel, and Karim Lakhani, the group's executive vice president of food and beverage. "It's the nostalgia of it, the unknown of what's behind the door," Lakhani says of the venue's allure.



Director of wine and beverage Justin Lorenz reaches into the locked cabinet that houses the bar's most prized liquors.

Photo: Gabi Porter

Then there's the booze, which is painstakingly sourced, like the bottle of early-20th-century rye whiskey discovered in a Colorado crypt, where it had been stored by a mine owner to avoid detection during Prohibition.

The price for a single pour?

It's \$175 — which a group of Romanian businessmen were all too eager to shell out in order to get first crack at opening the antique demijohn of whiskey in mid-February.

"We uncorked it, and they were taking a video of the process," recalls Lakhani.

There are rare bourbons too, including Pappy Van Winkle, whose limited production has made it a prized commodity.

"I am a bourbon guy. You name it, they've got it. I dabble in high-end for a closing, but that's about it. I brought a friend in from Tokyo, and he went straight to the \$500-a-glass booze," says the anonymous member.

Martin Katz, who is the jeweler to A-list celebrities like Angelina Jolie and Sandra Bullock, entertains clients at Rarities when he is in town from Los Angeles. He isn't a member but is a regular at the hotel.

"What's interesting about it is that it's a quiet, charming Old World room that feels so important," says Katz. "If you're into architecture and not much of a drinker, you can look around while enjoying a great Scotch or brandy. The kind of drinks that are way over our heads, but we like to know we're drinking them."

Katz says the most opulent tippie he's tried so far is a \$150 glass of port.

"It was wonderful. I wanted to have more, but it always depends on who your host is," he says with a laugh.

Mr. Big, for his part, hopes to continue hosting his jet-setting clients in relative obscurity.

"It's the best-kept secret in the city," he says. "I'd like to see it stay that way."

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