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The New York Power Lunch Is Back, With New Rules

Manhattan's movers and shakers are coming back to business lunches, with a pandemic-era twist.

By Charles Passy



Lunch patrons at Estiatorio Milos in Midtown Manhattan last week. CHARLES PASSY/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The New York power lunch is back, with new rituals for the see-and-be-seen set: Make sure you're there on the right day, try out a new wardrobe and Midtown is no longer a must.

Business people say they are embracing the opportunity to meet with clients and colleagues over a meal once again.

"I'm sick of my own tuna sandwich," said Adam Schwartz, co-chief executive officer of Angelo Gordon, a New York-based investment firm. Mr. Schwartz has dined lately at some of Midtown Manhattan's most noted power-lunch spots, including Casa Lever.

Mr. Schwartz's recent lunchtime companion at the upscale Italian restaurant was another top executive: Jonathan Mechanic, who chairs the real-estate department at Fried Frank, an international law firm headquartered in the city. As far as Mr. Mechanic is concerned, the days of virtual meetings could soon be numbered as the power lunch resumes its place in the urban fabric.



Lunch beverage

[“In-person is way better](#) than anything,” said Mr. Mechanic. “It’s like the major leagues versus sandlot ball.”

The rules of the game have changed. Gatherings are more likely to occur on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, since [many employees haven’t gone back to the office](#) full time and are still likely to work Mondays and Fridays from home.

Diners are lingering over their food, almost as if [the period coming out of the pandemic](#) has prompted them to appreciate the business lunch as a social occasion as much as an opportunity to talk shop.

“It’s like they’re more having brunch than lunch,” said Michael Coll, general manager of Nerai, an East Midtown Greek restaurant.

There is also the sheer novelty of meeting clients and colleagues after a year of isolation. “You’re so happy to be with people who don’t live with you,” said Marlene Wallach, founder of Gleem Beauty, a skin-care company headquartered in the city. Another shift: enjoying a cocktail or a glass of wine as part of the meal. That was once standard in New York power-dining circles but had changed in recent years with an emphasis on meals as serious and sober-minded affairs, say business people.

“I’m looking forward to having a martini” at lunch, said Milton Pappas, a semiretired venture capitalist who has been dining at high-end Greek restaurant Estiatorio Milos in Midtown with business associates.

With business people still often working from home in different parts of the city, there isn’t as compelling a reason to dine at the usual Midtown spots. Andrew Saba, an assistant vice president at the financial firm [AllianceBernstein](#), has been taking clients to business meals at restaurants in the West Village because it has proved a more convenient location.

There, the once-standard business dress code has shifted in a more casual direction to suit the neighborhood. “There’s no need to put on a jacket,” he said.



Jonathan Mechanic, left, and Adam Schwartz had lunch at Casa Lever in East Midtown Manhattan.

PHOTO: JONATHAN MECHANIC

New York's [office occupancy is still low](#). In a [survey of major employers](#) released in March, the Partnership for New York City, a nonprofit organization that represents business leaders, found that just 10% of office workers in Manhattan have returned. Even looking ahead, survey respondents said they expected occupancy would reach only 45% by September.

Some key New York spots for business dining remain closed. The [Grand Central Oyster Bar attempted a reopening at one point last year, only to reclose almost immediately](#) because of the limited response.

Executive chef Sandy Ingber remains doubtful about giving it another go until at least a few more months. "I just don't see it," he said of the foot traffic in the area. Still, Gherardo Guarducci, co-founder of SA Hospitality Group, the restaurant company behind Casa Lever, said office occupancy numbers may be misleading.

Even if the figures are far below pre-pandemic levels, the people who are returning to the workplace are executives for whom business meals are almost a necessity. "We're seeing all the top brass," he said of his dining crowd.

Other restaurateurs point to the large number of New Yorkers who have been vaccinated recently and are more comfortable dining out as a result, and say warmer weather has made outdoor dining more popular.

“They miss the food. They miss dining out,” said Mario Zeniou, director of operations at Estiatorio Milos, which also has a location at Hudson Yards. On a recent weekday, Mr. Zeniou was overseeing his Midtown spot, which was filled indoors and outside, albeit at the state-mandated capacity of 50% indoors. As servers brought out plate after plate of grilled fish or Greek salad, Mr. Zeniou expressed optimism. “I think New York will come back much faster” than people expect, he said.